On the Use of Metawriting to Learn Grammar and Mechanics

As a means of dealing with basic grammar and mechanics problems with his college-level composition classes, author Douglas James Joyce came up with the idea of metawriting—writing about writing. Through this idea, Joyce's students examine some of their own writing problems in a reflective, informative way that, Joyce finds, not only increases the students' familiarity with writing resources but also reduces the frequency of the errors examined.

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Like many of us, I suppose, I was long frustrated by seeing the same errors over and over again in my students' writing. It seems our students have been unable to apply the grammatical and mechanical concepts we so carefully and methodically cover through formal instruction and marking up of papers.

At the same time, composition instruction has become process oriented. We have bought into the concept of writing to learn, yet we do not ask our students to write about those very topics that cause us so much frustration: grammar and mechanics. I am convinced that writing about writing—metawriting—may be the single most effective tool we can use to assist our students in grammar and mechanics as they learn to compose formal academic essays. In my own teaching, I have found that applying metawriting to the problems of grammar and mechanics decreases those errors in subsequent student writing while encouraging students to use writing resources such as handbooks and style guides during the composition process.

Here's how metawriting works on the ground. After reading each essay, I select one error that recurs frequently in the work. I then point out each instance of that error and instruct the student to write a one-page essay that compares and contrasts three sources that provide guidance to the established use of this convention. (See figure 1, p. 26). I want the student to dig as deep as necessary into the topic to come away with a thorough understanding of not only how the usage works, but also why, and even consider the current debate that may surround that particular usage. Finally, I ask the student to provide an example of incorrect (nonstandard) usage and correct it.

Analysis

Now, let's see how students have handled their write-up assignments on specific errors. The following example (presented without editing) is from a student who wrote on possessives and contractions, using an example from her first essay for correction:

Example 1 — Student Write-Up on Possessives/Contractions

The apostrophe is used for indicating possession and marking contractions. In A Pocket Style Manual by Diana Hacker, she says that an apostrophe is used to indicate that a noun is possessive and that it indicates ownership, as in the editor's desk. If you are unsure whether a noun is possessive, she suggests turning it into an of phrase, like the desk of the editor. If the noun is singular and ends in -s you add 's but if the noun is plural and ends in -s you add only the apostrophe. In order to show joint possession you use -'s with the last noun only but to show individual possession you use -'s with all nouns. Unlike in possessives, the apostrophe takes the place of missing letters in contraction. For example, it's for it is and can't for can.
not. You can also use it to move the omission of the first two digits of a year, as in the class of '96.

In Stone and Bell’s Prose Style: A Handbook for Writers, they agree with Diana Hacker in using 's for the singular nouns and only an apostrophe for the plural nouns. They too suggest taking the of form if you are unsure of the noun being possessive. According to Stone and Bell, there is no apostrophe used in the possessive pronouns his, hers, its, our, yours, their, and whose. Many errors are made with its and it’s, but just remember that it’s means it or it has. Despite the fact that its may be a possessive, as in Every tree has its leaves, it contains no apostrophe. Diana Hacker and Stone and Bell also agree on apostrophe taking the place of missing letters for contractions.

The Purdue Owl also agrees with Hacker, Stone, and Bell in turning the phrase around and making it an of form of the phrase in order to see if you need to make a possessive. It also agrees with them with rules such as:

- add 's to the singular form of the word even if it ends in -s
- add 's to the plural forms that do not end in -s
- add only ‘ to the end of the plural nouns that end in -s
- add 's to the end of compound words
- add 's to the last noun to show joint possession

It says in the Purdue Owl that if the noun after of is a building, an object, or a group of furniture, then there is no need for an apostrophe.

Incorrect usage of an apostrophe:
The group made it’s decision.

Correct usage of an apostrophe:
The group made its decision.

This student made no more errors with respect to possessives and contractions for the remainder of the semester; however, she did not attempt to engage in any debate concerning that particular usage. The following example, on the comma splice, shows what I really hope students will do with their write-ups:

Example 2 — Student Write-Up on Comma Splice

All of my resources agree that a comma splice is a run-on sentence in which two or more independent clauses are combined with a comma, but without a coordinating conjunction. An independent clause is a group of words that can be punctuated as a sentence and at a minimum must contain a subject and verb. The seven coordinating conjunctions in English are and, but, or, nor, for, so, and yet.

If a comma connects two independent clauses, and there is no coordinating conjunction accompanying it, you have a comma splice. Yet there is a great deal of debate over what justifies the use of a comma splice. The two main uses are when the independent clauses are short and have similar structures or when they are in contrast to each other. According to Kenneth G. Wilson in The Columbia Guide to Standard American English, there is “a British style of punctuating linked independent clauses, distinguishing between short clauses and long ones, and using commas between short ones, where most American stylebooks and editors would insist on semicolons, regardless of length of clauses.” Most editors follow the American rule, so comma splices are rarely used in print. Diana Hacker uses the Henry David Thoreau quote, “The pleasures of the intellect are permanent, the pleasures of the heart are transitory” to illustrate that while this is certainly a comma splice, the way Thoreau contrasted the independent clauses helps to punch home the point of the sentence thereby making the use of a comma splice acceptable. [See www.diana hacker.com/bedhandbook; see Comma Splice under Language Debates.] While most people shun the comma splice as a cardinal sin of writing, if used carefully it can be a good tool for the writer, as long as it doesn’t confuse the reader.

For example, the comma splice marked in my paper is “I wasn’t there to meet-and-greet; I was there for Mike.” Following the comma splice rule, the sentence would be more correct as “I wasn’t there to meet and greet; I was there for Mike.” When I was editing the paper, I knew there was a grammatical problem with that sentence, but I made the choice to leave the comma in because of the way I wanted the sentence to flow.

This student has not only gained a complete grasp of comma usage, but he also fully understands the complexity of the convention, including differences between usage on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. Furthermore, he now knows why I pointed out the comma splice to him on his paper, and he is even
arguing for leaving the “error” in his writing. That is what I want students to be able to do. Not all write-up assignments are so successful, however. Consider the following example on passive/active voice:

**Example 3—Student Write-Up on Passive/Active Voice**

The passive voice is caused by shifting the stress of ones doing to what is being done. If one wants to make ones paper more interesting, according to the Purdue OWL, one should try to avoid the use of the verb to be when it is unnecessary.

The passive voice is not always a bad thing, it is effective in scientific paper since it will give the appearance that one is not biased by ones emotional investment in ones topic. In order for one to avoid the passive voice, one should strive to shift the stress to what one is doing. For example one could say: “It was dished out by the nymphs.” (Gordon 1993, 52). To change this sentence into the active voice one simply should remove the verb “was” and then place the subject (the nymphs) at the start of ones sentence and move the pronoun (it) to the end of the sentence. If the passive voice is overused, according to the Purdue OWL, ones paper may become too dull and the reader would lose interest. If one would like to see an example of how the passive voice would make ones paper dull or boring, one should reread this paper.

While this is a clever treatment of passive voice, it did not have the intended effect, as this student went on to actually increase his use of passive voice on the next essay. But he is not alone. Instances of passive voice often increase among students who write

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**Write-Up Assignments**

After each of your essays, you will be tasked with writing a brief paper on some topic of grammar or mechanics, for example, comma splice. These write-ups are to be one page (approximately 250 words) in length and are due one week after they are assigned.

In each write-up, you will study and analyze three sources regarding the assigned topic. Those three sources are:

1. *A Pocket Style Manual* by Diana Hacker (one of your required textbooks)
2. The Purdue OWL (On-Line Writing Laboratory) at http://owl.english.purdue.edu
3. A source of your own choosing.

This source must be a book or a journal article. For books, I would recommend using something from the following Dewey decimal classifications in the library:

PE 1075 - PE 1112 (grammar)
PE 1128 (grammar for ELL students)
PE 1365 (English syntax)

However, you are not limited to these books. If you already have *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White at home — fine. If you would like to purchase another excellent handbook, I would recommend *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams, but you should by no means feel that you have to purchase another book.

If you would like to use a journal article, I would recommend searching the library catalog for an article that pertains to your assigned topic.

In each write-up, I want you to explore the limits and freedoms of that particular usage. Remember, grammar and mechanics are matters of convention. As you analyze each source, compare and contrast it with the other two sources. On what points do they agree? On what points do they differ? If you come to terminology you do not understand, for example, *independent clause*, then research, analyze, and write about that as well until you have a complete and thorough understanding of the assigned topic. Finally, give at least one example of incorrect usage, according to your own research, and correct it.
about that particular style error. Or is it really an error? This question will be addressed in the interpretation that follows.

**Interpretation**

I have found that, for the most part, metawriting via the write-up assignment decreases specific errors in subsequent writing because it allows students the opportunity to intellectualize about a grammatical/mechanical topic. They read about the topic in three separate sources, compare and contrast their readings, write up their findings, and then provide examples of both incorrect and corrected usage. Maybe more than anything, metawriting helps writers to notice errors in their own writing. Consider one student’s journal entry on her write-up assignments:

_The write-ups are helpful for me. Once I have written one I can think about it during my papers. I have noticed that I write slower, pay more attention and edit better. Overall I feel that they have helped._

Furthermore, write-up assignments are an effective tool given the constraints of the college composition course, a course in which we tend to think we do not have time to discuss grammar and mechanics. Consider this journal entry:

_I think the write-up assignments are really easy. I do admit that some of them were boring but I learned a few things writing them, especially with my first one, possessives and contractions. My other two were passive/active voice and pronoun case (who/whom). They were a good way to learn about something without wasting so much time on an actual lesson._

The implication is that these students now understand specific grammatical/mechanical topics and are not simply employing avoidance tactics, in which they choose only “safe” grammatical constructs, in subsequent writings.

I wish I could claim complete success, but I cannot. One writer whose work I thoroughly enjoyed elected from the outset to disengage from the assignment, suffering whatever consequences would arise from that decision (in fact, his grade dropped from A to A- as a result). Consider this example (actually compiled from two separate journal entries):

_The write-ups suck. Well I imagine they would suck if I were to do them. I have not done any of them because I hate grammar. Grammar is stupid. I can articulate my thoughts in a manner so that other people can understand them. That is good enough for me. It is funny when you use grammar incorrectly on purpose. For example: try replacing what for that in your daily speech. It is funny. My friends and I call this “Gorilla Grammar.” It is tricky to write about writing._

It’s true: it is tricky to write about writing. I never said metawriting would be easy; I only claimed it is an effective tool for learning grammar and mechanics. And while this writer has a fairly good handle on grammar and mechanics already, I feel his command of conventions would be better still if he would intellectualize them—read about them and write about them. His philosophy on grammar is certainly valid, though I would like to hear more about just what he means by “Gorilla Grammar.” In the papers he has submitted for class, I have not noticed that he substitutes what for that.

Other students, however, were more cooperative, though their write-ups did not in every case lead to mastery of the convention. As I have said, this lack of carryover has been particularly true of students who have written about passive/active voice. But in looking more closely at student essays in which the use of passive constructions increased after a write-up assignment on that topic, I found that many were in paraphrases in which the original writers were undoubtedly using passive voice themselves. Also, student essay topics became progressively more “scholarly” as the semester proceeded, a progression that inevitably, for good or bad, encouraged students to adopt a more scholarly voice, a voice often characterized by passive constructions. When students read a lot in a particular genre, they naturally internalize the syntax of what they are reading; thus, they inadvertently learn to use passive constructions while reading scholarly writing. It is interesting that we encourage students to write in the active voice while requiring them to read so much material written in the passive voice. Nonetheless, I have come to believe that the experience of intellectualizing grammar and mechanics is a valuable one, even if it does not seem to work as well on passive and active voice.

**Conclusion**

I believe there are two benefits to the use of metawriting about grammar and mechanics in the college composition classroom: 1) it significantly reduces specific errors in students’ subsequent writing; and 2) the write-up assignment increases the use of writing resources such as style guides and handbooks.
On the Use of Metawriting

continued from page 27

The implication is that postsecondary composition courses would benefit from the incorporation of some form of write-up assignment, adapted, of course, by each instructor to meet her own requirements and the needs of her students. I believe the most successful component of the write-up assignment is the requirement to research, then compare and contrast, grammatical/mechanical topics in three separate sources. This forces students to analyze what they are reading and does not let them merely paraphrase (or worse, copy) one source directly into their write-up without any real consideration of its meaning. The next most successful component of the write-up assignment is the requirement of both incorrect and corrected examples, which forces students to see what is “wrong” with a sentence and fix it — precisely what we want them to learn to do in their own writing.

I believe the metawriting concept may be adapted to primary and secondary settings, but I leave that to other experts. As my teaching background is entirely at the postsecondary level, I am unaware of the extent to which younger writers can be expected to intellectualize grammar and mechanics.

Obviously, further research is necessary. The metawriting concept calls for a broad study of college students, one that includes more subjects and utilizes a rigorous data collection strategy. Perhaps more importantly, the concept calls for a study of primary and secondary level students to find out just how much intellectualizing about grammar and mechanics they are capable of. We may be surprised. Writing to learn has proven to be one of the most effective pedagogical tools to come out of the twentieth century. I believe metawriting may be one of the most effective tools in the twenty-first.

References


Purdue OWL. (On-Line Writing Laboratory) http://owl.english.purdue.edu


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