



## Mandates

Some students miss errors while proofreading not because they don't see them but because they genuinely don't know the rules. In these cases, disruptive techniques will not help because students don't know what they're looking for. Mandates and targeted tasks can help students in this situation, not merely with proofreading but with learning what to look for and how to find it.

### How it Works

Mandates work best when students are motivated, whether by learning or by grades. I give mandates to students when I notice a pattern of error. Sometimes on the first piece I will mention the error; I may reiterate it on the second piece and ask the student to write a reflection on that pattern. But by the third piece, I apply a mandate, which involves an email like this:

"Hi, X.

I've noticed that you have a lot of apostrophe errors in your essays. I mentioned it on the previous two essays, and you mentioned in your reflection that you often struggle to find these mistakes. But in your most recent essay, you missed four more apostrophes.

For your next essay, you have an apostrophe mandate, which means that, when I see the first apostrophe error, I will stop reading your essay and give it back. I won't grade the essay until you hand it in with no apostrophe errors!

We can meet to review apostrophe rules, and I'm including a list of usage guidelines here. Here are links to a couple of useful sites that might also help: \_\_\_\_\_ . Once you write two essays without any apostrophe errors, your mandate will be erased, but it can be reapplied later in the year if necessary. Let me know if you have any questions.

Dr. S"

I have used mandates with students of all ages, and the reaction is identical: frustration and exasperation at the placing of the mandate, followed by relief and gratitude at finally figuring out how to do something that has been bothering the student for years. Basically, a mandate forces students to study and learn the rule(s) about which they've been confused in a way that repeated comments don't. Students generally know about



these errors but don't have the tools and/or the initiative to confront them, so being told that they need to do so prompts them to make a real change.

## Two Student Examples

### Run-On Sentences Forever

Students nearly always eventually thank me for mandates, which not only change students' writing but change the way they think of themselves. In one dramatic case, a self-proclaimed "bad writer" wrote run-on sentences more often than she wrote grammatical sentences. She had been told this by every English teacher she had ever had. The mandate threw her into a panic: she couldn't envision herself writing in any other way.

So we began with a ten-minute meeting in which I showed her independent clauses in her own writing and worked with her to identify grammatical units. She picked this up quickly and began to divide her sentences accordingly. I had to give her next essay back ungraded once because it contained three or four run-on sentences. She corrected those, received her grade, and never wrote another run-on in any essay she handed to me. (I taught her for an additional year and a half.)

### Apostrophes

The results tend not to be quite this stark, but I also once gave a college student an apostrophe mandate as a freshman. He came back to me as a senior, about to start graduate school for a PhD in biology, and told me that being forced to figure out how to use apostrophes correctly altered the way he thought about himself as a student.

### Make It Work

This technique, while perhaps heavy-handed, requires just a little effort from you -- a list of students with mandates and some effort to keep track of which essays have yet to be resubmitted -- but has drastic results, lessening your annoyance at ongoing patterns of error and helping students see their own agency as writers.

For students who struggle with procrastination, part of their mandate can be that they have to fix the errors while sitting in (or just outside) your office and then hand the essay back to you on the spot.