

Thinking About Mechanics across the Curriculum

David Cunningham
Director, Klooster Center for Excellence in Writing

(with wisdom drawn from David Klooster, Maura Reynolds, David James, and others)

How can instructors — particularly in fields that may not always focus heavily on written products — help students adjust to college-level expectations concerning the mechanical aspects of their own writing? And more importantly, how can instructors do this without tearing out their own hair?

We've all encountered the problem: the students in classes right across the disciplinary spectrum frequently turn in papers that are riddled with mechanical errors. Spelling errors are less common than they used to be, given the presence of spell-checking software, and even some grammar errors have disappeared when they are perfectly machine-checkable. Even here, however, it's surprising how many very basic spelling and grammar errors show up in spite of the available technology. And in any case, the kinds of artificial intelligence that are available to most students cannot always catch misplaced or misused punctuation, disorganized paragraphs, or hopelessly tangled sentence structure. And some errors are simply a result of our students' stage of intellectual development: a tendency to use words that mean something entirely different from what students think they mean, efforts to emulate writing they consider good, and the absence of regular and intensive writing practice.

More than once, I've sat in my chair, staring at a paper, wondering how this student ever graduated from high school, let alone gained admission to Hope College.

The mind boggles as to where, even, to begin. Should I really correct every error on the page, including things like the failure to capitalize the first word in a sentence? Can I find a word that adequately describes this level of disorganization? Should I just tell the student that this is unacceptable and that she or he needs to start from scratch? Or should I just ignore the mechanics and focus on the content? Often I find it impossible to do that — and even if I could, I don't want to send the signal that punctuation and grammar are irrelevant. In short, I often find myself unsure of how to proceed.

One of the central observations in Tim Clydesdale's remarkable book *The First Year Out* is that most college students are so busy trying to navigate the basic elements of living life on their own — everything from negotiating relationships to figuring out how to do their laundry — that they really have very little time to attend to even the most basic elements of the educational process. They learn very quickly that there are only so many hours in a day, and they often feel compelled not to put any more hours into a project than it absolutely requires. If they know that they can dash off a written

assignment at the eleventh hour and still get an acceptable grade (however they define “acceptable”), then that is precisely what they will do.

What our students need from us, more than anything else, is to get a clear signal as to the standard to which their work will be held. They will typically rise to meet those standards, but only if we’re clear about them. If we do anything to suggest that minimal effort is acceptable, they will typically offer minimal effort. This isn’t laziness or stupidity; quite the contrary, they are very good managers of their time, their desires, and their worries. They will put in more time and effort where they must, and less where they need not.

The challenge for instructors, however, is to hold the bar high without committing themselves to spending more hours than they actually have. You could decide to edit every single paper, require revisions, mark up the revisions, send them back for more – in short, you can turn yourself into a copy-editor, if you wish to do so. But that’s a full time job, and you probably have a few other things that you need to do this semester. So here are some strategies that may help.

1. Clear Expectations. I make it very clear in the syllabus of every class I teach that the mechanical aspects of writing – spelling, grammar, and punctuation – are important and that they significantly affect a paper’s final grade. More recently, I’ve gone into more detail on this point, because my sense is that students have been told this in the past, but then are not actually held to any standard, so they don’t take my generic warning very seriously. Instead, I give them some examples: a three-page paper that would have otherwise received a grade of B+, but which contains ten mechanical errors, will get a C instead. This kind of thing usually gets their attention.

2. Minimal Marking. This strategy seeks to minimize the number of corrections and proofreaders’ marks that you insert into a paper, particularly concerning mechanical issues. Our teacherly temptation is to correct the mistake and sometimes even offer an explanation of why a semicolon is needed here, or how the word hopefully is misused. This takes a lot of time; moreover, research has shown that heavily marked-up papers lead to diminishing marginal returns. Students feel overwhelmed by the sea of red ink, quickly check the grade, and then file the paper away (often in the “circular file”). We spend longer grading the paper than the student did to write it – and all for naught.

As an alternative, instructors can simply make a small check-mark in the margin each time a mechanical error is encountered; this gives both the instructor and the student some idea of just how bad the situation might be, and therefore, of how much work is needed. In the final comments, the instructor might highlight one or two issues that seem to be prevalent throughout the paper. If you feel the need to differentiate among errors based on their severity, you can have a couple of different kinds of marks. (One

of my son's teachers in Germany had three: check, X, and skull-and-crossbones.)

Now, although minimal marking is a great strategy, I will admit at the very outset that I have a great deal of trouble putting it into action. I find myself unable to resist enlightening my students and deploying my profound grammatical knowledge. It seems as though my pen just corrects mechanical errors by itself. Still, it helps me to remember something that David James put in a memo to faculty some years back:

At least at the level of mechanics (grammar, spelling, and punctuation), many students can write better than they sometimes display. . . . Moreover, research shows that usually such feedback doesn't teach a writer how to write better next time – it doesn't transfer as we'd hope – so the time and energy spent doing it are wasted anyway. And there's double waste when the writer knew better to begin with but just didn't bother to edit and proofread.

Minimal marking addresses this problem by letting the students decide whether they have just been spending too little time on the mechanical aspects, or whether they really don't understand how to use a comma. If the latter, we have some good resources where they can get help, including their English 113 course (if enrolled), and the Klooster Center. Our Writing Assistants won't proofread the paper for the student, but they will offer explanations of grammar and punctuation rules in ways that are tailored to a particular student's needs.

3. Follow Through. Be sure that whatever you've put in the syllabus about the relative weight of mechanical details aligns with how you grade. And make the problem clear: don't just write "C" and leave it at that; instead, observe that the paper would have received a B+ but for the seventeen mechanical errors in the space of three pages.

4. Bailing Out. If the mechanics are really horrendous – if, after one page, there's a mark on practically every line, or at least one per sentence – I just stop. I then speak with the student (I usually try to do this in person) and make it clear, as gently and straightforwardly as possible, that what he or she has turned in is not acceptable college-level writing. Again, David James has some great advice here, if you're contemplating this kind of procedure:

Instructions for papers in the syllabus and other handouts would do well to lay out the potential for such actions, and the tone of any comments leading to them on a particular paper should not be accusatory or disgusted, since you can't always know the extent of effort a student may have invested. I've just found that assuming a student has tried is the best policy and the most reliable foundation for prompting a positive outcome.

My own approach to this situation is to tell students who write unreadable papers that if they want to get credit for the paper at all, the first step is to work through it and identify all the errors. Also, I now require them to visit the Klooster Center during the revision process, both to clarify errors that they don't understand and to get advice on making the paper better.

And then what? Well, this leads to the next point:

5. Revision: to allow, or not to allow? – that is the question. Some instructors allow students to revise and resubmit any paper; others fear that this would add to their workload, and/or that students would take inappropriate advantage of this policy by turning in weak papers and revising them to suit the instructor's requests. But a strategy of "unlimited revision" is not the only option. Various instructors have come up with a number of useful alternatives:

- Give the initial paper a lower grade (perhaps an F if the mechanics are really outrageous), but offer the option to revise in order to receive some sort of consolation grade (such as an average of the initial grade and the revised paper).
- Allow anyone to rewrite any paper, but only once; unless you had to bail out on the original version, you've already read the whole paper, so you can read the rewritten version fairly quickly, and minimize your marking and your commentary at the end (since further revision of the same paper isn't an option).
- Allow only one rewrite during the whole course. This allows students to recover from a serious failure but can't then abuse the policy for their own benefit.

Keep in mind that the additional workload here is not terribly significant, especially when paired with a "minimal marking" strategy that reduces the amount of time spent the first time around.

Let me close by mentioning another important feature of these strategies. Some instructors are hesitant to mark up the mechanics of a paper because they don't feel that they have complete mastery over such matters themselves. They therefore worry that they will lead a student astray or be unable to explain the fine-grain details of a particular error. The approaches outlined here allow instructors to mark things that they know are wrong, even if they aren't quite sure how to fix it, and even if they doubt they could give as good an explanation of the error as could someone with a Ph.D. in English. But by simply noting where problems occur, and then asking the students to address the problems themselves (using other campus resources as needed), the terms

of the relationship change. The instructor is relieved of the need to play the grammar expert, while the students are required to take responsibility for their own learning. At the same time, this approach emphasizes that mechanical matters are important in writing; students cannot succeed in college without attending to them.

More resources

We're in the process of accumulating various handouts and presentations on the topic of working with student writing. Most of these have been done at Hope College faculty workshops over the years. You'll find them at <http://www.hope.edu/lib/kc/works.html>; this is on the Klooster Center website, which you can reach from the Library's site (click on "Writing" in the left-hand menu), or from the new hope.edu site (in the directory under "go to Academics > Resources and Support, then Klooster Center). Once you arrive, in the lower right-hand corner is a box marked "Posters and Presentations"; click "More..." and you'll reach the page. Describing all this is making me realize that we need a separate "faculty resources" page that's easier to get to! I'll work on that and send an all-faculty e-mail.

Questions?

Part of my work as Director of the Klooster Center is to be available to faculty who have questions about anything relating to writing. Don't hesitate to contact me: x7121 or cunningham@hope.edu.