

Writing for Everyone (from *Friday @ the Center*)

F @ C begins a series of postings on effectively teaching good written communication skills. If we want our students to write well, we have to teach them how to write well. And that is the responsibility of the entire faculty.

Each week's "Writing Notes" will feature two components: 1) a discussion of an aspect of the global process of writing, and 2) an explanation of one of the most common "finishing" errors that college students make. In working with students on their writing, it is important to pay attention both to global issues of focus, clarity, logic, and organization, as well as to the finishing details of grammar, punctuation, documentation style, etc. Each discipline has its own kind of writing assignments, expectations, and documentation, yet there are some common elements in good writing on which we can all focus.

February 2, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: The official SPU writing guide and handbook is *The Everyday Writer*, by Andrea Lunsford. This text is used in all the University seminar courses and writing courses, and it would not be unreasonable for you to list it as a required text for any course. You could use it as a guide for preparing writing assignments and commenting on them, making reference to particular sections. If a lot of instructors repeatedly referred to this text, students might become accustomed to consulting it when writing. *The Everyday Writer* identifies twenty surface errors that most commonly appear in American college writing. These kind of errors give the impression of sloppiness and ignorance, and they might doom a job application if the competition is tough. Each week's finishing tip will focus on one of these errors.

FINISHING TIP: According to Lunsford's research, the most frequent punctuation error in college writing is **missing a comma after an introductory element**. Sentences can open with three different kinds of introductory elements: a word, a phrase, or a clause. Students don't really need to identify which kind of introductory element is involved. Rather, they simply need to think about introductory elements.

February 9, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: In giving any kind of formal writing assignment—the kind that will be turned in and graded—be very specific about the type of writing you are assigning. Students sometimes find the differences in genres among disciplines, courses, and professors confusing. Clearly identify the primary purpose of the piece: is it an argumentative essay making a claim and supporting it; a report that describes a particular process or event; a summary of another piece of writing; a reflective essay that explains a personal opinion, reaction, or thought; or something else? Acknowledge to students that writing has different purposes, and those different purposes lead to different kinds of organization and evaluation. Try to use key words in the assignment such as *analyze, argue, define, summarize, explain, prove, survey*, etc. Encourage your students to think about the rhetorical situation in which they are writing: A lab report? A summary of a book? An analytic academic essay? An industry report?

FINISHING TIP: The second most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is **vague pronoun reference**. Pronouns such as *he, she, it, they, this, that, which, and who* should refer clearly to a specific antecedent. Students tend to make two kinds of these mistakes: 1) Writing a sentence in which there is more than one word to which the pronoun might refer, and 2) Using a pronoun that refers to a word that is implied but not explicitly stated. Pronouns should refer back to the last noun preceding them in the sentence. Here are some examples from my own student papers: "Cora spends the last few weeks of **Addie's** life with **her**, and **she** makes sure that everyone knows all that she is sacrificing." (I suspect the *she* refers to Cora, but I'm not sure!) "None of his hard work is directed toward any material goal of his own, yet **it** is clearly a central part of his life" (the goal? the hard work?).

STRATEGY: Ask students to circle all the pronouns in a paper and draw an arrow to the antecedent for each one. If they can't find the antecedent, or the reference isn't clear, they can neatly write in a correction. This saves you grading time on this finishing error this week!

February 16, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: Strategize about ways to encourage students to view writing as a process. In my formal writing assignments, I identify several steps that students should go through, roughly divided into 1) Creating (coming up with ideas via thought, research, brainstorming, freewriting, etc.), 2) Shaping (organization), and 3) Finishing (crafting intros, working on diction, cleaning up grammatical errors, etc.). The exact nature of each of these stages will differ depending on the assignment. The Creating stage, for example, might include doing an experiment and recording the data, if the final product is a lab report. Some professors require something to be turned for each stage, thus encouraging students to begin the process earlier than the night before the final assignment is due.

FINISHING TIP: The third most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is **forgetting the comma in a compound sentence**. A *compound sentence* has two or more parts that could be a sentence. When those parts are connected with *and*, *but*, *so*, *yet*, *or*, *nor*, or *for*, a comma needs to appear before the connecting word. Example: Writers need to be able to recognize when a sentence part could stand alone, and they also need to know the seven connecting words (aka *coordinating conjunctions*).

STRATEGY: More in-class editing. Briefly define this rule and the two key concepts (*compound sentence*, *coordinating conjunctions*). Then have students underline all the compound sentences in a paper they are going to turn in and to circle the coordinating conjunctions. They can add a coordinating conjunction if they identify a sentence that is missing one. If you have them check for the missing comma after the introductory element, vague pronoun references, and then for compound sentences, I'd send the paper back home to be re-printed and turned in (along with the original) the next class period, without penalty. It's a great way to reinforce the finishing stage.

February 23, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: In the shaping phase of any writing project, developing writers often fail to support their arguments or adequately flesh out their descriptions. A "thin" essay suffers from a lack of supporting evidence or detail. *The Everyday Writer* notes that in one research study, questions about the paucity of supporting evidence accounted for 56 percent of reader comments on student papers.

STRATEGY: While students are working on a writing assignment, discuss the kinds of supporting evidence that would be most appropriate for the type of paper they are writing: facts, data, opinions of authorities, results from other tests, examples, textual evidence, reasons, vivid details, etc. Provide concrete examples of a generalization, plus several items of supporting evidence. Perhaps write a claim on the board and then have the class come up with some of the evidence that would provide support. In other words, have them practice connecting claims and evidence.

FINISHING TIP: The fourth most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is **using the wrong word**. The shorthand comment I make on papers for this problem is "diction" (as in "dictionary"). A word can be wrong for a number of reasons: it sounds similar (there/their; illusion/allusion), it has the wrong connotation (reckless thesaurus use?), or it means completely the wrong thing.

March 30, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: You may remember that we've talked about the writing process as including the steps of creating, shaping, and finishing. Of course, while we work on writing, we often move back and forth between

these steps. In many forms of academic writing, one of the difficulties in the shaping process occurs in the use of supporting evidence from sources. Many assignments require synthesis of a number of different sources, but students tend to rely too much on one source. They then may need to go back to the creating stage in terms of doing more research. You may need to teach students how to do effective synthesis in your discipline.

STRATEGY: Give students material from three sources and a topic sentence and ask them to write a paragraph putting it all together. Then show them the paragraph you would write. This is a good warm up exercise for a paper that requires synthesis. (Don't even think about grading these! Just give the students the experience of practicing.)

FINISHING TIP: The fifth most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is **missing commas(s) with a nonrestrictive element**. Any part of a sentence that provides *extra* but not *necessary* information should be set off with commas. Another way to think about this is to ask whether these words, phrases, and clauses *limit* or *restrict* the meaning of the words they modify. **Herman Melville, who sailed the seven seas, wrote *Moby-Dick*.** (Extra info, but not limiting) **Those mariners who sailed the seven seas often died at an early age.** (Limiting info) See the difference? It's tricky.

April 6, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: We've talked about the importance of supporting evidence and synthesis in the middle stage of writing (creating, shaping, finishing), but an even larger issue in shaping is the matter of organization. In academic writing, we often expect a thesis, or claim, or governing idea; followed by a logical development or proof of that idea. It can be useful to highlight your expectations regarding this central idea—when it should appear in the essay (first sentence? end of first paragraph? last paragraph?), how blatant the writer should be about including it (“This paper argues . . .”), if an implied thesis would or would not be appropriate.

STRATEGY: Ask students to bring a draft to class and have another student read it, underlining or circling the controlling idea/claim/thesis/assertion of the essay. Then have the “shaping editor” cross out any material that he or she believes does not directly relate to that central idea. Again, providing a short sample on an overhead before doing this exercise may be useful. Students then take their drafts and revise for shape, accordingly. While the shaping editor is at work, you could also ask her or him to indicate where some more evidence or detail would be helpful.

FINISHING TIP: The sixth most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is **using a wrong or missing verb ending**. I have to admit that I was surprised to find this one on the list, as I can't say I've encountered a lot of problems with this. Lunsford notes that “It is easy to forget the verb endings –s (or –es) and –ed (or –d) because they are not always pronounced clearly when spoken” (14). They also probably are often omitted in the text-messaging that makes up such a large part of our students' communication strategies. The –s endings are related to subject/verb agreement: “**Dickinson write (writes) extremely dense poetry.**” The –d endings should be included to indicate a past tense: “**When they first were married, they love (loved) each other very much.**”

April 13, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: In the drafting, we often find that our thoughts take unexpected directions once they are put down on paper. That's why I find it far more useful to work with a detailed outline after I've completed a draft rather than before I've written one. Nothing is more valuable than taking a draft and creating a basic topic outline defining what is happening in each paragraph. This helps point out paragraphs that don't hang together; rearrangements that might be necessary, repetition of ideas that should be brought together (Oh, both paragraph 4 and paragraph 10 talk about definitions of beauty!), and the need, especially in longer papers, for summary and transitional paragraphs.

STRATEGY: In a tutoring or one-on-one situation (I'm thinking Honors Projects rights now, but any long major paper), sit at your desk with the writer and the draft, and create an outline together from the draft. Then the two of you can discuss where rearranging should take place.

FINISHING TIP: The seventh most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is **a wrong or missing preposition**. An alert reader of last week's *F @ the Center* noted that forgetting verb endings (last week's common error) is common among writers for whom English is a second language. The preposition problem also is characteristic of ESL students, and it's very difficult to explain, in my experience. So we have "The strawberries are in the hamper" rather than "The strawberries are at the hamper." Idiomatic differences like this often need to be memorized or absorbed through constant usage.

April 20, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: In the shaping stage, pay attention to the shape of paragraphs. Contrary to popular opinion, not every single paragraph in an academic essay needs to be a topic-sentence paragraph (think about introductions, conclusions, transition paragraphs, summary paragraphs, dialogue, or one-sentence "effect" paragraphs, etc.). But topic sentences paragraphs go a long way if you are presenting points and marshalling evidence with the goal of establishing and proving a thesis, or claim. Some helpful comments you can make on papers with respect to paragraphs are: "this paragraph extends over two pages, how could you break it up?" "What's with the five two-sentence paragraphs; it's very jerky?"; "I can't figure out what the point of this paragraph is"; "This paragraph really has two very different points in it. Why don't you divide it?" or "Great topic sentence here and use of detailed evidence!"

FINISHING TIP: The eighth most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is **the dreaded COMMA SPLICE**. I've always liked the nautical flavor of that label, perhaps because I wrote my dissertation on *Moby-Dick*. ANYWAY, a comma splice occurs when a comma is used to splice together two clauses that could be sentences on their own: i.e., "Ethel pounced ferociously on the first spring robin, Lucy decided to spread her considerable girth out on the sunny patio." There are several ways to correct comma splices; the most common are 1) replacing the comma splice with a period and thus creating two sentences; 2) replacing the comma splice with a semicolon, or 3) adding a coordinating conjunction ("Ethel pounced ferociously on the first spring robin, but Lucy decided to spread her considerable girth out on the sunny patio").

April 27, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: In the earlier stages of writing, we often have a vague sense of what we want to say that consists of a lot of ideas, phrases, and details chaotically whirling around in the food processor of our brain. One helpful way to begin the writing process is by jotting down all of these random thoughts—in no particular order—just to get them on paper and out of the food processor. Then, sit down with someone and talk. Begin with "The major thing I'm trying to say is . . ." and see what comes out. This can be a useful strategy to use when you are meeting with a struggling student writer. First have her jot down her disconnected ideas; then have her talk you through her major goal.

FINISHING TIP: The ninth most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is **a missing or misplaced apostrophe**. This is an error that I find all the time, in all kinds of writing. Sometimes I wonder if new computer keyboards are missing the apostrophe. And text-messaging certainly eschews apostrophes. But perhaps it is simple uncertainty (does the apostrophe go before or after the -s?) that causes so many writers to omit this handy little punctuation mark. To make a noun possessive (indicating ownership), the writer must add an apostrophe and a -s to a singular noun and only an apostrophe to a plural noun; i.e., "The first **baseman's** foot rose from the bag in a disastrous error" and "The **Mariners'** record is already a cause for despair." For those cases where we find a plural noun that does not end in -s, use an apostrophe and -s: "The **men's** uniforms were a dingy white." A key concept is that apostrophes indicate possessiveness, not plurality. If we were to speak of my family, we would say, "the **Gallaghers**." No apostrophe. But to speak of our house, we'd say, "the **Gallaghers'** house."

May 4, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: A key thinking and writing skill on which we need to work with our students is the ability to synthesize other material and ideas into their writing. Student writers often have difficulty smoothly incorporating data, facts, or expert opinions into their writing. Sometimes I jot on papers, “This quote is just stuck in.” Quotations generally should have some kind of introduction to provide context, authority, and flow. Look at the differences between these two examples:

Graphic sexual imagery is a literary technique that does not necessarily teach immorality. “Literature and art are not required . . . to serve up clean and wholesome stories in all times and places” (Miller 7). Disturbing images can function to call our attention to great wrongs in the world.

Graphic sexual imagery can be a literary technique that does not necessarily teach immorality. Renown American playwright Arthur Miller insists, “Literature and art are not required . . . to serve up clean and wholesome stories in all times and places” (7). These disturbing images can function to call our attention to great wrongs in the world.

FINISHING TIP: The tenth most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford’s research, is an **unnecessary shift in tense**. This occurs, for example, when a writer suddenly moves from past to present tense, or from present to future, without a good reason. For example, “Sharon **was teaching** her class when the emergency horn sounded. Then she calmly **follows** the instructions in *Stop. Think. Act.*” Obviously, there can be occasions within a sentence when the tense changes for good reason. Tense confusion, I find, often occurs when writers are writing about literary works or quoting, summarizing, or paraphrasing. Simple present tense should be used in most cases (as in the Miller example above). The one exception is in scientific writing reporting on experiments or another researcher’s work, which should be in the past tense: “McFarland (2004) **noted** (not ‘**notes**’) that the mutation of the MIC-A sequence may yield mutants with a higher binding affinity.”

May 11, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: An excellent writing exercise for both upper-division and lower-division students from many different disciplines is the summary paragraph. It’s a quick way to see if students grasp the main idea of a reading assignment, lab procedure, film, or lecture. A good summary paragraph should open with a one-sentence summary followed by a four-five sentences highlighting the major points. Such a summary might appear in an annotated bibliography, a bibliographic essay, or—eventually—in a longer paper that draws on secondary material to establish its argument or analysis. Students often struggle to write succinct yet comprehensive summaries. It doesn’t take long to read and comment on these, using statements like, “The opening sentence doesn’t give us the gist of the essay.” Or “Your summary leaves out the third point, which is the most important one.” Or “This is far too long for a summary; how could you shorten it?”

FINISHING TIP: The eleventh most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford’s research, is an **unnecessary shift in pronoun**. The most common instance is when a writer changes from *one* to *you* or *I*. For example, “When *one* first begins writing on the college level, *you* often are worried about writing enough pages.” Readers may become confused by unnecessary shift between first-person (*I, we*), second person (*you*), and third-person (*he, she, it, one, or they.*) (*We*’ll talk in the future about the nagging problem of a shift in number from a singular antecedent to a plural pronoun.)

May 18, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: Here’s an activity that I used recently that has significantly reduced my grading time. When I made the assignment, I let students know that someone other than me would be reading their essays. The day the papers were due, students were put into groups of 3 and given an instruction sheet that stated: “Each person will read two essays. You will have 15 minutes for each essay. As you read, if you find any technical errors (grammar, spelling, etc.) circle the error. If you can’t follow a point or understand a sentence, insert a question mark. At the end of the essay, write 1) your personal reaction to the essay, 2)

what you think was the strongest point, 3) what you think was the weakest part of the essay. Then give it a letter grade and sign your name.”

Now that I’m reading the papers myself, I find that a lot of the technical errors have already been noted and that student readers often identify the strengths and weaknesses quite accurately. At other times, I will note that I agree or disagree with a comment of one of the readers. Sometimes the readers disagree with each other, too, which is interesting to see play out. This exercise gives writers a sense of the complexity of audience responses, shortens the amount of time I spend grading, and demonstrates that others, beyond the instructor, can note errors or confusion.

FINISHING TIP: According to Lunsford’s research, the twelfth most frequent punctuation error in college writing is an inappropriate use of **a sentence fragment**. While the sentence fragment may be occasionally used to create dramatic effect, most student writers include fragments due to grammatical incompetency. A sentence fragment is just what the term suggests: something that is written as a sentence, with a capital letter at the beginning and a period (or question mark, or exclamation point) at the end, but is grammatically only a part of sentence. Fragments can lack a subject or a verb, or they might occur when the writer begins a sentence with a subordinating word, which make the sentence depend on another sentence for its meaning: “Because I spent long hours at my computer keyboard.”

May 25, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: Save a tree. Except for long, formal research papers or honors theses, tell your students to omit a separate title page. MLA format recommends that the writer’s name, instructor’s name, course number, and date be aligned at the left margin of the first page, followed by the title of the paper centered. All of this, according to MLA style, is double spaced, with one inch margins and 12 point type. Page numbers should be printed in the right corner, but omitted on the first page. This is an example of a good standard format, and you may have some slightly different guidelines, but do let your students know the format their paper should follow, and hold them to it. They need to learn how to follow these kinds of formatting directions. Such explicit directions can also forestall tiny or large print, unusually wide margins, confusion in reading disordered pages, etc.

FINISHING TIP: According to Lunsford’s research, the thirteenth most frequent punctuation error in college writing is **using the wrong tense or verb form**. This is another one of those errors that frequently trouble second-language writers. The verb may not clearly indicate when an action or condition has or will occur: “By the time I reached home, Lucy **slept**” should be “By the time I reached home, Lucy **was asleep**.” And then there are those pesky irregular verbs, such as *begin*, *began*, *begun*, or *break*, *broke*, *broken*, which frequently confuse novice writers.

June 1, 2007

GLOBAL TIP: Advise your students to always have someone else proofread their papers before they turn them in. This is good advice for you, too! It’s hard to catch a spell-check-proof typo or a slightly incorrect word yourself when you’ve been living and breathing the paper and its ideas for a long time.

FINISHING TIP: According to Lunsford’s research, the fourteenth most frequent punctuation error in college writing is **lack of subject/verb agreement**. In many cases, the verb’s form depends on whether the subject is singular or plural. Often, subject/verb disagreement occurs when the writer leaves the –s ending off a verb out of carelessness. But most cases occur when other words come between the subject and the verb and confuse the issue. A few other tips: If a subject has two or more parts connected by *and*, the subject is almost always plural: “The woman and her husband **drive** [not **drives**] to work every day.” But if a subject has two or more parts joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb should agree with the part closest to the verb: “My parents or my sister **drives** me to work every day,” and “My sister or my parents **drive** me to work every day.”

