WRITING IS NOT SPEAKING: A KEY TO EFFICIENT EDITING

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Certainly editing, if we take editing to mean broadly the recognition and correction of errors at all stages of the writing process, is a vital aspect of writing. It is not the only aspect of writing, of course, but good writing does not result unless error recognition occurs at some stage in the writing process. To make an artificial but useful distinction, I see editing as an analytic activity and writing as a synthetic activity. Ultimately the teacher of writing must be a teacher of synthesis, of putting together, rather than of analysis, of breaking down. Still, though writing is not merely error recognition, it seems sensible to teach the important analytic process of editing in a time- and cost-effective manner.

Though they taught me many things well, my English teachers did not teach me to edit efficiently. They pointed out possible errors and corrected my mistakes, but they did not teach me how to recognize errors efficiently. And, from what I have seen in my own teaching career, this failure to teach editing efficiency is not a matter of individual teaching failures, but of a system-wide failure. Although the underlying causes of writing difficulty are alluded to in virtually every composition handbook, we are usually only tangentially aware of them. Thus we have generally failed to point out to teachers and students, to ourselves and to our students, these underlying causes of writing difficulty and, consequently, have made erratic and ineffectual efforts at improving editing.

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I will not pretend that these contentions are at all original. The general concept of error-recognition efficiency is at least as old as the so-called Functional Grammarians of the 1920s. Further, there is considerable recent research on particular causes of writing difficulty, research which I will not review here. My purpose is simply to restate, and to restate simply, the bases for writing difficulties and to offer some practical advice, taken from my own experience, on improving error recognition.

The central problem is that writing is not speaking. Most writing problems can be systematically derived from this fundamental proposition. We could almost predict the difficulties that the translation of material from one medium, the oral, to another, the written, would entail based on the particular differences between these media. We could certainly establish that the "write-as-you-speak" dictum gives useful advice only in limited situations.

The differences between speaking and writing are of two sorts: sensory differences and situational differences. Speaking depends, obviously, on the oral dimension — on sound. Writing depends on the visual dimension — on sight. This difference of sensory dimension — the fact that writing is words on papers, not sounds in air — accounts directly for the difficulties we encounter in spelling and punctuation. Situational differences are rather more complex, but basically they arise from the contrast between the informality of speech and the formality of writing. A host of considerations concerning such elements as permanence, the nature of feedback, the possibilities of review and correction, the nature of the audience, and so forth affect our expectations about spoken and written communication.

Having established the differences between speech and writing as the bases for writing difficulties, we may turn again to efficient error recognition. Such recognition requires that we concentrate on applying our speech-to-writing translation theory to high-frequency errors. There are so many possible difficulties in writing, and so many rules to deal with them, that very few of us can manage to keep track of either the problems or the rules, and it is simply not time- and cost-effective to try to teach our students to deal with all possible problems. Spending time and effort on a problem that appears only occasionally means the sacrifice of time and effort on a high-frequency problem, one for which student awareness and corrective capacity would pay repeated

dividends. And too many rules intimidate our students anyway. We simply must decide which problems are worth trying to eradicate and which troubles and trends are not worth battling.

Once we have established our individual problem-fighting priorities based on the capacities of the group with which we are dealing, we should adopt a "research" orientation. When proofreading is demanded of them, students should usually be allowed to look things up. Of course, on those problems for which we feel correction should be automatic, we may wish to make exceptions. But our general intention should be to alert students to the kinds of problems, both general and specific, that they may encounter, so that, though they may not be able to make a correction, they can at least recognize the need for one.

The following list arranges a number of the more common categories of what may be called stylistic problems (as opposed to problems of larger structures or of substance). These areas are arranged roughly according to the frequency with which I have met them in teaching my composition classes, and, of course, this arrangement should not be taken as universally applicable. I have indicated the underlying reason for a particular category's appearance on the list, that is, whether the category involves problems derived from writing's visual dimension or problems derived from writing's formality dimension. I have also appended a column of more specific comments, explanations, and recommendations.

Category
Dimension

1. **Spelling**
   Visual

   This category may include numbers, capitalization, and hyphenation. Nothing so gives the appearance of illiteracy as misspelling. We are faced with (1) the well-known and extensive inconsistencies of the English spelling system and (2) consequent homonyms (*Rome, roam*) and other sound-alikes (*its, it's; their, there, they're*). The best method seems to be to focus on the most frequently misspelled terms (especially the *to, too, two* sort) and really eliminate them and then to have students

practice looking words up and keeping lists of their individual problem terms.

2. **Word Choice**
   Formality
   This broad category includes such matters as usage, redundancy, wordiness, emphasis, and idiom and evidences all the problems of expectations concerning writing. If we write what we hear, we repeat cliches, fail to spot redundancy, favor slang, and so forth. Counter-problems: Hypercorrection ("to John and I"), grandiloquence, and poetic language. A further note: Many word choice problems are not the result of translation into writing but would occur regardless of the medium involved (for example, "most unique"). Advice to all: Use a good dictionary and find good writing models.

3. **Comma**
   Visual
   Punctuation is a novel system to speakers since the spoken language uses stress, pitch, and juncture, not periods and commas, to signal a variety of meanings. Not only do writing and speech handle similar meanings differently, but marks of punctuation indicate some relationships not clearly indicated by intonation — witness the complicated relationships signaled by colons and semi-colons.

4. **Combining sentences**
   Visual
   Essentially this is a problem of recognizing a punctuation problem. We usually do not say "period" or "question mark" to end our spoken sentences.

5. **Pronouns**
   Formality
   This is one of many consistency problems that the formality dimension imposes. Subordinate problems include person, number, gender, and case problems. Concentration on such perennial problem areas as collective nouns, *everyone . . . their, who/whom,* and possessive-before-gerund seems to be worthwhile.

6. **Fragments**
   Formality
   The write-as-you-speak dictum fails most clearly here. A major difficulty is that some fragments are acceptable in writing, and, with no absolute no-fragment rule, students are confused.
7. **Subject-Verb Agreement**
   Formality
   Another consistency problem. Concentrate on the collective noun, *there is, none* (*some of,* etc.), and compound subject difficulties.
8. **Other punctuation marks**
   Visual
   The basic problem is discussed in 1, 3, and 4. Note, for instance, how the apostrophe — entirely unnecessary in speech — creates a plural versus possessive conflict.
9. **Misplaced modifiers**
   Formality
   Despite the many comic examples available in our textbooks, the most frequent problem with modifiers is that what we clearly and easily understand in speech we do not accept as being sufficiently careful in writing.
10. **Parallelism**
    Formality
    Parallelism is, of course, rare in conversation and must be taught. Parallelism involves both a negative aspect (students must be warned against beginning a parallel structure and failing to complete it) and a positive one (students should see how effective occasional parallelism can be). The wide-ranging consistency category obviously includes parallelism.
11. **Tense and voice consistency**
    Formality
    Two more of the many consistency problems that nag writers but seldom bother speakers. Not terribly common.
12. **Passive and *There is/are constructions***
    Formality?
    Such constructions are common and widely accepted in speech and writing. Eliminating them

is, at best, stylistic polishing, surely not a principal concern in most courses.

Our list is merely a guide to priorities in problem avoidance. It is geared to problems at the sentence level, not to larger structures. It is based on "defensive" writing strategies, on an eliminate-the-negative approach to writing — an approach calculated to produce the efficient teaching of writing competence, not to produce literary excellence. This "adequacy" approach, with a somewhat different method of arranging frequently-encountered problems, is found in Teresa Ferster Galzier's *The Least You Should Know about English* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981).

Such a text and, more importantly, such an approach may be scoffed at by more "creative" schools of writing instruction — and may be legitimately challenged as too narrow in focus in stressing analytical editing skills at the expense of synthetic writing skills. But, if complemented by a pedagogy that develops and sustains the writing process, an approach that recognizes the causes of writing difficulties and encourages editing efficiency based on that recognition can help to remedy the widespread writing ills that plague us. The more confident our students are of their editing, the more effective their writing will be. Loosed from an oppressive fear of minor errors, they will be able to attend to the really important writing tasks, to the thinking, creating, and structuring that make for good prose.