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Common Errors, Slips, Blunders and Oversights of High School Seniors

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"Sleep and Sleeplessness in Shakespeare's play, Macbeth symbolizes both torture and purity of life."

"The blood in Macbeth has many different meanings, such as honor, uncleanness and how blood can taint a person's mind."

"A person willing to commit an act like this is damned to a life in pain and never to be able to be at peace even in the afterlife."

"All the blood Macbeth saw, was with him all the way until the end. Where the only blood he would see, was his own."

"Not only being able not to sleep but depriving someone else of sleep can affect someone so severely."

These quotes are not evidence of ninth grade students learning about Shakespeare. Neither are they rough drafts of an essay on the tragedy *Macbeth*. Alas, these excerpts are all taken from final drafts of an essay written by intelligent high school seniors in an English class for college-bound students. Each of these examples is so riddled with errors in punctuation, parallel structure, and homonyms, that it is nearly impossible to uncover evidence of intelligent thought.

After twelve years of education at a school known in Kalamazoo county for its rigorous curriculum, and four years of high school English required for graduation, this is not what one expects from college-bound seniors.

The above assignment required students

to choose a motif we had discussed in class and write an 800-word essay discussing its use in the play *Macbeth*. The assignment required an introduction with a clear thesis statement, examples and explanations of the use of the motif, and a strong conclusion. While reading the submitted essays, I was impressed by the depth of understanding evident in student writing, yet distracted by the elementary mistakes made by seniors. The students had the intelligence and understanding necessary to write compelling papers on the themes and motifs of *Macbeth*. Yet they lacked the ability to clearly articulate ideas due to errors in punctuation, spelling, and parallel structure, among other issues. Why did these bright students consistently make elementary errors?

At the time of this assignment, most students were less than six months away from high school graduation and the beginning of university life. From personal experience, I know that grades in most college classes are based on a few tests, at least one significant writing assignment, possibly a presentation, and a final exam. Post-secondary students are expected to write clearly and turn in polished work. Written expression of ideas is a necessary skill for a college degree, which is becoming more and more necessary for independent existence. It is also a necessary skill for students who are not working towards a college degree. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Education published in National Writing Project's, *Because Writing Matters*,

In the business world, as well as in school, students must convey complex ideas and information in a clear, succinct manner. Inadequate writing skills, therefore, could inhibit achievement cross the curriculum and in future careers, while proficient writing skills help students convey ideas, deliver instructions, analyze information, and motivate others. (3)

English 12 is labeled a college prep class, but it is also a required class for all students, even those who are not immediately college bound. Forced to evaluate, assess, and ultimately grade student writing, most middle and high school teachers award

points for process (prewriting, drafts, peer editing) as well as content. As Romano states, "In grading and evaluating papers I reward students for working hard in the process of writing, for participating in good faith" (112). He also admits, "Evaluation of writing is a necessarily subjective act. Objectivity is impossible" (113). Thus, many students get by with B's and C's in high school English because they follow the steps, turn in drafts and final copies on time, and have something to say, but the content and voice of the piece may be interrupted by issues of clarity and mechanics.

The seniors I work with know how to "do school." They complete all the process requirements for points and turn in a piece of writing that adequately addresses the topic. They use spell check and might participate in classroom revision, but they're unable to identify punctuation and sentence structure errors and overlook homonym errors and misspellings. While I believe that content and the expression of ideas is of the most importance in writing (it doesn't matter how grammatically correct a piece of writing is if it doesn't say anything!) and that the process of writing is essential to the final piece, I fear that my college-bound seniors will submit their first piece of college writing only to realize that their professor bases the grade on one final copy, and that this professor may notice mechanical errors before content.

As Romano states, "correctness is of little importance to readers when they are reading flawlessly edited copy. Let them spot one editing error, however, and suddenly correctness is all-important" (74). Despite the depth of thought evident in their writing, I was concerned that my very intelligent students would not be taken seriously in a college class. In fact, I feared that a college professor might not even see the clearly intelligent ideas in the writing of these students due to the muddy quagmire of mistakes at the surface level of the writing.

Upon receiving a grade from this college professor, these students may come to the conclusion that they were not prepared for writing in a college setting. Some of them will need to spend time and money in remedial writing courses, when they should have been prepared by their high school classes.

Worse, students who don't move on to college will probably not have opportunities to improve their written expression. In the working world of resumes, memos, and emails, writing may contribute to the first impression a boss or colleague will have of an employee. Surface level errors may give an impression of carelessness or sloppiness. I did not want my job-seeking students to be overlooked for employment opportunities due to elementary errors in resumes or cover letters.

I began to track common errors and take notes. I made copies of essays and underlined problem phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. In a spiral notebook, I began to list common problem areas and examples of problems. I continued to keep notes on students' writing throughout the rest of the year. The trend of errors continued in all forms of writing, from free writes to formal essays. The "top ten" list of issues encompassed mechanics and usage as well as style, and included problems with run-on and fragment sentences, punctuation and comma usage, homonym mix-ups, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, ambiguity, wordiness, informality, inappropriate use of quotes, misuse of pronouns, and basic organization. My students had reached a level of thinking appropriate for college level work, but their ability to express their thoughts in writing lagged behind, bogged down in a mire of mechanics.

My next step was to obtain a picture of students' true writing processes. In order to develop a strategy for addressing issues in student writing, I needed to know what students were actually doing in their writing process. What steps did they actually take before turning in a piece of writing? Although most students have been taught the steps of prewriting, rough drafts, revision, and editing, I knew that, realistically, most students did not follow the "writing process." In an age of word processors, writers don't necessarily follow these predetermined steps. I wanted to understand exactly how each student worked through a writing assignment. I asked students to think about how they begin a paper, when and how they edit, and what steps they take before a final copy is turned in. I showed them a map of my own process and then each of my students made a visual representation of his or her writing process.

The students' illustrations of their writing process reveal that students learned to draft ideas and make notes before writing. Although each illustration is unique, most of them include some sort of brainstorming or outlining technique to gather and organize ideas. Once students decide on a topic and outline ideas, they begin to write. From there, most students type a draft of the body paragraphs, write an introduction and conclusion, read over it and make a few changes, conduct a computerized spell-check, and then turn in a final copy. Although all students included some sort of editing, very few students included revision as a part of the process. Many students noted that they completed all or most of the process within two days of the assignment's due date.

I then asked students to respond to an anonymous questionnaire in which they wrote down their own strengths and weaknesses as writers and made suggestions for improvement of the English 12 writing curriculum. Suggestions varied from, "more creative writing," to "more structured essay assignments," and "instruction of vocabulary and grammar." The questionnaire also asked, "How often do you revise your own writing?" Some of the responses I received included, "about 75% of the time," "not too often," "2 times-sloppy copy and final copy," once, maybe twice," "only when my writing needs to be: i.e., papers and reports," "I read it over, then get my parent to look over it," "once before I print it out-I change what doesn't make sense to me," and "right before I turn it in." The most common answer was simply, "twice."

Finally, students completed a number-based survey rating their individual feeling of preparedness for college, their overall writing instruction in high school, and their abilities in areas of writing such as; spelling, writing a thesis statement, punctuation, writer's voice, style, clarity, sentence structure, writing a good introduction, organization of ideas, use of literary devices, and overall grammar.

According to the number-based surveys given to seniors at the end of the school year, students recognize their own weaknesses and needs for improvement and many are concerned about their preparation for writing in college.

When surveyed, less than 20% of seniors

graduating in 2005 felt "very prepared" for writing in college. When asked the open question, "What do you most want to improve in your writing?," 50% of students responded with concerns about mechanics, specifically spelling and grammar.

When the same survey was given to a new group of seniors the following September, less than 15% felt "very prepared" for writing in college, over 50% felt only "somewhat prepared," and 33% of students felt "unsure" about their ability to write in college.

Of this new group of students, only 20% felt confident about grammar and sentence structure. However, almost all of the students rated skills in mechanics, usage, and style as very important traits of a good writer.

According to the writing process illustrations and questionnaires, it seems that students struggle most transferring ideas from their minds to the paper, and this is where they spend the most time. Once they get their words onto paper, they want to hand it in and stop thinking about it. Although students may spend some time proofreading for obvious errors, most don't spend a great deal of time revising and polishing a piece. In response to the question "What makes a good writer?," a student wrote, "Taking a lot of time to revise your paper and analyzing every possible wording and order for your work." In response to the question "What are your weaknesses as a writer?" the same student wrote, "Lack of commitment to sitting down to write it which in turn doesn't allow me to take the time to revise." Despite students' dislike for spelling and grammar and, at times, disregard for these issues in their writing, most recognize the importance of mechanics and want to improve.

My conclusion from this wealth of information? Despite a curriculum already packed with four novels, *the Canterbury Tales*, *Beowulf*, and *Macbeth*, it is essential that I make time for response and revision. Romano stresses, "When teenagers work through writing processes, their final written products generally improve" (123). As a part of this process, he spends a class period or two correcting mechanical errors after students are finished with the shape and content of a piece of writing (73).

This time may include mini-lessons on a common problem area, or it may consist of each student editing on one or two focus areas based on suggestions from a teacher or his or her peers. The important thing is spending time reworking the writing to stress the value of the revision and editing part of the process.

Although it is a constant struggle against time constraints, teachers must also advocate for time to respond individually to students. Romano devotes an entire chapter of his book to, “the Crucial Role of Conferencing.” Students benefit from immediate feedback, and many will likely revise their writing according to feedback from a teacher as well as other adults and students. According to Tchudi and Tchudi, students’ peers should be readers and audiences (178). Students learn from comments and suggestions from a teacher or a response group, but just as important is what they learn while reading the writing of their peers. For this reason, we must give classroom time to conferencing, reader response groups, and other forms of feedback.

Finally, we must help students see the value of editing and revising their own writing. Teachers may only need to provide a push in the right direction. I’ve discovered that students are generally able to find and fix mechanical issues when they have something specific to look for. When students know that part of their grade is based on correct usage of homonyms, far fewer mistakes are made. My seniors don’t need a mini-lesson on their, there, and they’re. They just need to be reminded to look for problem areas. Similarly, when we spent a day reading examples of compelling introductions, the written results were an amazing improvement from the nondescript introductions of previous assignments. Daniels et al. agree, “Grammar elements actually need reteaching less often than we think” (62). They suggest that students keep lists of the elements of grammar and mechanics they’ve mastered so they can remind themselves to proofread for these issues. (62). Students know correct usage and are very capable of producing good writing when the requirements are not a mystery.

As writing teachers, we must provide adequate time for students to work through response,

revision, and editing, possibly to the point of allowing students to turn in multiple copies of an assignment until they are able to fix mistakes on their own. The trick is to help students to carry these techniques and focus areas into subsequent writing assignments. As seniors are moving towards independence in many areas of life, they must also learn to develop their own strategies for editing and revision, and incorporate them their writing process. Once they are confident in their abilities, students will be more motivated to take pride in their written work, and this step will become a natural part of the process.

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