Targeted Tasks

By the time they reach high school, most students have heard certain comments frequently: "you have a lot of comma splices here" or "you're using dashes incorrectly." Hearing them again doesn't come as a surprise, but it should demonstrate that this feedback hasn't yet solved the problems, so another approach is warranted.

Even if you believe that students should already know foundational grammar, should learn these skills in a different class, or should transfer their learning from English class to your course, those things haven't happened. So rather than give them repetitive feedback, ask them which errors they tend to commit most often or – if they aren't sure – articulate the patterns of error you've noticed.

How It Works

I keep a list of each student's primary grammatical or stylistic errors, just jotting a quick note to myself when I see a pattern. (I can't trust myself to remember all 80 students' patterns of error, so notating allows me to check if errors are a fluke or a pattern.)

When I notice a pattern, I ask students to target their proofreading to look **only** for those specific errors. They should avoid being distracted by other mistakes – although if a mistake jumps out at them, they should obviously correct it – but should remain entirely focused on the targeted area.

Some errors are easier to catch this way than others, and this technique can be time-consuming on long essays. Anything around five pages or fewer, though, can be proofread using targeting. Certain errors of omission (like missing commas) are harder to catch than errors of inclusion (like extra commas), but targeted readings help in both cases.

Aim For Usage, Not Grammar

If I am asking for written correctness on an essay, it's important for students to be given usage tools and not merely grammatical rules; for some students, rules easily translate into practice, but if you are working with high school or college students who consistently use apostrophes incorrectly even though they have been taught about possession, clearly the rules have not translated into practice. So offer them a new tool by offering them usage rather than grammatical guidelines. They may not know what a

subordinate conjunction does, but they can tell if a sentence starts with one and learn how to punctuate it accordingly.

Apostrophes are perfect for targeted proofreading because one can so easily see whether a word ends with "s." But this same principle can be applied to lots of different patterns of error. I ask students who write repeated comma splices to look at every comma and determine if it's connecting independent clauses. For students who put commas before every single "and," I explain how to check for independent clauses and ask students to look at each ", and" to see if the comma belongs.

Use And Repeat

Some students will only need one targeted proofread per essay because they have one pattern of error. Some students may have to do two or three targeted readings to catch several patterns of error.

Urge students not to try to save time by reading for multiple errors at once! They're likely to catch half as many. But reading a three- or four-page essay two or three times with clear advice about finding the specific errors is a much more effective and satisfying approach than proofreading again and again, not knowing what to look for but feeling that uncaught mistakes are still present.