eCULTURE

Volume 2 2009 *Article* 14

Two on-line tools for feedback on grammar and style in academic writing

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Abstract

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Two On-Line Tools for Feedback on Grammar and Style in Academic Writing

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Abstract: This paper introduces two online academic writing tools which should help address two common feedback problems at ECU. Undergraduate students often consider that they receive little appraisal of the style (including grammar), rather than the content, of their academic writing. In contrast, many research students frustrate their supervisors by failing to learn from detailed corrections of their writing style.
I independently developed a coding system for specific types of style errors, as have other academics and editors. The more significant innovation is the much more expansive interactive web tool which matches the numbered fault types to multi-layered explanations of each fault, complete with corrected examples. Feedback can involve highlighting the problem text and providing the fault number with or without further editing for style; the latter approach is time-efficient while also fostering self-reliance. In writing workshops I also promote independent learning by only teaching a few of these faults intensively and challenging students to master the rest by exploring the interactive web tool. While feedback on these tools from academic writing clients has been encouraging, convincing more academics to trial these tools with their students could help provide valuable appraisal of their usefulness.

Introduction

There has been significant debate about the value of providing feedback to students on their writing skills, particularly to non-English speaking background (NESB) or L2 (learning in a second language) students (Truscott, 2007). However, Ferris and Roberts (2001) argue that in most studies, it did improve the writing accuracy of L2 students over time and recent empirical research by Bitchener (2008) supports this conclusion. Regardless, there are risks including negative outcomes from the provision of highly critical feedback (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Similarly, providing very large amounts of editing and comments may not be the most effective approach (Centre for Learning and Teaching, 2009, p. 76). Specifically, written feedback may not be readily understood by all students (Rae & Cochrane, 2008) or may identify faults correctly, including grammatical errors, but not indicate how to acquire appropriate writing skills (Lea, 1994). Academics are encouraged to provide timely feedback to students on their writing (Centre for Learning and Teaching, 2009, p. 76) and this can limit the scope of advice provided. There is also recognition that, unfortunately, some students adopt a passive approach to their writing problems (Rae & Cochrane, 2008). Some useful strategies for engaging students in this process include linking writing skills to employment outcomes (Kuh & Hu, 2001) and fostering a "feed forward" approach where students are encouraged to apply feedback from one piece of writing to drafts of other sections of that document or to other writing tasks (Rae & Cochrane, 2008).

The tools introduced in this paper reflect my commitment to providing efficient feedback that encourages students to avoid dependency on the provision of editing support but instead become independent learners. While supervisors of research students and academics providing feedback to students in coursework programs may deal with both style and content, my major role involves improving grammar, style and structure for both native speakers and NESB clients. However, some undergraduate students at ECU claim that they receive very little feedback on style and grammar.

I independently developed a coding system for specific types of errors, as have other academics and editors (Maguire 2008a). The more significant innovation is the much more expansive interactive web tool which matches the numbered fault types to multi-layered explanations of each fault, complete with corrected examples (Maguire 2008b). It should be noted that some researchers could not demonstrate an advantage of using five error categories over less explicit feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). In contrast, I have had very positive feedback, on the usefulness of this approach, from research students and supervisors. The first tool is used in all editing I provide to research students and staff to ensure that they understand why the majority of changes were proposed. I encourage clients to explore their numbered faults via the interactive web tool. This tool has also proved very useful for writing workshops by allowing me to focus on just a few writing faults and then motivate the participants to independently explore the other faults.

The aim of this paper is to promote the use of these tools by supervisors of research students and to encourage staff, providing feedback to coursework students, to trial these tools in their feedback strategies. In my experience there is considerable overlap in the writing problems of research and coursework students and of native English speakers and NESB students. In this paper, the tools and the ways in which they can be used are placed in context with relevant findings in the literature. Ideally, adoption of these tools, by more academics and learning support staff, will help provide future opportunities for appropriate research into their effectiveness. Unfortunately, research on feedback strategies has not always been well designed (Bitchener, 2008).

Description of the Tools

The Numbered Writing Faults tool (Maguire 2008a)

This includes Faults 1-20 along with a simple example and advice (in bold), for the person editing, on highlighting the text that is causing the problem. This information is given below. This tool also incorporates a very simple grammar lesson, explanations of the editing symbols I use and a few key references.

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). For a clause that qualifies a noun in a sentence, 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 “□”). 13b. 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.

1. 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.)
2. 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.
3. 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…".

4. 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.)
5. 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.)
6. The sentence is incomplete and/or does not make sense e.g., a sentence without a verb. (Mark position with "□".)

The Interactive Web Tool (Maguire 2008b)

The following is the series of layers of information within this tool for just one of these faults, including the final layer for correcting the fault and applying a more direct style. The numbered list of faults is repeated but the initial text for each is a live link which allows access to the multiple layers of information. Hence each fault can be investigated out of sequence. It should be noted that this information is currently under revision to make it compatible with the information presented in the workshops I currently present to research students and staff. For example, information will be added to cover some of the exceptions to or difficult cases that conform to the rules below for subject-verb agreement. Importantly, the information below includes a technique for deconstructing a sentence so that the user can become adept at detecting the subject and verb in the main part of the sentence. Overall, the aim was to keep the wording in the document very user friendly and encouraging. Note that the references in the text below were merely invented and as such do not appear in the reference list for this paper.

2 No Subject/Verb Agreement

Short explanation (and highlighting instruction for editor)

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 a reggae band." (*was played* is the clause's verb). Clearly, such writing is unacceptable in formal writing. However, stand alone clauses e.g., "Which was played by a reggae band." are used in some forms of creative writing.

Advanced explanation with example(s)

The singular/plural status of the subject and the major verb in a sentence must be consistent. The name of an organisation is usually singular but students often match it to a plural verb, possibly because an organisation employs many people. On other occasions the complexity of the sentence defeats students. The trick, in a more complex sentence, is to temporarily delete all of the phrases and clauses so that the basic structure of the sentence becomes clear.

An example which combines both of these challenges is:
"The World Health Organisation of the United Nations argue..". In this case "of the United Nations" is a phrase and, for just the purpose of checking the verb, it can be deleted. We are left with: "World Health Organisation argue..". It is clear that Organisation is singular and that the verb has to be singular so we use "argues". There may be potential for using abbreviations if already defined for these organisations i.e., "The UN's WHO argues..".

A less technical example may be easier. “The boy, in the picture, who owns a lot of toys, are…” We temporarily get rid of the phrase “in the picture” and the clause “who owns a lot of toys” and the essence of the sentence is left “The boy are…” and there can be no doubt about the use of “is” instead of “are” i.e., “The boy, in the picture, who owns a lot of toys, is…” Notice also that the appropriate use of commas also helps us with seeing the essence of the sentence.

An example from another field may also help. “Expression of these genes overlap in the central nervous system”. If you delete the phrase “of the genes”, you are left with “Expression overlap in the central nervous system”. It is now obvious that “expression” is singular and hence we should use “overlaps”. The correct version is “Expression of these genes overlaps in the central nervous system”.

All of these examples highlight a process for achieving “subject/verb agreement”. This is probably the most common grammatical error made by students.

Example With a Fault Corrected and a More Direct Style Applied

An example of excessively complex writing that includes an error in the verb is given below. I adapted it from an even more complex example from a draft thesis.

“The problems and complexities of the duality of doing postgraduate research, which is applied but also attempts to make conceptual breakthroughs, as discussed by Albert (2000) who recognised that industry and academia can have different values, is evident within this project.” [41 words]

Delete two phrases. “The problems and complexities of doing postgraduate research, which is applied but also attempts to make conceptual breakthroughs, as discussed by Albert (2000) who recognised that industry and academia can have different values, is evident.”

Delete five clause-like sequences. “The problems and complexities is evident.” Clearly, the subject “problems and complexities” is plural so the verb “is” should be made plural i.e., “are”. “The problems and complexities are evident.”

However, we can write the complete statement much more directly. My suggested version is:

“This applied postgraduate research poses the dual challenges of being useful to industry and making the conceptual breakthroughs valued by academia (Albert, 2000).” [It contains 23 words and is easier to read.]

Discussion

The research tools are highlighted in this paper to encourage academics, who teach coursework students, and supervisors of research students to use them. Both staff roles involve reviewing large amounts of writing because of the number of coursework students or the size of research documents. While there are differences between the challenges with native speakers and NESB students, for example, with the use of articles, the faults covered by the tools occur within both groups. The tools presented here were developed for use with individual research students

who are also supported by workshops, individual meetings on their writing skills, and a set of on-line editing exercises. There is also an on-line, comprehensive writing advice document (Maguire, 2007) which is referenced in the interactive web tool. The on-line tools and documents are available to all ECU students and access is not restricted to just ECU or Australian students. Within ECU at least, coursework students have access to other writing workshops and to learning advisors who conduct individual meetings with clients.

The introduction to this paper noted some of the challenges, highlighted in the literature, with providing effective feedback. Below, the ways the tools can be used to address them are considered. Editing part of a document thoroughly and just highlighting faults for the remainder with fault numbers should lessen the chance that the student is overwhelmed by the feedback (Kuh and Hu, 2001). This approach may motivate passive students (Rae & Cochrane, 2008) by showing how their writing can be improved, without an editing service being provided. I also use the "feed forward" approach (Rae & Cochrane, 2008) with research students by often editing only a part of a document and then requesting independent revision of the next section, based on assimilating the types of faults addressed in the first section. Motivating students, to improve, through linking writing skills to employment outcomes (Kuh & Hu, 2001) is reflected in Maguire (2007) and my research tools-based workshops.

The two challenges which the tools address most directly are avoiding feedback that confuses students (Rae & Cochrane, 2008) or does not provide a strategy for acquiring the skills needed to overcome specific writing faults (Lea, 1994). Finally, the tools should help meet the challenge of providing timely feedback by reducing the need for staff to draft comprehensive explanations of style and grammar problems or to edit all of the text thoroughly.

Conclusion

The tools are presented in this paper as efficient devices for assisting and encouraging students to improve their writing style and grammar. Feedback on the tools from supervisors, individual research students and writing workshop groups has been encouraging. However, their broad utility cannot be assumed, given the debate in the literature on the value of feedback to students, or demonstrated without wider adoption and rigorously designed research (Bitchener, 2008). This phase will be explored after significant revision of the interactive web tool to provide greater depth of information, albeit without altering the established list of faults covered.

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