

5. Reid, 126. Vann et al., 432.
6. Susan Gass, Alison Mackey, and Teresa Pica. "The Role of Input and Interaction in Second Language Acquisition: Introduction to the Special Issue." *The Modern Language Journal* 82 (1998): 302.
7. Gass et al., 302.
8. Muriel Harris and Tony Silva. "Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options." *College Composition and Communication* 44 (1993): 533.

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Can You Proofread This?

Beth Rapp Young¹

Anyone who works in a writing center becomes familiar with requests like, "My paper is due in 45 minutes—can someone here proofread it for me?" With imposing urgency, some writers expect tutors to give the paper absolution and a quick blessing. Tutors risk disappointing students when they explain that they cannot comb through a paper for errors, mark and correct each one, and hand the paper back with a stamp of approval. There is another kind of risk as well, and this one stems from the very idea of correctness in writing. What's correct? Who is to judge? Why does it matter? Some writing centers try to stay away from proofreading altogether. Yet the fact is, students enter most writing centers expecting to receive help on all aspects of their writing, including final editing. This chapter offers thoughts on why proofreading is a dilemma in itself, and then—for those who struggle with it—some ways to help writers proofread their own papers.

Experienced tutors understand that when writers ask us to proofread, they may really be asking, "What do you think of my ideas?" "Have I supported my point?" or "Does it flow?" Careful questioning is important when working with a writer you've never assisted before. What many tutors don't realize is that the decision to proofread requires a shared understanding between the tutor and writer, one that recognizes the problems inherent in bringing papers to the writing center for proofreading. The first step, therefore, is always to be alert to the possibility that the writer may ask for help with grammar or proofreading when he actually wants something different but doesn't know how to ask for it. So if there is an opportunity to talk about ideas, take it and leave the proofreading for later. After all, once the writer changes the ideas and sentences, proofreading must begin all over again.

What about when the writer says, "I feel very good about the ideas and the organization—I've shown it to other writing consultants and other people in the class, and I've incorporated their suggestions for revision. Plus, this paper

is due in an hour. So I need someone to look it over and see if there are any errors.”? Should you tell that writer that she has come to the wrong place?

Some would argue that proofreading is against the purpose of writing centers because writing centers are supposed to work towards better writers, not better papers (for a famous example of this dictum, see North). Another argument is that proofreading supports an unrealistic view of writing-as-product, not process. Proofreading does this by ignoring the global revision needs of a paper in favor of error checking, especially when the writer still needs to work on ideas and organization. (Clark compares too-early proofreading to polishing fifty pieces of wood before you know which pieces you’ll use to build a table. Obviously, building the table should come before polishing it.)

Finally, some worry that an emphasis on proofreading will transform the experience of working in a writing center. Rather than focusing on the writer, writing consultants will need to focus on the text. Will writing consultants enjoy proofreading as much as the other work? And what if they miss an error or two? Will the writer hold the writing center responsible? Will writers even bother to proofread if they know someone skilled at writing can do it for them? And what message does *that* send? Questions such as these illuminate potential risks associated with proofreading. Each writing center should try to define its own purpose and mission in ways that recognize these risks.

One way to understand proofreading is in terms of the writing process. How can a writing center be complete, providing help from invention to revision, if it doesn’t pay full attention to that final step? Arguably, ignoring something that matters to most readers gives an unrealistic view of the writer’s obligation to her reader and creates the impression that correctness doesn’t matter. Besides, writers learn from modeling. When we say, “We can’t proofread for you, but we’ll teach you how to proofread your own paper,” there is an opportunity here to show the writer how good proofreaders work. Part of the argument for writing centers is that an outside reader can notice things the writer cannot because he or she is too familiar with the paper. Writers can learn from tutors how to step back from the piece and see it with fresh eyes. Finally, let’s remember that writers may visit the center for proofreading but return for other kinds of help. Proofreading may just be the entrée.

Some Background

A large body of research on errors and correction in writing provides different perspectives on this issue. While some have tried to classify the different types of errors and determine which ones occur most frequently (Connors and Lunsford), others have examined the effects that various errors have on readers’ attitudes (Hull; Hairston). Modern approaches to error have been more inclined to follow Mina Shaughnessy’s lead and regard error as a natural part of learning the skill of writing. When viewed this way, errors are not always straightforward mistakes. Sometimes they are the result of an incorrect or mis-

applied rule that the writer has learned, or they may be caused by intrusions from the writer’s spoken language (or her first language, in the case of second-language writers).² And sometimes they lie in the eye of the beholder. In an article in the journal *College Composition and Communication*, author Joseph Williams slyly inserted about one hundred errors—typos, misspellings, repetitions, and so on—into his article on error, but few readers (college English teachers mostly) caught on until the author told them at the end what he had done. His purpose was to demonstrate that English teachers find numerous errors in student writing because they are looking for them, and where they do not expect to find them, they don’t, even when they are plainly there.

Errors are no joke in most teachers’ minds, however, and students are justifiably concerned about the impact that errors will have on their grade. Helping a writer to proofread can be tremendously valuable when it is done for the purpose of teaching the student to find her own errors. Tutors may pride themselves on doing this well. Some writing centers approach the issue as a research problem by first listing all of the errors and then studying them with the writer to see what they have in common. In the long list of possible errors writers make, it is worth noting that readers tend to be bothered more by some than others—usually sentence-level problems (run ons and fragments), excessive commas, and nonparallel constructions (Cazort; Hairston).

What to Do?

Beginning tutors may be tempted to plunge right in, but experienced tutors know that proofreading is rarely a straightforward process. Here are some general strategies to bear in mind. (In the following section, you will see some specific suggestions for helping writers.)

First, talk with the writer about proofreading before you begin it and decide whether it is necessary at this time. If so, be honest about your own limitations and don’t allow yourself to be framed as a writing expert; this would be a no-win situation for both of you. It is better to treat the problems you are unsure about as curiosities, and you will be surprised at how often the real answer is that there is no single correct answer. This is not because there are no correct answers. Rather, many of the questions that writers express involve aspects of language usage that have more than one right answer. This is another reason why it is important to understand that proofreading is not a straightforward business and that editing decisions are ultimately the writer’s responsibility.

Experienced tutors don’t attempt to pick out every mistake they see. Instead, they look for error patterns. You and the writer can then decide which errors to work on. Spelling, for example, might be something the writer feels he can correct on his own or with spell check. Software such as MLA’s Editor5 may help with error analysis. Use grammar checkers with caution, though, because they identify many “errors” that aren’t errors at all (like passive voice) and they fail to catch errors that really are (like agreement). Look for grammar

checkers that print a comprehensive list of errors, rather than requiring you to address each error one at a time. The comprehensive printout can be reassuring because what looks like eighty-five individual errors with a standard grammar checker may turn out to be only four patterns of error. Nonetheless, many writing centers avoid grammar and style checkers altogether because of the mixed messages they can create.

Remember to make errors the writer is most concerned about a priority. You can determine this by asking questions about errors that have been marked in earlier papers, those that seem to be especially annoying to the instructor (sexist language, perhaps), or that will be fatal for that assignment (“any paper with two or more sentence fragments will fail”). For writers worried about questions that have no clear right-or-wrong answers, it may be best to focus on matters of voice, tone, consistency, or purpose as a way of deciding what to do (see Masiello, this volume).

In your discussions, don’t be afraid to turn to a handbook! Writers are sometimes unsure about how to use handbooks effectively, so when you turn to a handbook you model an important skill that writers can learn to use on their own. Beginning tutors sometimes worry that consulting a handbook hurts their credibility, but actually, demonstrating that you know how to use writerly resources enhances your credibility at the same time that it helps you resist being framed as the authority. In fact, it’s often useful to consult more than one handbook, because different handbooks explain concepts differently, yielding a fuller understanding of the issue. Sometimes handbooks even disagree, and that disagreement can help a writer stop seeking *the* correct answer and start considering which strategy is best for her particular paper. Consulting handbooks is a great way for tutors and writers to learn more about language and how it works.

Finally, I recommend that tutors look for opportunities to learn about language and how it works. Read and write often, paying attention to how authors convey different tones and experimenting with new styles in your own writing (see Bishop; Eckard and Staben, this volume). A heightened sense of curiosity about writing is what many tutors point to when they say that working in the writing center taught them more about writing than they could have learned in any class.

Regardless of the general approach you use, here are some specific techniques tutors can use to help writers with proofreading:

- *Explain how you find errors.* In other words, do your best to think out loud to help the writer learn from your example.
- *Explain suggestions according to the writer’s intended meaning.* (“With the commas, it sounds like you mean. . . .” or “When you change tenses, I can’t tell if you mean. . . .”).

Also, remember that rules are made to be broken and what the writer is doing may be creative and effective even if he doesn’t fully understand

it. Be open to this, and talk with the writer about whether or not it works. If you are both unsure, seek another opinion.

- *Compare specific strong and weak examples from the paper.* (“You use passive voice in this sentence, but over here, you use active voice. See how this sentence is less wordy?”)
- *Let the writer try out strategies on his own.* (“Ok, I’ve shown you how to change this sentence to remove the dangling modifier. How would you fix this next dangling modifier?”)
- *Maintain a healthy sense of doubt.* (“This might be wrong—I tend to get mixed up about lie/lay. Have you brought your handbook?”) A tutor isn’t expected to be The Grammar God. Tutors are expected to help writers learn to help themselves. Modeling use of a handbook is a great way to do that. Maintain doubt also by asking gently, “Why did you do this?” The answer may reveal that the writer is laboring under a misconception—or, it may reveal that you have misunderstood his intention.

At the end of this chapter (see Appendix A), you will find a list of techniques writers and tutors can use to check quickly for ideas and organization before embarking on proofreading (also see Trupe, this volume, for more on organization). You will also find a list of proofreading techniques to use in locating surface features (see Appendix B), a table that tries to match techniques with writing problems (see Appendix C), and suggested guidelines for prioritizing errors (see Appendix D). Use them as a guide for reflecting on various approaches to helping writers with their proofreading.

Complicating Matters

So it’s as easy as that? Well, it’s probably not that easy. In practice, these strategies have mixed results. Here are some of the difficulties we’ve run into in the writing center where I work. How would you address them?

Writers may regard the writing center as a place to share the burden. They may feel resentment and think, “I don’t know this stuff. I did all I can do and now I’ve come here for help, not to be told to do it myself. If I could do it myself, I wouldn’t need to come here.” Given the great amount of time some writers invest in ideas, research, and revising, isn’t it fair for them to ask the writing center to proofread for them so that they can devote more of their time to ideas, research, and revision?

Many writing centers have embraced the goal of empowering *student writers* to become *writers*, which involves, in part, helping students to learn the practices and habits of writers with *real-world* audiences and goals. Yet in workplace and other so-called real world settings, writers often turn to someone else for help with proofreading, because outside readers are more effective proofreaders. In fact, research by Glynda Hull (1987) examined just this point. Hull asked groups of more-skilled and less-skilled college writers to proofread

several essays, some of which were written by others, some of which were written by the the writers in the study. Hull found that more-skilled writers were better than less-skilled writers at proofreading papers written by someone else. But the two groups performed about the same when proofreading their own work—neither group corrected many errors at all. If proofreading is best done by someone other than the writer, should a writing center offer to proofread for writers, rather than helping writers learn how to proofread for themselves?

Writers may not know enough to share the burden. Some writers may honestly not be able to find errors themselves. For example, ESL writers who come to the writing center for help with articles and prepositions are often unable to locate problems with these words (see Ritter, this volume). Even when we try our best to explain the rules, ESL writers may not be able to spot problems with articles. This is because many languages do not have articles (those that do often use them differently from English), and because the rules for article use in English are surprisingly complex. One ESL speaker, a Japanese-born college professor, noted, "I have studied articles for 17 years, and I am finally beginning to feel I've mastered them."³ As this professor knew, ESL writers need practice and experience to acquire a good sense of articles. Thirty minutes, even with careful explanation, isn't likely to make a big difference. How can a tutor know how much progress is realistic to expect in a proofreading session?

Some errors may be normal side effect of writing improvement. As writers experiment with new techniques, it stands to reason that they will make mistakes while they are learning to master those techniques. To test this theory, Richard H. Haswell compared the errors made by college freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and post-college employees. He found that college students' writing did improve, and that they continued to make mistakes at the same rate while they were improving, but the mistakes were allied to the improvement. For example, as college students learned to write more complex sentences, they would make new mistakes which could not be made in simpler sentences. One implication of Haswell's finding is that undue effort to prevent the mistakes may also hinder the improvement. Given this, how much effort should a tutor spend on helping writers correct mistakes?

A student had worked diligently on a paper with one of the tutors in our writing center, only to return after she had received a C grade. At the bottom of her paper, the instructor wrote, "Next time, proofread!" Though the student did not try to blame the tutor, she was clearly discouraged. And the tutor felt terrible because he had not recognized several major errors in the paper. What would you say to this tutor? What should the tutor say to the student?

Further Reading

Bishop, Wendy, ed. 1997. *Elements of Alternate Style*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

If ever a book made the point that rules of grammar and proper usage were made to be broken, this is it. Various authors contribute chapters to this book covering such topics

as fractured narratives, risk taking, radical revision, and alternative grammars. This is a delightful read for anyone who has thought about breaking conventions creatively, and a must for anyone in danger of becoming too serious about correctness.

Hartwell, Patrick. 1985. Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar. *College English* 47: 105–27.

In all that has been written about grammar and the teaching of writing, this article is a stand out for the clarity with which it frames the debate. Hartwell explains the various meanings of grammar and why matters of usage, correctness, and style are fundamentally different from linguistics and the language we all acquire as we grow up. This article also helps in understanding why research findings have shown that grammar instruction in school does not tend to improve writing.

Hunter, Susan, and Ray Wallace, eds. 1995. *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

This book of essays offers a current and historical perspective on the debate about grammar and writing, focusing especially on the college level. Many of the essays challenge the idea that grammar instruction has no place in teaching writing, and some offer ideas for how to incorporate grammar instruction in ways that students will find lively and interesting. The contributing authors include college composition teachers and writing center directors.

Notes

1. This chapter began as a presentation at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, Plattsburgh State University of New York, November 6–8, 1998.

2. David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," *College Composition and Communication* 31 (October 1980), 253–69.

3. *English Composition for Non-Native Speakers*. Videotape. (Miami: University of Miami, 1996).

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Appendix A

Global Techniques Writers and Tutors Can Use for Ideas and Organization

Before beginning to proofread for surface errors, look carefully at ideas and organization.

- **Underline the thesis.**

Is there a thesis? Where is it? Does it accurately reflect the paper? Is it interesting, or is it a just-add-water, 3-part boring thesis? If the writer agrees the ideas are weak, help the writer make a plan to contact the instructor and ask for an extension to start over.

- **Help the writer create a descriptive outline for the paper.**

What does each paragraph or section do? What does the paper as a whole do? It is one thing to know *what a paragraph says*, but just as important to know *what it does* to strengthen the paper.

- **Underline transitions between paragraphs.**

Are there enough transitions? Do the transitions help to connect the paragraphs to the thesis? Do the transitions show how different paragraphs relate to each other, or do they just mark items in a list ("One thing . . . and another thing . . . and another thing . . .")?

- **Work with the writer to create an abstract of the paper.**

Start with the thesis and condense each paragraph to one sentence. If this proves to be too difficult to do, you may have located a problem with paragraph coherence. Fit all of this into one paragraph. Is it clear how each idea leads to the next? Is the abstract coherent? If not, revise the abstract. Next, using the abstract as a guide, revise the paper.