Put Down That Red Pen!

How Process Writing Deals with Error

According to John C. Bean (2001), Writing Program Director and Professor of English at Seattle University, studies have shown that

- Formal grammar instruction has a “negligible” and possibly “harmful effect” on the improvement of writing. Marking of error may exacerbate the problem by discouraging students.
- A “poor writer” is often seen as someone who has problems with grammar and usage, but student error falls into patterns of a few repeated mistakes. At least half of errors result from poor editing and proofreading.
- Error increases with the increased cognitive difficulty of an assignment. As students gain in knowledge of a discipline, their error will decrease.
- The frequency of error has not changed over time, but the type of error has evolved as the language has.

Writing teachers who use process writing operate on several overriding principles:

- Error should be expected in first drafts and essay exams.
- Students are responsible for their own learning and learn more if they are responsible for fixing their own errors.
- The teacher is a mentor or guide who focuses on what’s right and what can be improved, not what’s wrong and needs to be fixed.
- Writing is a process of steps (invention, drafting, critiquing, revising, and editing) that each writer goes through to create a final product. Error can be fixed in the editing stage of the process.
- Process-writing teachers respond to papers differently depending on what stage of the process a paper is in. Comments on early drafts deal with how papers can be improved, not on error.
Responding to Error

• Shift from “editing-oriented” to “revision-oriented” comments:
  o An editing-oriented philosophy tells students to “fix” error when the major problems might be weak ideas or confusing structure.
  o Revision-oriented comments tell students what is good in a draft but also suggest ways to revise the ideas of a paper.
• Marking error is time-consuming for the teacher. Ignoring error on early drafts allows a teacher to read papers quickly and focus on the ideas in the paper.
• When students read aloud, they often correct their mistakes as they read.
• Error often disappears as students write multiple drafts (a key component of all process-oriented writing classes).

Other Strategies for dealing with error:

• Use error notebooks in which students identify their errors, identify the rules they follow, and write corrections of the error.
• Have students teach their most common error.
• Put checkmarks on lines with errors and have students find and correct error.
• Employ peer editing.
• Suggest students schedule a consultation in the University Writing Center (262-3144).
• Read until the third or fifth distracting error; return it to the student to fix before reading further. (Borrowed from Norm Clark, Communications, ASU.)
• Use portfolios for assessment. (See the WAC website or contact Dennis Bohr [bohrdj@appstate.edu] for more information about portfolios.)

Information for this handout was taken from Art Young’s Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum (2002) and John Bean’s Engaging Ideas (2001).