20 Common Errors that Students Can Edit

Most writers repeat 3 or 4 common types of errors. This list can help them edit their own work:

1. **Missing comma after introductory element:**
   Frankly I don’t know. (Frankly, I don’t know.)

2. **Vague pronoun reference:**
   If they took both of them, they will be stranded. (If Jerry and Ann took both of the cars, their parents will be stranded.)

3. **Missing comma in a compound sentence:**
   She walked but I rode. (She walked, but I rode.)

4. **Wrong words:**
   They’re costing us an arm and a leg.

5. **Missing commas with a restrictive element:**
   Jo who’s the boss quit. (Jo, who’s the boss, quit.)

6. **Wrong/missing verb ending:**
   Yesterday, he walked the dog. (Yesterday, he walked the dog.)

7. **Wrong/missing preposition:**
   Lloyds of London is on Union Street.

8. **Comma splice:**
   I came to the bank, the robber had just left. (When I came to the bank, the robber had just left.)

9. **Missing/ misplaced possessive apostrophe:**
   The boys mom took their cousins’ game away. (The boys’ mom took their cousin’s game away.)

10. **Unnecessary tense shift:**
    Cary was laughing so hard she slipped and fell. (Cary was laughing so hard, she slipped and fell.)

11. **Unnecessary pronoun shift:**
    If one tries, you’ll win. (If one tries, one will win.)

12. **Sentence fragment:**
    All gone. (The cake is all gone.)

13. **Wrong tense/verb form:**
    If I saw the police, I would have drove slower. (If I’d seen the police, I would have driven slower.)

14. **Lack of subject-verb agreement:**
    The biggest part of her chores are done. (The biggest part of her chores is done.)

15. **Faulty parallelism:**
    Will the market be bullish, bearish or get volatile? (Will the market be bullish, bearish, or volatile?)

16. **Non-agreement between pronoun/antecedent:**
    To each her own.

17. **Unnecessary comma(s) with a restrictive element:**
    The play, Othello, moved him. (The play Othello moved him.)

18. **Fused sentence:**
    I liked the book I cried at the end. (I liked the book. I cried at the end.)

19. **Misplaced/dangling modifier:**
    We saw whales with binoculars. (We used binoculars to see whales.)

20. **Its/it’s confusion:**
    It’s a red car on its side. (It’s a red car on its side.)

Using Take-Home Essay Exams

Final take-home essay exams can provide students with the opportunity to do more substantive thinking about course content. Professors who use take-home exams may want to provide students with a rubric ahead of time. It may also help to answer the following questions in written instructions for students:

- Will the exam be graded as a formal essay, with multiple drafts & citations?
- Will the exam be open-book & open-notes, or closed-book & on the honor system?
- May the student get help from the Writing Center or incorporate peer-review?
- How much time should the student spend on it?
- What page length should the exam be—& will exceeding the page length be penalized?

See Bean, Engaging Ideas, 191
Comments for revision: Identifying Higher Order Concerns

Students often misunderstand what revision means. Here are some questions that can generate comments for guiding them to revise:

**Does the draft follow the assignment?** If not, return it to the student, asking her to reread the assignment carefully.

**Is there a thesis, and does it address an appropriate problem or question?** Point out lack of a thesis—or if the thesis is implicit, ask the student to articulate it in the paper’s introduction. It might also help to ask for a preview of the argument and a brief plan of how the student plans to develop it. Sometimes students don’t fully realize that most written projects require an argument (or claim, proof, proposal, recommendation—disciplines use different terms to define “argument”).

**What is the quality of the argument?** Comment on the strengths or weaknesses of the argument. Indicate how logical it is, or how appropriate it is to the discipline. Notice if the student addresses opposing or alternative views. Briefly suggest where supporting ideas need development, or where they are complex and well thought-out. Remark on the relevance or sufficiency of the evidence, or the need for appropriate visual aids.

**Is the draft effectively organized on the “macro-level”?** Recommend that the student outline the draft after she’s written it, to see more readily what should be added or eliminated. Point out where passages should be reordered or shifted around. Notice where transitions exist between paragraphs or sections, and where they are needed. Comment on how well details relate to the major points of the argument. Indicate whether the title and introduction give a preview of the purpose and structure of the paper.

**Is the draft organized effectively on the “micro-level”?** Notice how coherent paragraphs are and to what extent they are developed. Suggest that the student explain or interpret the use of cited material. Observe where students simply list information, rather than use it to some effect or clear purpose. Comment on paragraph length and focus. Make the student aware of where she has successfully used a strategy such as cause/effect, classification and division, etc.—or where such strategies might work.

Many professors prefer to make a list of “boilerplate” comments or questions, when they know they’ll be using the same ones frequently. Getting students to concentrate on higher order concerns also keeps them from assuming that revision is more complicated than just correcting grammar.

Using this list of questions can also help professors to generate criteria for a rubric, or guidelines for peer review.

Designing a Rubric

The following rubric might be adaptable to written projects in a variety of disciplines:

1. **Originality of thesis:** The writer develops an authentic & challenging idea.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit
2. **Clarity of thesis & purpose:** The reader can easily identify both thesis & purpose.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit
3. **Organization:** The paper fully supports the thesis & purpose, presenting an effective sequence of ideas.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit
4. **Support:** The paper offers appropriate evidence & disciplinary methods of reasoning to convince the reader.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit
5. **Use of sources:** The sources support, extend, & inform the ideas but do not substitute for the writer’s development of them.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit
6. **Ethos:** The writer represents himself as other writers in the discipline would.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit
7. **Style:** The writer uses the terms, sentence & paragraph structure, documentation, & other stylistic conventions common to the discipline.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit
8. **Edited Written Standard English:** The writer meets expectations of grammar, punctuation, spelling, & syntax—except for deliberate departures in quoted sources, humorous effects, etc.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit
9. **Presentation:** The paper follows conventions of format and visual aids appropriate to the discipline.
   - superior 4—3—2—1—0 no credit

Adapted from Walvoord & Anderson, Effective Grading

Peer editing

Students can learn to be effective respondents to drafts—especially if they’re given a set of guidelines to encourage comments directed toward revision. Ask writers to provide questions they want a partner to answer about their drafts. Then divide students in pairs, and tell them to use the following guidelines:

1. Summarize your partner’s draft, writing one sentence for each paragraph.
2. How well do you think your partner has followed the assignment?
3. To what extent has your partner changed your feeling about the topic?
4. What is the strongest counterargument to the stance your partner takes—and to what extent does your partner address it?
5. What two features of the draft most need improvement (consider thesis development, quality of the argument, support, organization, paragraph development)?
6. What editing concerns need to be addressed, if any?
7. Reply to your partner’s questions.

Adapted from Haring & Raines, Guide for Peer Response