Feedback strategies when editing students' writing:
Edit less and explain more

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(This document updates one developed for a staff workshop in 2007)

Introduction

There are different feedback strategies that a Supervisor can use and they may change as a student's skills and confidence grow. My purpose in introducing "a number system for writing faults" below is to help address what I perceive to be some commonly occurring issues. Although originally intended for research students, workshopping of this number system with staff revealed that it would also be useful with undergraduate and coursework postgraduate students.

Students already have web access to a very comprehensive article which deals with the need to develop self-editing skills and which also provides detailed coverage, with examples, of the major stylistic problems highlighted in the number list (Maguire, 2007a). There are also introductory exercises and solutions to prepare them for reading that article (Maguire 2007b,c) and more advanced exercises, and possible solutions, to challenge them after they have read it (Maguire, 2007d). I have now developed an interactive web document, Maguire (2008a) which draws upon these articles, and includes the numbered list of faults from Pages 3-4 as a menu (without explanations) so that students click on a number and access a multi- layered explanation, with examples, of that writing fault. Academic staff could provide their students with a customised version of Pages 3-4 e.g., in a Unit Outline. These two pages are also available as a downloadable document (Maguire 2008b).

Issues

The common issues that seem pertinent are listed below.

(A) Many research students will produce an impressive thesis if every line is carefully edited for them but, in doing this, have we fostered their own self-editing skills? Once they have a PhD, for example, they may have to edit for others e.g., their own research students, colleagues, authors who have submitted manuscripts to journals, or candidates when acting as an Examiner. As an author with a higher degree they will receive less support than as a research student and will need to become more independent.

(B) As Supervisors there is a risk that, when we make a change to a section of text without explanation,
we are relying on osmosis i.e., the student will understand why the change was made and learn from it. Perhaps we need to edit less text and explain more so that they do learn from the process.

(C) Delays in feedback to students are a common problem as academic workloads become more demanding. Using the writing fault number list may be a more efficient way of providing feedback than always rewriting the text.

I do not put these views forward with a sense of arrogance that I know best. Having supervised 30 research students, I must confess that I edited every line for all of them. I have now begun to question the appropriateness of this strategy. It is interesting to note that software is being developed in Australia to assess the skills that research students have acquired during their candidature (Parker, 2007). There are, no doubt, many excellent and experienced Supervisors at ECU who feel that their strategies are working well. Others express their utter frustration that some research students do not seem to learn from the editing done for them.

In developing strategies that foster greater self reliance, we also have to be sensitive to the challenges faced by research students who are writing in a second language. Different students require different approaches and the occasional student is so ill-equipped to write in English that, as an Academic Writing

Consultant (AWC), there is no option but to jointly edit their writing during meetings between the AWC and the student. I also note that editing, as a co-author of manuscripts with research students, requires a very thorough approach so as to protect your reputation. As an AWC, rather than a co-author, I adopt a similar approach when providing feedback to research students and staff on their draft manuscripts.

Strategies
The strategies we can use are by no means mutually exclusive.
- Rewrite every line that needs improvement.
- Rewrite every such line on only a few pages.
- Use notes to student [………] i.e., why you suggested this change. Explain editing "symbols" if used e.g., # for insert a space.
- Add a number for the type of writing fault. (This is used in some creative writing courses.) These numbers can be complemented by appropriate use of symbols and specialised notes to students.
- Get the student to work with an Academic Writing Consultant (who alas faces the same issues of fostering greater independence and confidence in clients).
- Discuss your concerns with the student who will, however, still need annotated or numbered text as students may not remember all of the points made verbally or identify where they apply. As an alternative, I know that some students record their meetings with their Supervisor to ensure that they do not miss any details.

My fault number system (plus useful symbols and very brief explanations) is provided on pages 3-4. Some quick notes on grammar are also included and are used in Maguire (2008a,b).

Additional suggestions/questions for Supervisors when editing
- Are all students aware that we expect them to develop their own self-editing skills?
- At an early stage in the development of a higher degree proposal i.e., after the student has done a significant amount of reading, get the student to provide a draft list of contents i.e., headings and subheadings. This will help ensure that they are "on the right track" and have an appropriate structure i.e. they begin the review broadly and narrow down to their research questions.
- Agree on a referencing system for their thesis early in the process e.g. at the Proposal stage. Ideally, it should follow the style of a journal in which they are likely to publish.
- Avoid a long gap in writing activity between the proposal and the thesis itself. In decreasing order of usefulness, this activity could be a refereed paper, a full conference paper (not refereed) or a poster plus abstract.

Numbered faults
(These faults are listed below and a recommendation made to academic staff on indicating which text is of concern. If the fault has subcategories, annotate that on the student's writing e.g. **1(f)** for an error with a possessive, not just **1**.

Numbered faults
1. Incorrect spelling **(highlight the word)**. This may be **(a)** a simple error or **(b)** confusion between two words with different meanings but the same or similar pronunciation or **(c)** confusion between Australian/UK and US spelling or **(d)** confusion among variations on the same word group or **(e)** use of an informal version of word(s) in formal writing e.g., "haven't" instead of "have not" or **(f)** an error in the use of possessives e.g., *team's* as the possessive form of *teams* instead of *teams'* or **(g)** no fault, just two well accepted versions of spelling the same word, to convey the same meaning or **(h)** use of a foreign word but a distinctive letter is incomplete.
2. No subject/verb agreement **(highlight both subject and verb)** i.e., a singular subject ("dog") requires a singular verb ("has" not "have") e.g., The *dog* near my house *has* fleas. A special case is where there is no verb in the sentence for the subject to agree with e.g., "The music loud." instead of "The music was loud." or where the only verb is in a clause "The loud music which *was played* by guitarists." (Verb = *was played*.)
3. No noun/clause agreement **(highlight both the noun & verb in the clause).** A clause qualifies a noun   in a sentence and the verb in the clause must be consistent with the noun in terms of being singular or plural

e.g., The *dog* which *lives* near my house has fleas. Note that "which *lives* near my house" is a clause and cannot be used as a stand alone sentence as there would be no appropriate noun for the clause to qualify.

4. Mistake with an Article **(fix some of the "the/a/an/no article needed" problems for the student and highlight others).**

5. Tenses are mixed unreasonably **(highlight relevant words)** e.g., The dog *has* long hair which *needed* combing (*has* is present tense and *needed* is past tense; *needs* would be correct).

6. Parallel structure problem **(highlight words).** Internal consistency is required with the forms of words in a sentence or a short series of dot points e.g., "The pathway to heaven is via praying, giving and forgiving" not "via prayer, giving and forgiving". A short list of dot points should all begin with the same type of word

e.g. a noun; the short list for Fault 1 conforms to parallel structure, allowing for the use of articles; see Fault 4). This long list of 20 faults does not conform to parallel structure.

7. Statement not referenced or there is a referencing error **(highlight relevant statement or reference).**

8. Same word used repeatedly **(highlight each usage of that word).**

9. These text sections have the same meaning **(highlight each section).**

10. Self evident text **(highlight the text)** e.g., "The Introduction introduces the topic."

11. Made this point already **(put a line through the sentence/paragraph).**

12a. Need a link word e.g., "however" **(indicate position with an arrow head). 12b.** Delete this link word **(highlight the word).**

13a. Add a topic sentence to lead into the next topic in the new paragraph **(mark position with "-+")**. 13**b.** Delete this topic sentence **(delete text).**

14a. Add an interpretive summary to highlight the key issues and conflicts in a major section of text **(mark position with "-+"). 14b** Delete this summary.

15. Sequence of paragraphs is not logical. **Indicate the appropriate sequence** e.g., **a**, **b**, **c**, **d**. (The student

will have to deal with any continuity issues e.g., jargon was used in paragraph **a** but is now defined in paragraph **b**.)

16. An extra step is needed in this argument **(mark position with "-+")** e.g., a significant assumption was made by the student but this was not included in the text.

17. This text could be shortened by using an adjective or verb to replace a clause, phrase or other words **(highlight the text)** e.g., "The happy dog…" instead of "The dog which is happy…".

18. Rewrite sentence/paragraph more directly **(highlight key information words e.g., in bold and use a contrasting highlight for less important words).** (Complement this by rewriting some of this text for the student.)

19. Text does not match table/figure e.g., an average of *22.3* given in the text but *23.2* was used in the table.

(Give table number (X) and highlight those data in text/table.)

20. The sentence is incomplete and/or does not make sense e.g., a sentence without a verb.

(mark position with "-+").

Editing symbols
= Insert a space.
.(l = Delete space (hand write it as longer and narrower and without the arrow head).
"' = Insert text.
/' = Combine sentences or paragraphs (as a curved symbol when I hand write it).
U = Link two words as one.
t = Insert a paragraph break (use large symbol without arrow head if hand written).
.W = Insert a break into this excessively long sentence at this point.

A quick grammar lesson
In "The cat ate the rat", "cat" is a NOUN, i.e., it is a thing, person or place, and in this case is the SUBJECT of this sentence. The word "ate" is a VERB, i.e., a doing word, and "rat" is also a noun but is the OBJECT of the sentence.

In "The hungry cat ate the small rat", the words "hungry" and "small" are descriptive words and are ADJECTIVES. In "The cat ate the rat slowly", "slowly" is one of the most commonly used of all ADVERBS. These modify a sentence, a verb, adjective or another adverb. Students often confuse adjectives and

adverbs e.g., "general" and "generally", respectively; we might say "The general trend is…" or "I was speaking generally..".

In "The cat in Jim's house ate a rat", "in Jim's house" is a PHRASE. Phrases begin with a PREPOSITION e.g., "in", "at", "on", "with", "to" and "for", and do not contain a verb. This phrase is "adjectival" i.e., it qualifies the noun "cat". Some are "adverbial" and relate more to the verb or whole sentence that they do to a noun e.g., "The rat ran in many directions", where "in many directions" is the phrase. Often it is possible to replace an adjectival phrase with an adjective e.g., replace "You should not leave the trails in national parks" with "You should not leave national park trails".

In "The cat which hangs around Jim's house ate a rat", "which hangs around Jim's house" is a CLAUSE. These often begin with "which", "who", "that", "why", "if", "although, or "when" and contain a verb. A clause is not a stand alone sentence although many students make this mistake in formal writing. Some of the words which begin clauses can be used to begin a question and these can be stand alone sentences e.g., "Which house does Jim live in?" (or, more appropriately, "In which house does Jim live?"). If you wish to expand your knowledge of grammar (and punctuation), try a good value book from the ECU Bookshop (Davidson, 2005).

Other comments
The symbol that you should avoid using is "?", at least without a note to the student. If not, you are presuming that the student will understand why you are questioning a section of text. It could be useful for highlighting sections that need to be discussed with the student.

Content issues would form a large category of standard, numbered comments and customised notes may be more appropriate. It is clear that some Supervisors use notes to students very effectively when providing electronic feedback on drafts, particularly for content issues.

This leads me to the general issue of providing feedback in electronic format e.g., in TRACK CHANGES mode instead of as hard copy. If a draft is provided electronically to a Supervisor it can be returned as annotated hard copy although this is somewhat slower for students located interstate or overseas. As an Academic Writing Consultant AWC I do not provide detailed rewriting of text in electronic mode because of the risk that a research student client may just ACCEPT it electronically without sufficient consideration of the appropriateness of my comments. Similarly, I am loathe to provide comments on a draft that still includes the Supervisor's suggestions in TRACK CHANGES mode because of the risk of drafts moving between the Supervisor and the AWC, via the research student, without the student themselves responding effectively to the respective comments i.e., by considering then accepting, modifying or rejecting suggested changes to the text.

Unintended benefits of the numbering system.
This has now provided me with a way of giving electronic feedback without the risk of students accepting changes automatically.

The other benefit, according to students who have received annotated drafts back from me, is that the numbering system makes it easier to see the recurring types of errors in their writing.

Workshops or individual sessions for students and staff
If you feel that your student needs help with their writing, feel free to get them to arrange an appointment with me. I am also happy to run relevant workshops for groups of research students (five or more) from the two faculties in which I work or from their individual schools on any writing or publishing issues. Alternatively, you can encourage your students to use some of the resources on the ECU website e.g., Maguire (2007a,b,c,d; 2008a,b).

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