

# MIKE'S HANDY HINTS FOR IMPROVING STUDENT WRITING

## Before Your Students Write

- 1) **Strongly** encourage rough drafts. Consider placing a line in your TA syllabus telling students that if they want to do well your in your class, they should write rough drafts. You may worry that reading drafts will be too much work, but, believe me, no matter how hard you encourage your students to write drafts, only 1/5 to 1/4 of them will do it. Besides, giving students feedback on drafts is undoubtedly one of the best ways to help them improve their writing.
- 2) Hold an extra office hour before a paper is due to look at students' thesis statements and outlines. Not only will this help your students, but it will earn you a small amount of brownie points. Don't bother to schedule more than one extra office hour since few people will show up.
- 3) Outline your expectations the week before a paper is due. Use a couple minutes of class time to remind students that their essays should contain a thesis statement, topic sentences, and citations. This may seem silly, but it can markedly raise the quality of essays you receive, especially from a class composed primarily of freshmen.
- 4) If you are TAing a writing-intensive class, consider spending a few minutes of section time discussing what makes a good thesis paragraph . Evaluating student work from previous years is usually the best plan.

## While You Grade Essays

- 1) Keep marginal comments to a minimum. Few students, in my experience, read marginalia carefully. Marginal comments should rarely be longer than a sentence and should generally be just a few words (i.e. "good point, but needed additional evidence," "could've elaborated here," "citation?").
- 2) Note all grammatical errors, but don't dwell on them.
- 3) Use positive comments, such as "good use of evidence" and "strong topic sentence," liberally. If the student has really done something well, let them know it. Praise is as useful a pedagogical tool as criticism.
- 4) Write one to two paragraphs of final comments at the end of essay. Always try to begin your comments by observing something the student did well, but don't pull your punches in this section. On even the finest essays, note ways in which the student's writing and analysis could have been strengthened.

## After You've Graded the Monsters

- 1) **Never** discuss grades with unhappy students right after you've handed back a batch of essays. Do, however, encourage students to see you later to discuss their grade and ways to improve. Students will generally use such conferences to tell you that your grading is "so unfair"; your job is to turn the discussion into a learning experience by emphasizing what the student can do to improve their writing (and earn higher marks in the future).
- 2) Spend a few minutes of section time discussing problems that occurred in many students' essays. (Weak thesis paragraphs, passive verbs, and insufficient evidence are the usual suspects.)

## HOW TO DECIPHER MICHAEL'S PROOFREADING MARKS

<u>Mark</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Example of Error</u>	<u>Example of Correction</u>
p.v.	Unnecessary passive verb	Cook's ship <u>was</u> seen as an island, an enchanted salmon, and a "spirit thing."	The Nootkas <u>saw</u> Cook's ship as . . .
p.t.	Use past tense	Cook <u>thinks</u> the Nootkas <u>are</u> foolish, unskilled traders.	Cook <u>thought</u> the Nootkas <u>were</u> foolish . . . [Note, however, that one uses the present tense to refer to documents which still exist. (i.e. Cook's journals <u>depict</u> the Nootkas as foolish . . . )
//	Construction is not parallel	Cook valued his duty to his nation, business and trade, and to herald the coming of English civilization.	Cook came to fulfill his duty to his nation, to seek business and trade, and to herald the coming of . . .
S.i.	Split infinitive	Cook traveled on the starship <i>Enterprise</i> , whose five year mission was to seek new life, . . . , <u>to boldly go</u> where no one had gone before.	. . . to seek new life, <u>to go boldly</u> where no one had gone before.

### RELATIVELY SELF-EXPLANATORY MARKS

sp.	Spelling	r/o	Run-on sentence
wc	Word choice	frag.	Sentence fragment
∧	Insert	—	Omit word or phrase
awk.	Awkwardly phrased	o	Omit punctuation
cont.	Do not use contractions in formal papers	S/V agr.	Subject and verb do not agree
e/ob.	Elaborate	rep.	Repetitious