

3 STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVED STUDENT WRITING (AND INSTRUCTOR READING)

Let's start with a few assumptions:

- You don't have time or inclination to teach grammar, nor should you be expected to
- Some 100-level courses require English 19 or 22 as a prerequisite, so there's no guarantee that 100-level students have a strong grasp of conventional English grammar
- Students who have passed English 22 are capable of writing clear, intelligible sentences with "passable" conventional English grammar

Three major grammar issues:

- Run-on sentences
- Sentence fragments
- "Gobbly-guck" writing; incoherent phrasing and expression of ideas

These three issues are fairly easily overcome. I'd go as far as to say that students are much better writers than they show themselves to be. However, encouraging the good writing—the *readable* writing—out of them requires some strategizing, investment of class time, and perhaps a slight willingness to bend assumptions about both what students are capable of (much more) and what we can do to bring it out of them (usually a bit more than we'd hoped).

REVISION STRATEGIES FOR RUN-ONS & FRAGMENTS: READ ALOUD, FORWARD AND BACKWARD

- Few students read their work after writing; the writing is their only reading, so they've potentially never read their sentences from beginning to end
- Require students to read their papers out loud, preferably in-class to another classmate
- Instruct them to find and fix the errors and awkward sentences
- Bringing two copies of their work to class is idea; one for the writer to read, and another for the classmate to follow along and make additional marks
- In groups of 2, this can take 20-40 minutes, depending on length

- BEST at home revision strategy: Instruct students to read their work backwards, reading each sentence in isolation, from last to first
- Reading for meaning at the sentence level allows students to quickly see where they did not put together a complete idea, which is often easily fixed with combining two sentences or shortening one long one. Most students are capable of fixing most fragments and run-ons with almost zero grammar instruction.
- Potential lesson plan: Distribute an anonymous student paragraph with fragments, run-ons and other errors. Have students in groups read the paragraph backwards and correct the errors. Have students post their revised version into Chat Room and project them thru the Elmo for the class to see. Having this first-hand experience will lead them more easily to at-home revision.

- Share the "#1 comma rule": *When in doubt, leave it out.*

**STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE CLEAR WRITING (AND AVOID GOBBLY-GUCK SENTENCES):
BRING 'AUDIENCE' INTO THE ASSIGNMENT WITH CLASS ACTIVITIES**

We've all read those long, tumbling sentences that go nowhere and say nothing, seemingly Frankensteined together by bits and pieces of random phrases and half-ideas. You wonder, *How did this student even graduate high school? What do I even say to THIS?* Believe me when I tell you I used to read this stuff all the time, especially in English 22 but also in 100, but I no longer do. I have a magic wand that I wave over the class now, over and over again. Sometimes, I use the wand to poke at students, even throttle the particularly recalcitrant pupil. I ask them, "Who are you writing for?" "Who is your audience?"

"You, Mister," they say—which is another way of saying nobody in particular.

Gobbly-guck incoherent no-sense writing comes from a lack of knowledge in who should or would care about their ideas. If nobody cares, the students don't either.

BUT, when someone genuinely has an idea to share, it's hard to stop them. At the very least, imagining who is reading helps students to *aim their writing in a direction*, which seems to bring the sentence-level meaning to coherence.

For clear, sensible writing (and easier reading on your part), any attempt to invite *the person* to authentically engage with the assignment will yield surprisingly good results.

Here are a few ways to bring audience and authentic writing into the assignment:

- Have students develop/share ideas in guided or structured groups (concentric circles, Q&A, competitive brainstorming, etc.)
- Have students share parts of their work in groups, like, reading the introduction and one paragraph aloud, then soliciting feedback from the listeners
- Any technique to bring a social component to the writing project will often encourage students to imagine their classmates as the audience for their work
- Randomize the groups if possible; avoid the "1 good student to 3 mediocre student" ratio—experience shows that 4 randomly grouped less-than-stellar students make a better team than even the most thoughtfully designed group

- Also, it can be fun and useful to make "writing to the audience" part of the assignment—discuss who the students are writing to, who can find the information useful, and why there's a practical need to be able
- Students can even play the role of anthropologist, psychologist, etc. as a position to write from

STRATEGIES FOR READABLE, COLLEGE-LEVEL ESSAYS: SCAFFOLED ASSIGNMENTS

Some student essays don't seem to even follow the assignment guidelines. It's as if the student never even read the assignment, and the work does not reflect what you discussed in class, much less what the actual assignment dictated. Even student tutors will tell you the difficulties they sometimes face when they try to steer the student back to the assignment and your instructions only to have the student willfully, almost stubbornly pretend that your instructions don't exist.

Some solutions:

- Scaffold the assignment into three or so smaller, discreet assignments that culminate in a final essay
- Give class time to developing and sharing ideas for each individual scaffold assignment
- Give suggestive feedback on each assignment to guide the student toward the expected outcomes