



Locate The Errors

If you feel insufficiently prepared to help students with grammar, give yourself permission to focus on other areas. However, many teachers wish to focus on grammar, so here is a way to do so without editing.

The best practice involves pointing students in the right direction but not providing information for them. Ideally, you can give them less information as the year progresses, reflecting their growth.

3 Key Pieces Of Information We Provide When Correcting Errors

When we correct errors on student essays, we provide three pieces of information:

1. The location of the error
2. The type of error
3. How to fix the error

So, for example, if you place a comma where one is missing, you've let the student know where the comma was missing, the problem was a missing comma, and the solution is adding a comma. Occasionally, you may provide only two of those pieces of information. For example, if you write "run-on" in the margin of a sentence, you've identified the location and the problem but not shown students how to fix it. If you write "run-on" and also add a semicolon, you've provided all three pieces of information.

How It Works

Option 1: Omit Only The Correction (Easy)

The easiest and most straightforward aspect to omit is, of course, the correction itself, but keep in mind that if you identify both the location of the error and its type, you are making the job of correction potentially too easy. If your students are generally weak writers, you can begin by only omitting the correction itself. Aim to lessen the information you provide for students over time so they can become better equipped to locate, identify, and also correct their own errors.

Option 2: Use X's To Mark Error Locations, Not Error Types or Solutions (Moderate)

To eliminate the copy editing of students' work, try providing only one of the pieces of information above. If you want to comment on location but make students determine



the type of error and its solution, put an X in the margin each time you see a surface-level error. Students' follow-up work requires identifying the errors and correcting them.

Add A Feedback Loop

Ideally, they will also explain the rationale for the change:

- *"I needed a comma there because I was separating two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction"*
- *"Two independent clauses can't be connected by the word 'however' without a semi-colon."*

If students struggle to find the error themselves, a partner can help. If lots of students struggle with the same error, I may pause and offer a brief explanation to the whole class.

Working To Improve Over Time

Students can count their X's and then aim for a lower number on the next essay. Something about reducing a quantifiable number feels both more achievable and more fun.

Option 3: Identify The Error Type, Not Location (Hard)

Identifying the type of error but not the location is harder, so I save this approach for later in the semester. At the bottom of the last page of the essay (or at the bottom of each page), create a tally list like this:

- **Commas:** IIIII
- **Apostrophes:** II
- **Run-on sentences:** I
- **Typos:** III

Why It Works

It's not hard to keep this running tally as you read, and the student's job is then to review the essay (or page) and find as many of those errors as possible. The student may not find all of them, which is fine. If they find most – or any! – they are doing the hard work of asking questions – "Wait a minute; does a comma belong here or not?" – determining the answer, which can help them far more than your marking a comma ever could.

Experimentation Welcome!

If you need an interim step because a list of errors at the bottom of the page is too difficult, you can place a list at the end of each paragraph or focus on counting only a



single type of error per essay. Be creative, keeping in mind that you should leave at least one, and preferably two, of the three aspects of error correction undone so that students can complete it themselves.

Option 4: Include Only The Number Of Errors (Very Hard)

The most difficult of these options, and the one that provides the least information short of providing none at all, is to simply include a number at the end of the essay. I only do this for my most advanced students who are up for a challenge, but it can be quite interesting for them to see simply a “12” at the end of an essay. Again, that notation concretizes the goal of “lower that number!”

Invite Students To Recognize Patterns

If you offer just a number, ask students to categorize their errors and begin to notice patterns. While occasional students will have errors in many aspects of their surface-level writing, most students follow specific patterns of error. Even within a larger rule like commas, an individual student’s comma errors usually present a clear pattern, so encourage students to notice not merely that most of their errors are comma errors but, first, whether they overuse or underuse commas and, second, in which particular situations: compound sentences? appositives? introductory clauses?

Why It Works

The more they identify error patterns, the more likely they are to change them. If a student generally feels “I’m terrible at punctuation” but cannot articulate how, she is unlikely to break that pattern.

Work Toward Teaching Students Rather Than Correcting Them

Each of these techniques, tiered for different levels of students, works towards teaching students rather than correcting them, and while you may initially have to fight yourself to avoid copy editing, doing so will help students gain control of their writing. In this way, you become their guide and mentor but not their evaluator.