

The Weekly Edit: An Attempt To Improve Students' Proofreading Skills

by
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This past summer I did some serious thinking about a common lament of English teachers at all levels: Whatever happened to the skill of proofreading? Why do we keep seeing the same kinds of simple (yes, most of them really are simple) errors in students' writing assignments? More importantly, could anything be done during the upcoming school year in my classroom to improve the situation?

Through the years I have had many of my junior high school students say, "If my ideas are good, why does all this other stuff matter?" My customary reply has been to try to explain that there are real differences between spoken and written language, and that "all this other stuff" can sometimes detract greatly from good ideas in writing. I know that there are English teachers who have discontinued teaching spelling, punctuation, and grammar (at least in a direct way), but I am not one of them. I do not believe that most students will learn these things through an osmosis-like exposure to the printed word.

Nevertheless, I was still faced with the dilemma of proofreading — or rather the lack of it — by my students. Was it happening because they really didn't have a good understanding of how to go about it, or was it because they simply weren't taking the time to do it? I suspected that it was probably a combination of both. Therefore, I had to come up with an idea that would provide for the direct application of previously learned (?) skills on a regular basis.

As I considered the matter further, several points about any activity I might decide upon came quickly to the forefront. First, it had to be something that could easily be incorporated into an already overloaded curriculum. Second, it had to provide students with practice aimed at improving the kinds of errors I was tired of seeing in their writing. Third, it had to be something all of us could live with for an entire school year, allowing for minor adjustments if necessary. I wanted my students to view this as a meaningful activity and one that could help them gain points (both literally and figuratively) with other teachers who also require them to write, I am happy to say, on a regular basis. In addition, from a purely selfish standpoint, anyone who teaches six classes a day and has four preparations is not looking for a big increase in terms of paper work, so the activity had to also be workable for me.

I next made a list of the kinds of writing errors I felt my students should be able to eliminate between the rough and final draft stages *if* they were willing to take the time to do it. My list contained the following:

spelling in general
 homonyms - to/too/two, there/their/they're, and other culprits
 capitalization - not a big problem at the jr. high level, but not something to ignore, either
 punctuation
 sentence fragments and run-ons
 sentences that don't make sense because of awkward phrasing, words left out, etc.

With this list in mind, I devised The Weekly Edit. I realize that this is probably not the most exciting title in the world, but it does have a certain journalistic flavor, and it definitely beats The Weekly Proofreading. Each Monday my students receive a Weekly Edit paragraph. It is their job to correct all the errors — using the original sheet, which is triple-spaced, as their rough draft — and then to hand in a perfectly edited version — written in ink on their own paper — by Wednesday. I read them, circle any remaining errors, assign a number grade (explained below), and return their papers to them on Friday. Using an overhead projector, I then spend about five minutes of class time to explain, reinforce, and answer any questions (or gripes) students may have about that week's assignment. The following Monday we begin again with a new paragraph.

I try to prepare about eight weeks' worth of paragraphs at a time (roughly enough for one grading period), since there is usually at least one "short" week per quarter because of vacation breaks of various sorts. I cleverly decided to use different paragraphs for my eighth and ninth grade classes, figuring that if the activity is one I decide to continue using next year, I won't have to scramble for other sets of paragraphs at that time. Occasionally the examples I use are entirely of my own creation, but most of the time I simply "borrow" paragraphs found in the many textbook examination copies I've accumulated over the past fifteen years of teaching. I do have to insert the errors, of course, but that isn't difficult, and sometimes my less-than-perfect typing invents a few for me as well. I always include a variety of mistakes in each paragraph. They range from the very simple (a leap-off-the-page mis-spelled word, a sentence not beginning with a capital letter, or a question mark where a period obviously belongs) to the more complex (a word left out of a sentence, an introductory adverb clause masquerading as a complete sentence, or half a set of quotation marks). Sometimes I include a sentence that really doesn't have much to do with the rest of the paragraph just to see if they're paying attention. I am very deliberate about my choice of errors, and I especially try to incorporate examples of mistakes that have appeared in other writing assignments done during the course of the year.

I had insisted to myself from the outset that I was going to keep this activity as simple as possible for all of us, and that had to include grading. At the beginning of the year I provided my students with what I thought was a fair rationale for The Weekly Edit, and they seemed to buy it. I explained that each week's assignment would be worth ten points. After all, this wasn't to be a major creative endeavor on their part. A perfectly edited paragraph would earn them ten points, a paragraph containing one to five errors would earn five points, and if they handed in something still containing more than five

mistakes, they'd get a zero on the assignment for that week. We were working for accuracy — right?

About three weeks into the school year I detected definite rumblings in the ranks (jr. high students are not very subtle) concerning my "simplified" grading system. Those who had made only one mistake, for example, considered themselves above those who had made five. One student, who had received a "0" two weeks in a row for six mistakes, stated flatly: "At least I did my assignment! Shouldn't that be worth *something*? Maybe I'll just quit doing these dumb things if I'm not going to get any credit for trying!" I told them that I'd do some thinking about it over the weekend because I could see their point of view (and I really could).

The following Monday I announced these revisions in the grading system for The Weekly Edit assignments:

Points Earned	If
10	perfect
8	1 error
5	2-5 errors
2	more than 5 errors but submitted on time
0	not turned in

I am still using these guidelines and will continue to do so for the rest of the year. My students, for the most part, are also satisfied. The correcting takes less time than I thought it might, since all I do is read, circle, and score. Comments are made when papers are returned on Friday. This activity is, it must be remembered, only a very small part of the curriculum I cover.

My main objective for trying this activity, of course, was to improve students' proofreading skills. Has it? My answer as I write this mid-way through the school year is an unqualified "Maybe." There still aren't very many 10's earned each week, but there are more than when we started. Several students who used to get 5's are earning 8's, and not many only get a 2 anymore. I do have one ninth-grader who has yet to turn in a paragraph, but then he hasn't bothered to submit much else this year, either. As far as noticeable improvement in their other regular writing assignments, I have seen some. I hope it will continue. I am not expecting an overnight success.

Two very good things have resulted from this endeavor, however. Parental support has been great, and what teacher can't use that these days? One mother commented at conference time: "So *this* is what my daughter has been complaining about! She's not getting any more sympathy from me. This is a good idea. Keep it up." More importantly, though, I think my students do have a clearer understanding of what proofreading involves. It does not replace any of the other steps in the writing process, nor can it cover up poorly developed ideas. It does take time, and it is picky work. I am quite sure that not one of them is even remotely considering a future as a professional proof-reader, but my hope is that they will continue to use some of the techniques learned in my classroom in the years to come.