Why Our Students Need Instruction in Grammar, and How We Should Go about It

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Our students need to be able to adhere to standard written English to succeed in their other classes and to get jobs at the end of their schooling, and it’s the responsibility of writing teachers to help them do so. In this article, the author provides a research-based theoretical underpinning for effective grammar instruction as well as several specific strategies—based on experience and research—for addressing grammar productively.

Six years ago, the writing program at my community college instituted a portfolio assessment in three of our writing courses—a developmental course and the first and second semesters of our first-year composition sequence. All students submit portfolios containing several essays, which are read by two instructors in the writing program and assessed according to a common rubric. The rubric is simple: basically, a list of our course outcomes, with spaces to rate the student’s demonstration of achievement in each outcome as poor, adequate, or fluent. After six years of assessment, we’ve seen that in each of the three courses, the outcome that consistently garners the fewest “fluents” and the most “poors” is the one dealing with grammatical and mechanical conventions.

This wasn’t really a surprise. Here at the community college, our student population consists of many students who never thought they were candidates for higher education; most didn’t take high-school courses considered “college-prep,” and, unfortunately, their writing skills tend to be poor across the board. We writing teachers have our work cut out for us, and most of us find it much more enjoyable to teach other aspects of writing—development, adherence to a thesis, personal engagement—than we do grammar. Certainly, few of us were drawn to English by, say, an irrepresible desire to master the subjunctive. And the so-called “larger issues,” such as teaching students to construct essays that delve into a topic at depth, really are necessary if students are not only to produce quality, college-level writing, but also to learn how to engage with and manipulate ideas with the sort of fluency required in college and the work world.

But students also need fluency in standard written English, and, unfortunately, I think many of us rationalize our avoidance of grammar with arguments about how it should come last in the writing process (it should), or how construct-
ing a well-crafted paragraph is more important than knowing whether or not to put a comma before the “and” that precedes the final item in a series (it is). However, shunting grammar to the periphery ensures it doesn’t get engaged in the way it merits. Despite how we may feel politically and emotionally about valuing students’ native dialects and the desirability of myriad patterns of speech and writing, the work world—and, indeed, most of the world of higher education not directly involved in language studies—that awaits our students upon graduation or transfer does not share such values. In addition to the ability to engage with, shape, and develop ideas productively in their writing, our students need to be able to adhere to standard English to succeed in their other classes and to get jobs at the end of their schooling, and it’s our responsibility as writing teachers to help them in this task.

A few years ago, the Council of Writing Program Administrators drafted several outcomes for first-year composition. The sections are rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; and knowledge of conventions. Under the last one, they state that students should learn formats, develop knowledge of genre conventions, learn documentation, and “control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling” (“WPA” 325). Around the same time this was published, Larry Beason examined the reactions of businesspeople to common grammatical errors—things like fragments, misspellings, word-ending errors, fused sentences, and quotation marks—and found that such errors led to adverse judgments about the writers. A communications instructor at our college and her class performed a similar study and reached similar conclusions (“Business”). And all writing instructors probably have had the experience of being stopped in the hall by teachers in other disciplines and regaled with stories of students who have taken first-year composition and yet still “can’t write” (read: “They use ‘poor’ grammar”).

Something must be done. However, I don’t think the answer is to devote fourteen weeks a semester to whole-class grammar instruction. Nor is it to ignore the issue, or to focus only on educating the public on discourse communities and dialect. At least at our college—and, I strongly suspect, at others—students have clearly demonstrated a need to improve their command of standard written English, and we writing teachers must decide how to meet that need. In this essay, I’ll highlight some problems with traditional whole-class grammar instruction, advocate some productive ways to conceive of grammar and correctness, and lay out several specific strategies supported by research to help our students build fluency in standard English.

**Problems with Traditional Grammar Instruction**

It appears that teaching grammar in the way most of the public visualizes it—the teacher lectures on grammatical concepts, diagrams sentences on the board, gives a quiz, etc.—does not work. In fact, it appears to hamper students’ writing abilities. In *Explorations in the Teaching of English*, Steven Tchudi and Diana Mitchell argue that a “direct focus on skill instruction proves generally fruitless because it fails to con-
centrate on language users and their needs. The net effect of skill-building programs is often to inhibit the skill users, crippling their natural language ability and blunting their desire to do anything new with words” (248). They cite a 1966 review of empirical research whose authors, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, found that “training in formal grammar did not transfer to any significant extent to writing or to recognizing correct English” (249). Similarly, educational theorist James Moffett writes that “parsing and diagramming of sentences, memorizing the nomenclature and definitions of parts of speech, and otherwise learning the concepts of traditional, classificatory grammar [. . .] do not reduce errors” (164). Other teachers and scholars argue much the same thing (Harris 119–20; Shaughnessy 155; Tarvers 71). In “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” Patrick Hartwell quotes a report whose authors found that “in view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing” (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer; qtd. in Hartwell 370). And Mina Shaughnessy writes, “It is [. . .] important to remember that the student who is not at home with standard English has most likely had several doses of grammar already and it hasn’t worked” (155).

Unfortunately, these assertions leave most of us at a loss. Our students need to be able to write using standard English, but the research seems to suggest we can’t (or shouldn’t) teach it to them. We seem to have a problem with no solution—unless we change the ways we conceive of and teach grammar.

**Productive Ways to Conceive of Grammar and Correctness**

According to William DeGenaro, the historical mission of the junior college was “to socialize the new working-class student body into a bourgeois sensibility” (130). A key place this happened was the writing classroom. Tchudi and Mitchell describe another historical mission for writing instructors: “Language instruction has been consistently linked to morality,” they write, “with English teachers perceived as defenders of the language against the onslaughts of ‘barbarians,’ including their students” (8). While most of us would resist a job description that centered on socializing a group into a “bourgeois sensibility,” there are undeniable class dynamics at play in today’s community-college writing classroom, and our students, while perhaps not barbarians, are often violently resistant to grammar instruction. Such resistance is understandable: even though our goal is to teach them the linguistic landmarks of the culture of power, thereby enabling them to chart a safe passage through it, when we frame our discussion of grammar in terms of correct and incorrect—with students’ natural ways of expression tending to fall in the latter category—it can sure feel to them like socialization by force. It may be possible to diffuse at least part of their resistance, though, by reconceiving grammar and grammar instruction, and by letting our students in on that reconception.
For instance, it appears that an understanding of grammar as absolutely “correct” or “incorrect” is inaccurate. Over the past few decades, new ways have emerged of looking at what we talk about when we talk about grammar. Hartwell outlines several layered “grammars,” and begins his discussion by citing three described by W. Nelson Francis: Grammar 1, which is the internal grammar we acquire through interactions—it's unconscious, and our understanding of it is the only way we can communicate; Grammar 2, which is a set of codified rules that imperfectly describe Grammar 1; and Grammar 3, which is really “linguistic etiquette” (374–75), and usually has a pejorative attached—e.g., bad grammar and good grammar. To these, Hartwell adds Grammar 4, or the grammar taught in school, and Grammar 5, or grammatical concepts taught for the purpose of improving style (375).

According to Hartwell, the rules of Grammar 2, while useful in describing our language, “are simply unconnected to productive control over Grammar 1” (380), and those of Grammar 4 are helpful and make sense to students only if they have already acquired them in Grammar 1 (385). In other words, if they already know the rule but can’t put words to it, grammar instruction helps them in that it gives them an explanation for what they already know. However, if they don’t already know the rule, they aren’t going to learn it from grammar instruction. They may memorize it, but it won’t make sense on a deep enough level to produce a fundamental change in their writing. And, according to Hartwell, Grammar 5 isn’t of much use to developing writers, either, for it distracts them from the process of “manipulating language in meaningful contexts [. . . and from] language activity that enhances the awareness of language as language” (390).

The problem is, we need to figure out some way to access and (let’s face it) change the rules in students’ versions of Grammars 1 and 3. Especially confusing to community college students is Grammar 3—linguistic etiquette—which doesn’t have so much to do with “correctness” in terms of whether a sentence makes sense but more to do with appropriate usage. For instance, when a student writes “I seen three deers the other day,” we understand perfectly what he means; although we might say the sentence is “incorrect,” there is nothing wrong with it from a communicative perspective. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that the student has violated a rule of etiquette: he’s not writing in a way appropriate to the academic community.

Similarly, Tchudi and Mitchell argue that what is “correct” depends on sociological context, and that we should teach students to think in terms of dialect, shifting the objective from learning to write correctly to acquiring an “academic” dialect (255). They stress that rather than devaluing students’ native dialects with notions of correct and incorrect, we need to make the benefits of learning an academic dialect plain, and then provide students with the resources (individualized instruction, handbooks, models, etc.) to acquire it (256–57). Moffett also defines “correctness” as “conformity to the particular grammar of standard dialect” (156), and cautions us to remember that we’re asking a student to prefer how we talk to how everyone else she knows talks. He argues that when there are socioeco-
nomic differences between the student and the teacher (as there generally are at the community college), “corrective grammar teaching assumes that a speaker of the non-standard dialect should write in standard English even though he is barred from association with speakers of standard English. Actually, to preserve his own sense of integrity, he has a powerful motive not to adopt this alien grammar” (157).

Shaughnessy addresses this point as well, cautioning writing teachers to remember that a student’s trouble adhering to standard English arises “from his mastery of one language or dialect [which corresponds to Hartwell’s Grammars 1 and 3], and that changing to another often involves at certain points a loss or conflict of meaning and therefore difficulty in learning, not because he is stubborn or dumb or verbally impoverished but because he expects language to make sense” (155). For instance, if a student has grown up with everyone around him using “lay” when they should use “lie,” the rule for differentiating between them seems incredibly abstract and slippery, and the only reinforcement comes in school; when he goes back home, his father will still tell the dog to “go lay down”—and when even the dog understands what is meant, who can blame the student for continuing to confuse the two, and resisting learning the rule over which his teacher gets so inexplicably worked up?

Still, the student has an incentive to learn such rules: we know that grammar and usage serve as socioeconomic markers and can influence how others perceive us (Lynch-Biniek; Moffett). As Tchudi and Mitchell write, “correct” grammar can “provide students with access to higher social levels” (253). This gives us a rationale for teaching it, and it provides reasons for learning it students can understand—if they learn to influence readers positively, it can pay off with better grades, a better job, and a general improvement in socioeconomic status.

Many authors advocate such a shift in how we think and talk about grammar, from a view focused on absolute correctness to one based on the effects of grammatical choices on readers—a more rhetorical understanding of grammar. In his article on how businesspeople react to error, Beason argues for defining errors “not just as textual features breaking handbook rules but as mental events taking place outside the immediate text” (35); in other words, the problem with errors isn’t that they’re essentially wrong, but that they inspire undesirable reactions in readers. Similarly, in “The Phenomenology of Error,” Joseph Williams suggests we think of error less as a violation of a rule and more as a “social error,” or something that matters only because we give it meaning. He argues that we “shift our attention from error treated strictly as an isolated item on a page, to error perceived as a flawed verbal transaction between a writer and a reader [. . .]. The matter of error turns less on a handbook definition than on the reader’s response” (163–64). In fact, sometimes “errors” work better rhetorically than “correct” sentences—after all, professional writers frequently break rules when it serves their purposes.

Perhaps what is called for is a way to teach students how to understand the rhetorical reasons behind grammatical guidelines, so they can make their own informed decisions about when and when not to follow them. Donna Gorrell writes that rather than “leaning on correctness” (394), we should teach our students to
compose consciously and develop their own individual styles; John Dawkins states that “the secret [. . .] is for student writers to do what good writers of nonfiction do: use meaning as a basis for decision making, not grammar-based rules” (156–57). And it is important to remember that as students experiment with gaining fluency in the academic dialect and developing their own styles, they will make mistakes. Rather than reacting negatively, we should, as Tarvers argues, see some of those mistakes as “a sign of growth”—i.e., our students are attempting new things in their writing, and they won’t get it perfect the first time (71).

**Specific Strategies**

So how do these ideas translate to what we should do on Monday in English 101? To answer this question, I’ve generated seven suggestions—based both on research and on my own classroom experience—which can help us move from the theoretical to the practical.

**Address Grammar Rhetorically**

As I stated above, we need to move from viewing grammar in terms of absolute correctness to viewing it as being correct in context. We also need to help our students begin to see it that way, because if we talk about it in the same way they’ve heard it before—i.e., by implicitly devaluing their native dialects and the social and economic worlds they inhabit, and with no acknowledgment of grammar’s context-dependent, rhetorical nature—we will almost surely get the same results as students’ former teachers. We have an advantage in that our students want to be successful in the academic and work worlds; we need to help them understand—and believe—that a command of standard written English can help them achieve that success.

I attack this goal from an argumentative standpoint, assuming an audience that, while (I hope) not hostile to me, is certainly hostile to my thesis (that they need to put a priority on improving their command of grammar and editing). Early in the semester, I share an anecdote about the airline losing my luggage—including my suit—before a job interview. I tell them how I frantically cobbled together a motley collection of dress clothes from the local shops still open when I got into town, and how, despite the new clothes, I stayed awake out of nervousness until the airline dropped off my recovered suit at three in the morning. We have a chuckle as we picture this, and then I ask them why they think it mattered to me what kind of clothes I had on when what I had in my head—the things I would say in the interview—was exactly the same regardless of what I wore. They have no problem listing why I cared: a negative first impression, a distracting appearance, a lack of confidence, etc. And although we agree that such negative results would be unfair—it wasn’t my fault my luggage got lost—we can also agree that those results would be no less likely for their lack of fairness. From there, it’s an easy transition to a discussion of how one’s competence as an editor can have real bearing on how...
one’s writing is read, and how one is perceived, regardless of whether the ideas are solid or not.

Next, I share research—a greatly abridged version of the research I shared earlier in this article—detailing how others in the business world or academe react to what they see as grammatical incompetence. I stress again that the issue isn’t whether it’s fair or unfair; it’s just reality. Their chemistry teacher will teach them the science required for the term paper; she wants the grammatical know-how already to be present. Similarly, their employers will tell them the contents of the letters they are to write to all clients; the sentence structure, however, will be up to them, and for their job security, they’d better get it right. I talk about how grammar isn’t even close to the most important thing in writing—to return to my anecdote, I could have been well-dressed but devoid of ideas, and that would be far worse than to be missing a suit—and I tell them I’m not asking them to write or speak in standard English all the time, but that I want them to learn it and become fluent in it so they can, essentially, put on suits when they need to.

Finally, I lay out a plan for them to achieve such fluency, or at least to take the first steps on the path to doing so. That plan has several components, which correspond to the sections below.

Teach Writing as a Process

One of the key things we can do is teach students that there are several stages to a successful writing process, and that editing comes last. Unfortunately, unskilled writers tend to focus on achieving correctness as the paramount goal in writing (Harris 120), and frequently focus on avoiding errors from the start (Bissex 37). We can help by showing the normal, messy evolution of a piece of writing. In my classes, I emphasize process by sharing drafts of pieces I’m currently working on. For instance, during a unit on synthesis in my recent research writing class, I shared my drafts of this article, including an annotated bibliography, an “idea map” where I had organized the research by topics and suggested strategies, and an initial draft. For a creative writing class, I shared several drafts of a poem, talked about why I’d made the changes I did, and even shared the rejection letter and annotated copy of the poem from the editor at the first place I’d submitted it. Throughout these discussions, I emphasized that I was providing a window into my writing process. I talked about the value each stage had in the creation of my pieces, and we discussed how they might find a process that worked for them.

Despite my nervousness at sharing my own work—especially work that was unfinished, messy, and not quite right—my students were engaged in discussing these drafts and were willing to ask questions about my choices; several came up to me after class and told me how much the experience helped them—both in terms of providing a model for their own writing process and in simply seeing me step down from my teacher’s pedestal and share my own confusions and challenges. None said they respected my feedback on their own writing less now that they’d seen that great writing didn’t leap from my head fully formed.
In addition to demonstrating a solid writing process, we should also do what we can to make sure our grading systems and the structure of our courses treats writing as a process. Edwina Helton and Jeff Sommers suggest we find “a way to integrate grading and responding in a manner that promotes learning through revision,” and that rather than use grades, we initially mark essays according to where they seem to fall in the writing process—early, middle, or late (157–58). Students would not work on editing issues until their drafts fell in the later stage.

Several years ago, I adopted a similar technique and switched from assigning a grade to each essay to grading by portfolio. Once a grade is put on a paper, students tend to treat it as finished. I didn’t want students to finish a paper in the fourth week of the course; instead, I wanted them to keep coming back to it, to look at it with new eyes enriched by the knowledge they’d gained in the intervening weeks. Basically, I wanted to encourage revision. So, I divided their final grade into two parts: process and product. The process portion is determined by the day-to-day work in the course—whether they have a draft on time, whether they do their homework, and the like—and the product portion is entirely based on the final portfolio, which contains three essays of their choice. They produce five essays in the course, and in my comments I focus on identifying areas for revision, asking questions, and offering ideas. On a rubric similar to one suggested by Peter Elbow (195), I mark several areas on each essay as strong, OK, or weak. Students can resubmit their essays as many times as they want. To encourage better initial submissions, I give an incentive for their process grade if the majority of their essays fall at an OK level or above, but I emphasize that some holes are fine; the focus should be on selecting three essays to rework extensively for the final portfolio. The process requires quite a bit of both written and oral feedback to allay student worries that I will hit them with a surprise failing grade at the end of the course, but such feedback is pleasurable—in contrast to crafting my comments to head off arguments about paper grades, I can focus on helping them identify what works and what could be revised.

Focus Teacher-Student Interaction on Talking and Listening

Another strategy we can employ to improve students’ grammatical skills is to concentrate on dialogue and questioning. Some authors assert that targeted questioning will enable the teacher and student to identify problems and fix them together. Jeff Brooks advises we “ask questions as often as possible,” and use that dialogue to develop small tasks for the student to work on independently (86). Muriel Harris also advocates using questioning to target instruction on only what the student needs to hear (120), as does Kathryn Evans, who also cautions that quite a bit of teacher response tends to be context-free—i.e., the same regardless of student or paper—and of limited value (293). And Linda Boynton argues for regular individual conferences in developmental writing classrooms, stating that such conferences “help students find a ‘voice’ that truly makes them a part of the academic community” (391).
Many of us have students write targeted reflections on the processes they followed after each essay, and technology has offered us some new ways of continuing the dialogue outside the classroom, such as threaded discussions and even online chat-room office hours. However, I haven’t found anything I like so much as the face-to-face writing conference. Perhaps it’s because I was a writing center consultant before I was a teacher. The techniques used by most peer tutors—reading papers aloud, minimizing the amount of writing one does on someone else’s paper, asking lots of questions—work wonders in the classroom setting as well. And conferences allow us to address complex ideas such as the rhetorical nature of error in a much more relaxed setting than the classroom.

In addition, at the community college, we often work with nonfluent writers, and it can be difficult to understand the richness of the meaning they’re trying to get across from just their written words. Through conversation, we can access that richness. Then, together, we can develop strategies to help the writing improve. Conferences are especially helpful for grammatical issues; chances are, a student has had several teachers in the past write “frag” next to the many fragments in her writing, and the handbook definition hasn’t helped. Enormous progress can be made in a relatively short time if that time is highly focused. But it’s necessary to talk with the student, to question, and to work intensively with the student’s own work in order to pinpoint exactly what the student’s thought process is that’s resulting in the error and to develop an individualized strategy for success.

It is always difficult to find time for such conferences, of course. Writing centers and learning-support labs can help, and so can peer-response groups (although I have had mixed results with those on grammatical problems; they seem to be better at content-level issues). I find that both the students and I get so much out of our one-on-one interactions, though, that I build my courses around them.

Work on Grammar in Students’ Own Writing

Connected to the need to base grammar instruction in a conversation between teacher and student is the necessity of using students’ own writing as the medium for instruction. As Harris puts it, when we teach grammar in the context of the student’s own writing, “we are no longer merely working on formal grammar, grammar in the abstract, but working with the student on his or her own prose structures” (119–20).

Josephine Tarvers states that students learn best by “having their writing diagnosed, keeping an error log, and learning to predict where errors may occur so they can check carefully for them” (71). One promising strategy comes from Helen Collins Sitler, who identifies one of her goals as helping her students develop awareness of their own patterns of error and shares a strategy she has had good results with: “fix-it pages,” in which she marks down the errors in a student’s final draft “that most detract from the writer’s conveying a meaningful message” (73). The page has columns for how the student should fix it, where the rule is in the handbook, and if it is changing in the student’s writing—the students fill those out.
themselves. In future assignments, students use their own fix-it pages to remind themselves to check for errors they tend to make. It’s important to note that the column about how to fix the error isn’t just a restatement of a rule; it’s where students note the detailed strategies they’ve devised to make sure they get it right in the future. I plan to use this technique in the fall.

Encourage Careful Rereading

Brooks argues that “if we can get students to reread a paper even once before handing it in, in most cases we have rendered an improvement” (84). Likewise, Ann Berthoff suggests that “any writing assignments that encourage students to look and look again will be teaching critical reading and critical thinking” (48).

One of the most common strategies writing teachers (including me) seem to use to get students to slow down and pay attention to what is actually on the page is to have them read their papers aloud. Hartwell writes that students who are asked to read their papers aloud will correct most of their errors themselves (386). I have found reading aloud to be most effective in addressing typos, forgotten words, and mistaken word endings, most commonly in the context of peer-response groups; I’ve had less success using it alone to remedy larger issues such as sentence fragments, or especially tricky ones like comma placement and colon use. For more difficult issues, students tend to need more help from me in conference before they can recognize such errors.

Provide Models of Good Writing

It seems intuitive that in order for students to improve as writers, they need to be immersed in good writing and asked to write imitatively, thereby stretching their command of written language in much the same way young children stretch their oral communication skills by talking with adults. Moffett tracks language acquisition in kids and points out that they naturally learn most of the fundamental rules of oral communication through conversation and observation. Assuming our students decide to commit themselves to learning standard English, Moffett suggests we teach it by immersing students in it to allow them to acquire the rules naturally (158, 163). (This might be seen as a way of directly expanding Hartwell’s Grammars 1 and 3.) Bonnie Devet also suggests imitation—give students great sentences from great authors, she writes, and have them try to write similar sentences—while Glenda Bissex stresses the necessity of providing students with models, with the goal of making the writing techniques inherent in the models their own.

I think it’s important to provide students with excellent models about subjects they care about, not just adequate models. Like many teachers, I use essays from past students as models for specific essays I’d like students to write, and as springboards to a discussion of what the authors did well and what they could have done better. However, I think most readings should be truly excellent—as in professional. (For instance, I teach annotation and active reading on the first day of class using a few paragraphs from Mike Rose’s Lives on the Boundary; I’ve taught
structure and punctuation by analyzing a *New Yorker* article by Elizabeth Kolbert on global warming.) Not only does this give us a chance to see how writing functions in the real world, and to discuss things like audience and the rhetorical choices the author made, but it lets students see what can be achieved with writing in much the same way a high-school basketball player who watches the pros sees the potential of her sport realized. Many of my students rarely read more than they are required to; how can we expect them to understand the power and pleasure of the written word without providing them with excellent examples?

In many cases, students complain, at least initially, about the complexity of the readings. Especially in the first and last few weeks, it is necessary to check in some way to make sure they’re actually reading them. However, I think requiring students to read complex (albeit understandable, with some effort) pieces is not only valid, but necessary. As Moffett writes, “[T]he final answer to linguistic elaboration [i.e., adept construction of complex sentences] lies beyond language, in general cognitive development, and [...] intellectual stimulation is far more likely to accelerate syntactic growth than grammar knowledge” (163). In other words, we should give students excellent readings to show them not only great writing, but great thinking as well.

**Assign Agency to the Student—Don’t Correct**

One common theme in current research is that correcting grammatical problems in a student’s paper actually undermines our goals as writing teachers. Instead, we should focus on talking and listening, drawing the student’s attention to key elements in the paper, and giving him or her support. Greg Giberson cautions that “common types of response in which teachers cross out sentences or phrases and rewrite them for the student can have the effect of appropriating ownership of the text from the student” (411). In other words, if our purpose is to teach students skills to succeed in future writing situations in which there may or may not be teachers present—in short, if we aim to produce successful, self-reliant writers—we will target our response to encourage those traits.

In “Minimal Marking,” Richard Haswell describes an error-marking strategy that is extremely noninvasive and, based on an empirical study he performed, effective. The only thing Haswell does to indicate error is put a check mark in the margin next to the line in which the error occurs (167). He marks multiple checks for multiple errors. Papers are returned fifteen minutes before the end of class, and students find and correct the errors. He works with students individually to make sure the corrections are actually correct. Haswell has found that, on their own, students will correct 60 to 70 percent of their errors; “carelessness and not stupidity” is generally the source of the error (167).

I use a variation on minimal marking in my own classes. I’ve had good results with a version of focus correction areas (FCAs) (“Focus”); basically, I’ve identified eight or nine grammatical concepts I’d like my students to master by the time the semester ends. For each polished essay, we focus on two or three of them.
Along with each essay assignment, I hand out a sheet that details those areas, provides examples and explanations, and indexes the pages in our handbook that discuss those concepts. I talk about them very briefly when I hand them out, and then we don’t mention them (unless they ask me to) for the next couple of weeks. As we get closer to the essay’s due date, I teach microlessons on the FCAs, assign students to write paragraphs about readings, and then have them correct or modify the paragraphs for whatever grammatical concepts we’re working on. I collect these paragraphs and give them feedback targeted on our current FCAs; I don’t grade them. These microlessons are designed primarily to position editing at an appropriate spot in the writing process (the end), to increase awareness of the grammatical concepts right before essays are due, and to give me a chance to provide individualized, targeted feedback.

On my students’ formal essays, I follow Haswell’s practice of checkmarks in the margin. Like Haswell, I’ve found that students tend to be able to find and correct simple errors on their own once I draw their attention to the lines in which the errors occur; if they can’t, I have them ask me, and if it’s a pattern of error, I usually suggest an individual conference. Especially in the case of students I have for both first- and second-semester composition, I notice a marked improvement in their ability to identify and correct errors on their own over the course of our time together.

**Conclusion**

At our college, and surely at others, students have demonstrated a need for a greater command of standard written English. Our responsibility as writing instructors isn’t to address only those aspects of writing with which we feel comfortable; instead, it is to identify areas in which we can help our students and to respond. The teaching of grammar is a problematic task, but with an awareness of current research, coupled with a spirit of openness and flexibility in the classroom, it may be possible to teach grammar effectively. Let’s hope it is. As instructors, we must move beyond what hasn’t been working and find what will.

**Works Cited**


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