

A Guide to Feedback on Grammatical and Lexical Issues:

A reference for providing effective language-focused feedback to multilingual writers

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Preface for Faculty

This document was originally created and [published](#) as a resource for the training of writing tutors. However, any instructor who provides feedback to writers can benefit from these materials. If you find yourself struggling with how—and if—to give feedback on language issues on assignments, my hope is that you find this guide helpful. Though this manual is not a magic formula for making accented writing vanish, it is a resource that can help you more efficiently provide feedback that can increase the chances that a language learner will learn more about English with continued practice. This resource is *not* a guide on how to grade on grammatical accuracy, because leading practitioners counsel against basing writing grades on grammar (see, e.g., Matsuda, 2012).

Please direct any questions about this resource to Kelvin Keown (kelvin3@uw.edu).

Introduction

Language is a complex phenomenon. In the UWT Writing Center, our work is to help people become better writers. Exactly how best to conduct this pursuit has been an issue in writing centers since their inception, and few topics within the field’s discourse have been hot as grammar. Though many writing centers hold grammar at arm’s length, out of legitimate concern for grammar becoming the misplaced center of writing consultations, at our writing center we do not push the language concerns of students to the margins. One reason that many writing centers have eschewed the grammatical concerns of writers is that providing effective feedback on grammar is a challenge. Without training, attempting to provide feedback on grammar can be counterproductive. This manual and on-the-job reference is an effort to provide writing tutors in the UWT Writing Center with insight into common types of errors, the metalanguage for discussing them, and examples of ways to respond that are grounded in applied linguistics research in written corrective feedback.

The grammatical and lexical errors presented in this manual are sampled from writing submitted to our writing center via eTutoring. The writers sampled here are nonnative speakers of English at varying degrees of fluency. Writers whose first language is NOT English constitute about 50% of our appointments, so it is crucial that we provide robust training on working effectively with these writers. There are no “English classes” that these writers are going to take at UW Tacoma that will explicitly address their language needs and concerns. We are it.

This guide aims to be **empirical**. Our hope is that the empirical nature of this manual offers both new and seasoned tutors readily applicable material to learn from. Because it is empirical, it is always changing, just as the writers who seek our feedback change and as the English language changes. These conditions mean that this is a living document that all tutors are expected to contribute to. All feedback, suggestions, and proposed additions are not only welcome but encouraged. (Instructions on how to contribute are discussed at the end of the document.)

This resource aims to

- teach you about common grammatical and lexical errors, especially those common in the writing of non-native speakers of English;
- teach you about the forms and metalanguage of English grammar to help you become a better responder to writing submitted digitally to the UWT Writing Center;
- model appropriate feedback tone and content;
- demonstrate pedagogically effective feedback strategies;
- inspire tutors to learn more about English to better serve UW Tacoma students.

One final but important note before moving on: This material should also remain within the UW Tacoma Teaching and Learning Center at this time. **Please do not remove it or reproduce it without permission from the professional staff.**

User Guide

On formatting: For ease of reading, you will see a balance of feedback in the margins and feedback underneath the excerpts of student writing. This is intentional; when margin comments become so voluminous that Word abbreviates them, or they become an unbroken chain in the margin, this gets difficult for some people to manage. Remember, we are not helping if we are overwhelming. So, to demonstrate the importance of keeping your comments manageable for readers, some of the comments addressed to the writer will be “in text,” but indented as a block quote and shaded grey.

You will also see some notes with an *asterix addressed to you, the reader. These will usually provide more context about an error/issue that was *not* provided to the writer.

Additionally, any highlights or colored sections of text—with the exception of grey—were part of the original feedback provided to the writer. These are preserved to demonstrate their occasional and sparing use.

Response Strategies that Promote Language Learning

At the Writing Center, one of our tasks is to help students learn about how English is used in the academy. So does correcting all of their grammatical errors do this? Probably not. Even if it did, effective writing is so much more than “correct” grammar. Though the line between editing and teaching may sometimes be blurry, our feedback should fall on the teaching side. A paper is due in a few days, but language acquisition is not on a quarter schedule. We have to try to help students with both short-term and long-term needs. This is challenging, but we can and should do it. Give writers *some* of what they want (correct all my errors!) does *not* preclude us from also offering more of what they need, which is detailed below.

1. *Your feedback should prompt writers to revise and edit; occasional direct edits are OK when part of an explanation/demonstration.*
 - a. Though there is evidence that direct correction can be effective, we labor under the conditions of deadlines and the judgment of faculty. Ideal feedback spurs further action from the writer. If students can submit work that we have edited without reflection, then the opportunity for learning is small.
 - i. I was always told that helping mom to do the housework such as cleaning house, cooking, washing dishes, and so on.
2. *Use and define metalanguage.*
 - a. Learning grammatical metalanguage, technical names for the parts of grammar, can raise learner awareness of the distinct forms and roles of grammar. As writing tutors, we are learners too. Using a common metalanguage will make us sharper analysts of the language we encounter; we need to be able to discuss and analyze grammatical forms.
 - i. YJ is not religion, because she doesn't have the time to go to church.
3. *Grammatical feedback should focus on recurring patterns of error.*
 - a. The long-term effectiveness of providing a single treatment of unfocused written CF [corrective feedback] is uncertain, as the findings are conflicting, but the long-term effectiveness of providing a single treatment of focused written CF on discrete, rule-based linguistic categories of error is clear and compelling for the limited linguistic environments investigated so far. It is unclear whether focused or unfocused written CF is the more effective. (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012, pp. 73-74)
4. *When an explanation challenges you, exemplify your point instead or in addition.*

Remember: *Give a rule, end up a fool; an example is ample.*

 - a. Thesis Question: Why is HIV/AIDS worse in South Africa and why are women more vulnerability?

5. *Scaffold away from previously identified/explained error patterns.*
 - a. This is because we are advocates who are involved in decisions about creating a safe environment...
 - i. *Here the commenter identifies a previously noted error pattern and employs metalanguage to draw the learner's attention to the form. This strategy can be useful if the tutor has previously explained the form and if the tutor also provides a resource that further explains/models the form.
6. *Use "enhanced input," i.e. italics, bold, underline, or highlight to draw attention to form differences and key elements of a sentence that you demonstrate in your comments.*
 - a. This piece of music is monophonic with one melodic line, no accompaniment. This means that it is places with a single voice being an individual part or line.
 - i. This is an idea from Second Language Acquisition theory in which drawing a learner's attention to a target form (i.e. a thing you want to teach) helps learners notice a "gap" between the language as it is commonly used and how they are using it.
 - b. **The way the notes were sung, created** a sense of peace in my soul.
 - c. Be strategic with the text that you highlight to create your comment. Try to use highlights (either those of the comment function or yellow, blue, green, etc.) to demonstrate the relationships between words. For example, if you comment on a clause or phrase, highlight all of it rather than part of it.
 - i. YJ is not religion, because she doesn't have the time to go to church.
7. *Lexical errors, such as idioms and collocations, require direct feedback because they are not pattern-based in same sense as grammatical patterns.*
 - a. English is not my first language. English was not even my second language as I grew.
8. *Refer learners to TLC resources to reinforce your feedback.* Our handouts can further elaborate on your feedback. Hyperlink to them in your comments and/or upload them to the appointment as separate documents.

Verb Issues

Here some important things to know about verbs as you read academic writing.

1. English has two verb tenses—present and past. In English, we locate events in time with 12 possible combinations of tense, **aspect**, and **modality**. (I am being pedantic here on purpose; I recognize people are taught there are 12 tenses. While basically true, it is an oversimplification that elides how the tense-aspect-modality system works.) In academic writing, simple present and simple past are by far the most common tense-aspect combinations. Each style guide (APA, MLA, etc.) may have its own prescription for which tense-aspect combination it prefers.
2. Present perfect is common when discussing relevant research, such as in literature review sections (e.g. *Studies have shown that...*).
3. Additionally, about 25% of all main verbs in published academic writing are in passive voice, which contradicts the common advice to writers to avoid passive voice.

Verb Tense

This message still remains within me; thus, if my husband does not have a good mood, I would search for something I did wrong.

Using past perfect when simple past is preferable (overgeneralizing past perfect)

At Family Medicine at the University of Washington, I **had used** ORCA to see medical records for the purpose of extracting information and assisting physicians for data completeness. I had applied my skills of creating spreadsheets and reports using data extracted from medical records, maintained database, participated in data validation project, and managed documents, records, and time.

You don't need past perfect (had used) here. Simple past is a better choice: *I used*. The reason is that sometimes past perfect suggests a change in plans. For the most part, you only need past perfect if you are talking about two past events but you need to be clear that one happened before the other.

Verb Form

For the family genetic history I will used genogram to help us with the family tree and I had drawn out what my family told me.

Verb Form (overgeneralization of passive voice)

- 1) Moreover, the market principle is based on individual freedom of buying and selling, as long as it does not harm anyone's rights. In this regard, both sellers and buyers are benefited from the transactions of the right to jump the queue.
- 2) However, she was mention that her mother died, because of starvation during civil war.

*Example 2 shows the writer probably not intending to use passive voice, but starting with "was" as a template-like form of past tense. This is common.

Passive Voice (when it obscures the agent of the verb)

The call for multi-level interventions emerged from interviews. A systemic response that not only acknowledged soul wounds and a need for soul care was highlighted. One stakeholder asserted "I think it would be great if our agency took soul care to a different level." Additionally, multiple stakeholders believe there is a need to equip supervisors in how to help their workers through soul wounds and to promote soul care practices. At the individual level, recommendations were made for mandatory trainings allowing workers to understand these concepts and learn how to utilize appropriate tools.

In this paragraph it occurs to me that a fairly high amount of passive voice is being used, wherein a sentence emphasizes the "object" (that which is acted upon) of an action rather than the "subject" (facilitator of the action). Depending on who your audience is for this formal project proposal, you may want to adjust to more active voice in some cases (though passive voice is useful when the agent ("do-er") of the verb is unknown OR the person who did/caused the action is not the focus of the sentence).

I suggest also checking the entirety of the proposal for other instances of passive voice. Readers could benefit from a clarifying who the agents of the actions are. Our passive voice handout is available here:

https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/sites/default/files/sections/TeachingandLearningCenter/a_ccs_Grammar%20%20Passive%20Voice%202011_rev2016.pdf

Thanks to James for contributing this example and response, which has been lightly edited.

Verb Complements

At the same time, he suggests that ask these questions is moral consideration about things and therefore it leads us to discuss meanings of good life in society.

During the storming phase, faculty members explored how students understanding of the task/project, such as where and when students will go and what they should do to be successful in completing their project.

As written, this is not a complete sentence. Just one word makes this sentence incomplete: *how*. Here is why. The word *how* links an entirely new clause to the clause *faculty members explored...* And they need something to explore. OK, now let's look at the clause after *how* by itself, as if it were trying to be its own sentence:

Students understanding of the task/project, such as where and when students will go and what they should do to be successful in completing their project... IS what or DOES what? ...is important? This whole clause is a long noun phrase without a verb.

Now, fascinatingly, if you just delete the word *how*, this problem goes away:

...faculty members explored students' understanding of the task/project, such as...

In Korea, there was a gender based division of labor. I was always told that helping mom to do the housework such as cleaning house, cooking, washing dishes, and so on.

Lexical Issues (word choice, collocations, idiomatic usage)

Preposition Choice/Collocation

I believe that librarians who have transformation leadership qualities can enlighten their followers as well as motivate their curiosity and interests on learning.

English is not my first language. English was not even my second language as I grew.

*Note that this issue could also be filed under “Verb Issues” because *grow up* is phrasal verb, a class of multiword verbs that function as a single phrase with meanings distinct from the verb when used apart from the phrase (e.g. *grow* vs. *grow up*)

Word Choice in context / false synonym

Building partnerships between different organizations and school libraries are good methods to help students to gain knowledge from different aspects when school libraries have limited funding.

Morphology (right word, wrong form)

YJ is not religion, because she doesn't have the time to go to church.

Thesis Question: Why is HIV/AIDS worse in South Africa and why are women more vulnerability?

Meaning-structure relationship

Despite health informatics professionals may being involve in direct patient care, health care providers have the same goal to help and heal the patients.

The adverbial subordinator *despite* has some special requirements when we use it. You've got part of it right, but the modal *may* doesn't quite work here. You also seem to be missing a *not*:

Despite _____ **NOT being** involved in direct patient care...,

But there is a more efficient way to say this. You can convert the complex noun phrase *not being involved in patient care* to this: *Despite health informatics professionals' indirect involvement in patient care*,...

Do you see how that works? Change *not directly involved* to a single adjective—*indirect*. Look for phrases, such as *not directly involved in*, that you can convert to adjectives and you can make your writing more efficient and compact. 😊

Sentence Boundaries / Clause Relationships / Punctuation thereof

Sentence Fragment

In a couple years, I have witnessed some school librarians use their transformation leadership to build partnerships with some local scientific museums to hold some programs in school libraries. For example, having photo or specimen exhibitions, inviting a guest speaker to give a lecture on different topics, and teaching children how to make crafts by using recyclable materials.

Run-on sentence

Food waste is a big problem in developed countries, I hope to inspire children to develop a good habit of reducing wasting as what we eat come from people's hard work.

You need more than a comma here to link these two independent clauses. One option is to use a semicolon:

...countries; I hope to...

Another option is to use a comma with a coordinating conjunction like "so":

...countries, so I hope to...

Comma Splice

The way the notes were sung, created a sense of peace in my soul.

*Note to users of guide: In the example above, the part in blue is the subject-noun phrase even though it contains the verb phrase *were sung*. This is accomplished through the use of a relative clause: [*that*] *the notes were sung*. Here the writer has employed a reduced relative clause, omitting *that*.

Conjunction Use

Communication among all healthcare providers is crucial to delivering quality care to patient and health informatics professionals help accomplish that among the medical team.

Missing key word(s) in lexicalized phrase

Moreover, agriculture created severe disparity in our society by concentration of food source and storage. It is important to note that rich societies, such as the United States, are few elites, and the comparison here is between the worse off majority in agricultural society versus modern hunter-gatherers.

Relative Clause/Pronoun (missing)

This is very different than first boy was called, “house mainstay.”

Referent Fronting

For example, I learned home economics, but male friend learned technology. There was no choice. **It is** institutionalized conscious/unconscious behaviors made both gender **students became to** internalize their gender roles.

Writer, do you see how this previous sentence can be simplified with my highlighted edits? The phrase *It is* at the beginning of the sentence usually refers to a noun that is coming up in a few words. Instead of “*it*” at the beginning, just replace “*it*” with the noun that “*it*” is substituting for. In your sentence, “*it*” refers to “institutionalized conscious/unconscious behaviors.” Do you see?

This piece of music is monophonic with one melodic line, no accompaniment. This means that it is places with a single voice being an individual part or line.

Sentence Structure / source integration

Olsen (2004) explained that genogram **as-“Historically-it** has been the family therapist’s version of a family tree and depicts behavioral and emotional processes within families across generations” (p. 298).

OK, let’s talk about integrating a quote into your sentence. The challenge of using a quote is that the quote must fit into the architecture of your sentence. A writer can’t suspend rules of sentence structure simply because one is using a quote. You begin your sentence this way: *Olsen (2004) explained that a genogram is...*

But then you drop the quote here. This is a problem because the quote is its own complete sentence, so this is a bit like trying to squeeze 8 people into a car with 5 seats. The solution here is to skip the part of the quote that is grammatically redundant. What do I mean? The clause you are inserting this quote into already has a subject noun—*genogram*. So cut from the quote the words before the verb phrase, which is *has been*:
Olsen (2004) explained that the genogram “has been the family therapist’s version of a family tree and depicts behavioral and emotional processes within families across generations” (p. 298).

Insufficient Context for Quote

[first sentence in paragraph]

Grey et al. (2006) explained that “In the original framework, risk and protective factors included those person, family and environmental contexts that may influence response to self-management intervention as well as health outcomes” (p.165).

The interest is focused on the single melodic line than the harmony being produced. In the book, “the expressive music of Hildegard of Bingen exemplifies the tension between an

individual, creative response to divine inspiration and community expectations of worship” (Forney et al., 2017, p.64).

This is a very useful quote; I can see how it supports your analysis of the music. But the way you are introducing it doesn't quite work. If you say *In the book*, I'm expecting you to give me a title of the book. You need to find a way to better integrate the quote into your paragraph. Let me show you one way to do that. First of all, start with the author(s). Make them the grammatical subject of the sentence. Like this:

Forney et al. (2017) noted/argued/claimed/contended/etc. that this style of arrangement “exemplifies the tension between an individual, creative response to divine inspiration and community expectations of worship” (p.64).

Notice what is happening here. You can make the author the subject, then use a reporting verb, of which I have demonstrated several. After that, refer back to the idea you have been discussing with a new phrase (e.g. *this style of arrangement*). Only then does the quote begin.

Cohesion

Ambiguous Referent (“dummy” it)
However, it did not work well.

Redundancy / Verbosity

My decision to pursue a master's degree in Health Informatics and Health Information Management (HIHIM) at University of Washington for the fall 2017 was shaped by my past academic courses during my time as an undergraduate along with **my desire to deepen my knowledge in health informatics.**

You're an excellent writer; even so, one suggestion I have for you is to look for redundancies in meaning in your longer, complex sentences. These phrases in blue mean essentially the same thing. This gets important when you are trying to stay under a word limit. Here is a way you could merge them:

My desire (or decision) to deepen my knowledge in health informatics with a master's degree in _____ was shaped...

Formatting and Style Guidance

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and what they are communicating; looking at it's contribution to culture and society.

Commas and Quotation Marks

He states that this is recent phenomena and there are conflicting arguments, between the market principle, “you get what you pay for”, and the queueing principle, “first-come, first-served”, around this issue.

It is ok to put the punctuation inside the quotation marks. In APA, when there is a citation in parenthesis, we place the punctuation at the very end, even after the citation:

“you get what you pay for” (Sandel, 20xx, p. x).

But if you aren’t citing the source, you will simply place the punctuation inside the quotation marks.

Instructions for Adding to this Manual

As previously established, in order for this document to remain empirical, it requires our regular maintenance. To do that, tutors need to preserve excerpts from eTutoring papers that they work on in a separate document, which will be called “Proposed Additions to eT Manual.” This document will be accessible in our eTutoring folder on the Share Drive.

In the course of your eTutoring feedback, when you encounter an intriguing or confounding language issue that you think **a)** the manual lacks or **b)** would be a valuable addition, you will copy that passage and your feedback (if you provided any) and paste it into the document. A template will be provided to assist you.