



# "Just Check My Grammar"

## What this handout is about

When you ask ESL students what they would like to work on, they will often say that they'd like you to check their grammar. "Checking the grammar" can feel uncomfortably close to proofreading and editing students' papers for them—which tutors know is strictly out of bounds. Unfortunately, ESL writers have been unfairly denied access to language feedback because of the very strong prohibition against editing, but the good news is that we can still be very helpful without violating our principles.

This page provides a bit of important historical context for the discussion and offers strategies for responding to the grammar-checking request in ways that respect the pedagogical philosophies of the writing center and the instructional needs of students writing in a foreign language. The list of strategies is followed by tutorial excerpts with annotations that illustrate how some of the strategies work in real conversations between tutors and ESL writers.

## 1984: The Triple Whammy for ESL Writers

In 1984, several of the most influential texts in writing center history were published. You will probably recognize the first two because the vocabulary and the philosophy are still the driving force in today's writing centers:

1. Reigstad & McAndrew: Division of the writing process into "higher order" and "lower order" concerns, establishing a value-laden sequence of content and organization before grammar and punctuation.
2. North: Staunch declaration that writing centers were not centers for mechanical remediation and error correction. "In a writing center, the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction...our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (p. 69).
3. Friedlander: Assertion that writing centers meet the needs of foreign students by focusing on mechanical remediation and error correction. The content of students' essays should be discussed only as much as necessary for accurate error correction.

The writing process was divided, the writing center's territory was firmly staked, and the perceived needs of ESL writers were placed squarely outside the parameters of the writing center's mission, pedagogical philosophy, and standard procedure. No wonder we've struggled so much!

In fairness to the scholars above, they meant to emphasize that writers should concentrate on developing their ideas before they worried about comma splices, and to emphasize that truly good writing involved the long-term development of a complex set of skills. These ideas are still so powerfully present in writing centers today because they are so very true. Unfortunately, they had the unintended effect of marginalizing discussions of sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, and grammatical errors until

very late in the writing process.

In truth, ideas can not be separated from the language used to express them. ESL writers are language learners, and language learning takes *years and years*, particularly when learners need to have command of a sophisticated range of vocabulary, sentence structures, discipline-specific expressions, idioms, etc. ESL writers are also developing writers, so they do need the same kind of process-oriented and "higher order" feedback that native speakers need. Quite often, though, their ability to develop the content of their essays is limited by their lack of vocabulary or by their difficulty with complex sentence structures. As tutors, you can support the development of writing skills by talking about language at any point in the writing process where it might be helpful. It's good to discourage premature concern with nit-picky editing decisions, but it's great to encourage exploration of the right language for expressing a great idea. Be flexible and be comfortable with the fluid, back and forth movement between discussing the ideas and the language.

## **What do you do when students say, "Just check my grammar"?**

1. Validate the students' desire for grammatical feedback ("Sure, we can take a look at the language stuff..."). Lectures about how we teach proofreading strategies or how we don't really do grammar in the writing center put students on the defensive when they have a legitimate need for feedback on their language proficiency. Just say yes, and move on to the next step.
2. Keep asking simple questions to elicit the full range of concerns (...What else would you like to talk about today? Are you still working on the content?). Students will often identify quite a range of concerns with simple prompting at the beginning of the session, especially after they've been reassured that you'll help them identify problems with a language they're still learning.
3. Ask for an overview of the project. ("Before we get started, could you tell me about what you're working on and what you've included so far?"). Explaining their writing project (the assignment and the text so far) gives students the chance to produce "comprehensible output"—a chance to use the English language to express their thoughts clearly and to make themselves understood. We know that language learners are able to understand a lot more than they are able to spontaneously produce in a foreign language, and it's really hard work to express complex thoughts sufficiently in a language that's not your own. By asking questions, by listening carefully, and by asking follow-up questions, you can help students work through the process of communicating clearly in English, and you can give yourself a mental framework of the project that will be helpful when language questions arise in specific parts of the text.
4. When you find something confusing as you're reading the draft, start broadly ("Tell me more about this idea" or "I'm not sure what you mean here."). You can stop reading for a quick clarification, or you can make a note to come back to it later. Either way, try to be attuned especially to places where the student's language use is truly interfering with your ability to understand what they're trying to say. Clarifying these expressions takes priority over minor errors that don't really interfere with your understanding.
5. Recast the students' explanations more grammatically or more clearly ("Let me see if I understand you correctly. You're saying that..."). If you understood and explained correctly, the students hear the thought expressed in grammatical English and can make note of it—they can add it to their English language repertoire. However, if your recasting (your paraphrased explanation) doesn't match the students' intended meaning, or if you can reasonably offer two different interpretations of the text, you can examine the passages more closely to figure out why it was unclear. Then you can work together on correcting whatever is confusing about the students' original expressions. This back and forth process is called "negotiation of meaning" ("Is this what you mean?" "No, I mean this." "Oh, okay. We say it like this." "Oh, okay. Thanks.")
6. Provide "linguistic input"—language that students read and hear. This "input" might be bits of English that are new to them (like a new word or idiomatic expression), or it might be familiar bits of English being used in ways they've never heard before. Don't worry that you are usurping

control of the students' ideas if you make suggestions about words or phrasings that convey what the students are trying to express.

7. Provide the essential grammar and vocabulary, providing several options for students to choose from if possible.
8. Try to explain why we say it the way we do, but be comfortable with not knowing off the top of your head. You are NOT expected to be experts in formal linguistics. But you ARE expected to try to learn something about the way language works. Admit it when you just don't know the answer. Use it as an opportunity to collaborate with the student, with your colleagues, and with your friendly neighborhood ESL specialist. Together, we'll try to find the answer in our favorite reference books, and you'll learn something interesting and useful for the next time.

## What if students really mean, "Just check my grammar"?

There does come a time when both native and non-native English writers are ready to concentrate strictly on their grammar. They're satisfied with everything else, and as writers, you know that's a happy place to be. Normally we teach proofreading strategies to native speakers at this stage, and we can do this with ESL writers too, but we also have to adjust our strategies to accommodate their status as language learners. These suggestions are meant to help you with that adjustment.

There's a strong misconception that ESL papers will have "patterns of error"—certain types of errors that occur repeatedly in the text. Sometimes that does happen, but more frequently, there will only be one or two instances of each of twenty five different kinds of error. That's okay. You can still exploit the educational value of each error, having confidence that students will try to apply what they learn to their subsequent writing.

Two things to note: First, even though the strategies listed below concentrate more on straight proofreading and grammar checking, remember that you can also use all of the strategies listed above for correcting the grammar by clarifying the intended meaning. Second, when you do find an error, you can ask, "How do you normally proofread for this kind of mistake?" or say to the student, "Let's try to find a few more examples of this structure, just to double-check them." Look for correct and incorrect examples because we need our successes reinforced too! It's a great opportunity to assess the students' proofreading skills and do some strategy building.

Think of these strategies as being listed in the order they should be used in, but feel comfortable to experiment with the order, depending on the student, the writing project, and your own judgment. Play with them to see how each strategy helps enhance the students' learning experience.

1. Ask students to identify specific words, sentences, or types of grammatical structures they want feedback on ("What do you normally struggle with?" or "Show me a couple of things you're not sure about."). You can ask why they're not sure about that sentence, if they can think of other ways to express the thought, what rules they know about the particular grammar structure, if they checked a reference book, if they can show you the page so you can look at the rules together, etc. In other words, you can learn a lot about the students' thought processes that will be helpful in working with each of them. One caution: be sensitive to how much time you're spending on these questions. It can be frustrating to students if every single error is interrogated at length, as you can imagine. Idioms and prepositions are great candidates for the tutors' quick corrections because they're so idiosyncratic. Structures that follow a set of rules more systematically, like verb tense or gerunds vs. participles are good candidates for more questioning. (See the *Problem/Solution* book if you didn't understand gerunds vs. participles:)
2. Ask them to show you where they struggled to make language choices. Sometimes they really do believe they've written everything in correct English, so they can't point to a sentence they think might be incorrect. If you ask them to show you where they really had to work at it, you have a chance to interrogate their decision-making process ("Why was this a hard choice? How else were you thinking of saying it? What made you choose this way?") and to either congratulate them and

- reinforce a correct choice, or to correct them and perhaps teach them a trick for making the right choice next time (a mnemonic device, a great page in your favorite reference book, etc.).
3. Read through and identify places you, as the reader, do not understand. Explain to the students that you will concentrate on thoughts that they are not communicating clearly before you move on to the passages that are incorrect but understandable.
  4. Take one or two pages and underline every error you notice without correcting it, then ask the student to try making the corrections. Concentrate on what the students can't correct independently, then look for subsequent uses (correct and incorrect) of that structure to teach proofreading strategies and reinforce the language lesson.
  5. Again, explain what you can, but enlist the students' help in using the reference books. If that fails, keep track of it to look it up later so you can learn how to explain it and/or find it again with another student.

## The Strategies in Action

These transcripts (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/tutor/grammarchecksheets.doc>) are excerpted from tutorial sessions with ESL writers. They have been annotated to explain a bit about what was happening in the tutorial, what the students were trying to accomplish, what the tutors were trying to accomplish, and to illustrate a few of the concepts and strategies listed above. Read each excerpt without reading the comments, just to get the flow of the conversation. Read them again, looking at each of the marginal comments as you reflect on the information on this page.

## Resources

You can find very clear explanations of grammar structures and an EXCELLENT collection of idioms and phrasal verbs, which ESL students usually struggle with, at UsingEnglish.com (<http://usingenglish.com>) .

See what the students are learning on our ESL Student Resources (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/esl.html>) page.

## References

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