

## GRADING AND GIVING FEEDBACK ON ESL WRITING



When grading papers and assignments, it is important for instructors to see feedback and evaluation as an opportunity for learning. Our suggestions encourage you to try to see past the inevitable grammatical errors to the content being communicated. Even if a paper contains numerous grammatical errors, it is still essential that we honour student writing as a form of communication, and respond to it as such. You can give helpful feedback on ESL writing without any specialized ESL training. By engaging with the student about the content of their paper and by showing them where, as a reader, you get lost, you encourage them to stretch and perfect their language skills.

In addition to the feedback you give ESL students yourself, you can encourage them to work with a tutor at the Writing & Learning Centre (WLC). Tutors help students to both develop their ideas and improve their written style and grammar – see the article on “Support for ESL Students at the Writing & Learning Centre” for information on what students can expect from the WLC.

There will be times when it is difficult to see past language limitations in your students’ work, when difficulties with language obscure communication to such an extent that you feel a student cannot succeed in your class. This may be a time when you need to talk with the student and encourage him or

her to take time for more concentrated language study. In addition to working with tutors at the WLC, this might include enrolling in credit ESL programs at OCAD (see “Resources for ESL and International Students at OCAD”) or in ESL programs outside OCAD. For general advice you can give on language learning, see “Supporting Your Students’ Language Learning.”

Here are tips for providing helpful feedback on ESL papers:

**Provide feedback from an “active” reader.** Always respond to content, not just grammar. ESL students often feel as though their language errors have eclipsed their ideas, and this can lead to a sense of frustration or not feeling heard. Try first reading the paper once through without circling, correcting, or annotating a single grammatical error and responding solely to the content and ideas. Add a short note at the end of the paper. Here, give feedback on strengths as well as areas for improvement, discussing the ideas presented and the overall structure of the argument. It’s also helpful to raise provocative questions for the student to consider. You might also give a few concrete suggestions for improvements or areas to work on in the next assignment.

**Minimize grammar markup.** Most students will benefit minimally, if at all, from a grammatical markup of

their entire paper. Passively looking over corrected errors rarely leads to new learning. In the absence of explicit grammatical instruction, it is difficult for most students to deduce grammatical rules from a series of corrections and apply them in new contexts. And the impact of all that red ink can be devastating. Instead, consider marking up only one paragraph for grammatical errors to give the student a sense of the number and kind of errors they are making. Beyond the one paragraph marked for language errors, only mark up passages where the clarity is directly affected. If possible, try to explain what it is about that passage that is unclear. This will help keep the student’s focus on improving clarity, rather than aiming for perfection. Remember that grammatical errors are only a percentage of the mark in essays written by native speakers, so don’t deduct more for non-native errors than you would for native ones.

**Make time to meet with students during office hours.** If you’re having trouble making sense of the content of a student’s paper, consider going over a page or two in individual meetings during office hours. This kind of one-on-one interview is often most valuable to the student, particularly when the student is having trouble understanding written feedback.

### STUDENT STORIES



Almost every instructor would try and correct my mistakes... I appreciate that paragraph my instructors write at the end – they tell me what they feel about my paper and they tell me how I can improve. That helps me more than correcting my words or choice of words.

**Max Lin, Environmental Design**



It’s helpful for me when instructors highlight the part that they didn’t understand well and they explain to me how I can make it better, so next time they can understand what I am saying. They always do notes. I’m learning... that’s why you go to school. Even English speakers can have the same problems I have in grammar and organizing and paragraphs... so I don’t feel bad at all.

**Magda Salamanca, Sculpture/Installation**

## RESPONDING AS AN “ACTIVE READER”

Here is a sample of how a note on a student paper might focus on content while still giving feedback on structure and grammar.

(Written by Catherine Black, Liberal Studies)

*This essay gets so much better as you get deeper into your analysis. The start of this essay is a little awkward because of some issues with “tone”: your references to your experience and your feelings are a little bit overwhelming – it makes me focus on you, the writer, rather than the subject, the painting. I also think you could have written a clear thesis statement instead of the statement of intent that appears at the bottom of your introductory paragraph. Remember that your introduction is like a map and you are providing your reader with a clear idea of what follows and where you are going. (Be specific. State your thesis.) As I read your essay it became clear to me that you do have a thesis, and a good one! I find that*

*there are many moments of very strong analysis in this essay as you discuss the oppressive colours, the energy, the weight of the scene. You paint a very ominous picture with your description, and your vocabulary is generally very accurate and strong. Your very vivid, descriptive paragraph about 911 did seem out of place, however. The content actually seemed more appropriate as an introduction—a way to lead to your thesis. I think your major challenges are with tone (knowing how much ‘distance’ you should have from your reader and your subject and also the way you “talk” to your reader—whether it should be casual or formal). There are also some problems with grammatical errors like article use. These are easy enough to correct, but will take some practice and attention. Finally, I feel your conclusion falls short of being a reflection of the very good analysis you offer in the body of your essay. Remember that it is an important part of your essay—it’s your last impression!*



## ESL WRITERS AND PLAGIARISM

ESL students at OCAD who plagiarize often do so for the same of the same reasons other students do. The conventions of citing appropriately in North American academic writing are complex, with many gray areas. What is considered common knowledge in a particular context? How close can a paraphrase be to the original without being considered plagiarism? At what point does a discussion with a friend about a piece of writing become too close a collaboration? Few students come out of high school, wherever they were educated, prepared to use sources well in university writing. Most will require a fair bit of coaching on this during their time at university. On the other hand, there are OCAD students who put a low priority on their written work at OCAD and are simply trying to avoid the work required to turn out a written paper. Or who simply get pressed for time and panic. Some turn to copying or buying papers. When you suspect this type of plagiarism, it is appropriate to follow the procedures in place in your Faculty.

There are, however, a couple of sources of plagiarism that are specific to the experience of ESL students: one has its source in cultural differences in writing practice, and the other in pressure students feel to turn out perfect English writing.

It is important to know that in some academic cultures, the words of re-

spected authoritative authors do not need to be cited. In fact, a fluent writer is often expected to show their mastery of the material by weaving in words from “the masters.” The educated reader is expected to recognize the source. For writers from these writing traditions, rewriting the words of an authority “in their own words,” as we ask them to do, may be considered a deeply inappropriate. In writing by students from these traditions, you will commonly see that the student has woven into a paper passages that are clearly not his or her own, copied perhaps from a website or even from the course reading. Very often, this is done with no intention to deceive.

Another difference between the North American tradition and some other academic cultures is our emphasis on ownership, not only of original research, but of words themselves. For example, if we include some readily available background information on an artist, such as date of birth, we don’t normally need to cite it – it is considered common knowledge. However, if we take this information verbatim from a website, suddenly it is plagiarism. Even though there is nothing original about the information itself, the writer owns the precise phrasing of the passage. This is a bizarre concept to writers from many cultures – after all, how can one “own” the words of a language? Our very culturally specific views of intellectual property take learning. Differences in views of ownership of



language and written expression can also influence how students collaborate with others on their work, with some ESL students feeling it is quite natural to rely on friends with stronger language skills to write portions of their paper based on their ideas or research. Writers from other cultures may not draw such clear lines between their own words and those of others. This area can be particularly confusing for students in OCAD classes where close collaboration on group projects is often encouraged.

Another common reason that some ESL students plagiarize is that they feel compelled to turn in grammatically perfect writing – in fact, they are often told by faculty that this is expected. Or they may simply feel embarrassed to hand in

work that they know is full of errors. To meet this expectation, students may hire editors, or they may decide to write in their own language and have it translated. Some hired editors do much more than correct grammar – they may rewrite whole passages to make them sound “better.” The result may leave little that is the student’s own.

Here are some suggestions for helping students from other academic cultures avoid plagiarism:

**Where you have a concern, meet with the student one-on-one.** If you see writing from an ESL student that is peppered with passages that are clearly in a different voice, it is worth a one-on-one conversation. The student may readily tell you which passages are their own and which are not. You can help them understand that in learning to write in English they are learning a whole new set of conventions on how to deal with sources in their writing. You might suggest that they work with a tutor at the Writing & Learning Centre to learn how to paraphrase and incorporate written sources in their work. You might also offer them the opportunity to rewrite their work.

**Let students know that the conventions you expect them to follow are culturally specific.** It’s important to impress on students how seriously plagiarism is viewed at OCAD; it’s also important to acknowledge that the conventions we follow are culturally specific and need to be learned. Lectures about morality and what we term “intellectual integrity” may be ignored by students who don’t see what they do as cheating or stealing.

**Encourage students to visit the Writing & Learning Centre early in the research process.** Many students fall into plagiarism early in the research process by simply copying long passages from their readings into their notes. A meeting with a Writing & Learning Centre tutor can help a student develop strong research questions, read critically, and take effective notes so that they are able to establish a dialogue with their sources in their final writing.

**Tell students explicitly that you do not expect perfect English.** To ease the pressure for perfect English, emphasize that you want to see their own work in their own words, even if it is imperfect. Let them know that if they do have a friend edit their work, they are responsible for ensuring that the thinking and content remains their own. They should also work closely with their editor so the writing remains in their voice. In other words, if they sit down with you with the final draft they should be able to explain why they have chosen particular wording in particular places. If they want to make sure their ideas are clearly expressed without running the risk of an editor rewriting their work, their best bet is to work with a tutor at the Writing & Learning Centre.

## RESOURCES

For further reading on ESL writers and plagiarism, see:

Pennycook, Alastair. “Borrowing Others’ Words: Text, Ownership, Memory, and Plagiarism.” *TESOL Quarterly* 30.2 (1996): 201-230.

Currie, Pat. “Staying out of Trouble: Apparent Plagiarism and Academic Survival.” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 7.1 (1998): 1-18.

Both articles are included in a reader prepared by the Writing & Learning Centre: *Critical Reflections for Educators on Intellectual Property, Originality, and Use of Sources* (2006). Available at the Writing & Learning Centre or the Dorothy H. Hoover Library.

## FAQ

### How can I design assignments to deter plagiarism?

Some strategies to discourage plagiarism may improve the work you receive from all your students. Aim to create assignments that require synthesis of material and application of concepts to new examples. Build process into your assignments so that you have an opportunity to see and comment on early drafts or research questions.

For more detailed suggestions see this handout from the University of Toronto: [www.utoronto.ca/writing/plagiarism.html](http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/plagiarism.html).

