THE TOOLBOX

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Instructors

HOW MICRO-EDITING IMPROVES OUTCOMES IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING CLASSES

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Instructors who teach first-year writing courses, especially at the community college level, regularly deal with students who will not or cannot properly edit and revise their work. These students' predisposition is often to look at an assignment, reflect on it briefly, open a blank document on their computer, dash off a draft, and let it stand regardless of how underdeveloped it might be.

Why is first-year student writing so underdeveloped? It could be that these students have not been given proper instruction about the writing process in earlier schooling; maybe their high school teachers were too overwhelmed preparing them for standardized tests and did not have time to explain the power of prewriting, multiple drafts, and careful editing and revising. There is also the strong possibility that many of these students might have been away from formal schooling for some time. Whatever the reason, first-year writing instructors are often left to pick up the pieces and help their students become better writers.

Most seasoned writing instructors are aware of research that tells us, "Early intervention in first-year courses [built] around essay writing helps students transition into university and increases chances for student success" (Riddell, 2015, p. 80). Additional research shows students devote little time to editing and revising their written work (Christiansen, 1990).

To facilitate this process, Christiansen (1990) says it is important for instructors to clearly communicate the intended outcomes for their writing assignments. This specificity will help students identify and correct their own writing weaknesses. Additionally, as a way to help students improve their writing skills, Grünke and Leonard-Zabel (2015) advocate for explicit teaching strategies and a simplified approach to the basic skills of writing. One way to simplify the editing and revising process is through micro-editing, a method that works well with struggling, novice, and reluctant writers.

> "Writing without revising is the literary equivalent of waltzing gaily out of the house in your underwear.
>
> — Patricia Fuller, American author

Micro-Editing: Step by Step

To begin, students are instructed to bring a printed rough draft of their assignment to class. They should also bring highlighters of assorted colors, a red pen, and sticky notes (or, perhaps, these can be supplied). Students are then instructed to spread out their drafts in front of them as they begin the editing process:

» Students begin by marking the most basic formatting issues:

  » Instruct students to highlight, for example, the heading (i.e., their name, their instructor's name, the course, and date) of the paper.

  » Discuss how to title academic writing.

  » Ask students to check whether their page numbers are correct.

» Students continue to mark each element as the instructor tells them, using an established and clear set of coded marks (see Figure 1). Instructions may include the following, for example:

  » place brackets around the introduction;

  » underline the thesis statement twice for emphasis;

  » highlight in-text citations in a second color;

  » circle transitions in red;

  » place a check mark next to each piece of evidence; and

  » underline analysis of that piece of evidence.

» If necessary, a quick lesson could be taught about incorporating or synthesizing expert voices into the paper. For each source, students could place an asterisk next to their refutation or parentheses around the conclusion they reach.

» Finally, students might be instructed to cross-out any jargon, slang, abbreviations, and otherwise inappropriate or weak (as determined by the instructor) words.

As the students make these marks, they should get a sense of how well they have met the assignment's criteria and may even want to make notes about where and how to make improvements. This exercise takes time, so it is important that students have room to work, that the instructor circulates the room, and that quick lectures are given when students encounter a problem. For example, if they are having trouble finding their warrants (i.e., a statement about the topic that readers would accept without proof), the process would stop for remediation. If students need help with organization, flow, phraseology, or in-text citations, the process would stop to immediately address these issues. Riddell (2015) says, "This approach urges students to be self-reflective and aware of the processes of writing and argumentation, and encourages [them] to be creative problem solvers as they systematically approach the task of developing, writing, and revising an essay" (p. 85). Applying these marks makes the process real and connected for these novice writers. It also makes them confront these composition protocols in a visceral way that other methods might not.

Figure 1

A Sample Micro-edited Paper
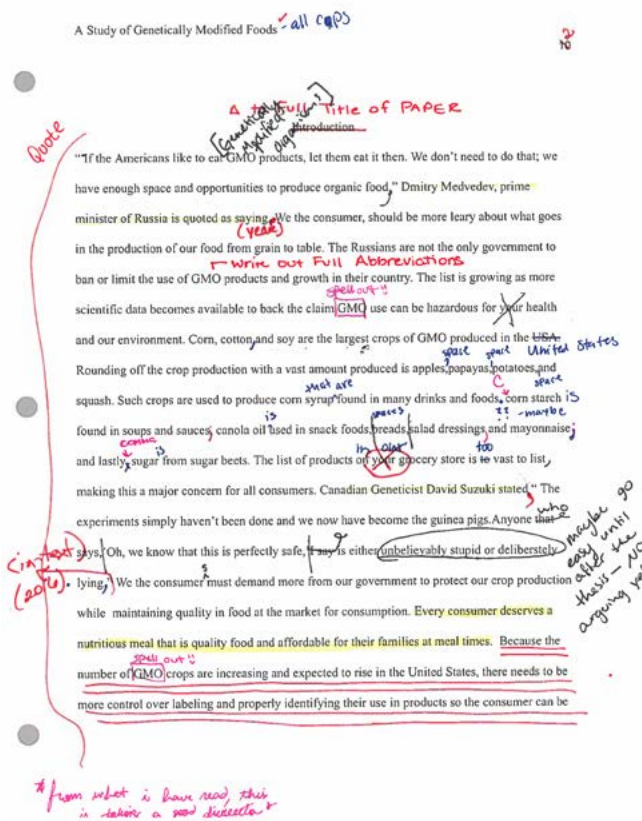
Another advantage of micro-editing is the instructor can easily glance around the classroom, see the students' marks, and determine if they are on target or in need of assistance; this is especially useful in larger classes where individual assistance is more challenging. Sometimes a short video can clear up the matter, or maybe old-fashioned board work is the answer. Students may need to look at a handout, refer to their textbook, or perform a quick Internet search to clarify a problem area. This practice creates what Riddell calls the "feedback loop" (2015), and research indicates that creating these feedback loops increases "students' metacognitive awareness, improves the quality of written work, encourages active learning, and develops capacities for life-long learning" (Riddell, 2015, p. 81).

As the students continue to mark up their work, they can see what they have done wrong and what they have done right. Too often instructors focus on the negative—where students are failing—rather than letting them know they are on the right track. Students can build upon their successes. During micro-editing, students can stop and jot down ideas, corrections, and improvements on sticky notes while they are in the moment. This recursive instruction is where real learning takes place—when students are "live" in their thinking and writing process. This metacognitive awareness is not fully present during the drafting process—when students are creating—but comes when they are in what Christiansen (1990) calls the "self-criticism and self-appraisal" stage of the writing process (p. 11). Here they are reflecting, which occurs in a different part of the brain than writing. For this reason, students need to better understand that they should not combine drafting and editing/revising into one task.

Another advantage of micro-editing is it addresses students with various learning styles. Visual learners see the marks, auditory learners hear the directions, and tactile learners make the marks, thus connecting with each type of student. In fact, the combination of employing these learning preferences is what makes this method so successful.

When the micro-editing process is complete, students should have a heavily edited paper filled with marks, scratch-outs, circles, lines, arrows, notes, and more; these are all clear, specific, understandable markers for how the draft can be improved. Additionally, after students have seen the value of micro-editing, they are more likely to practice separating the drafting and revising parts of the process, thus strengthening their writing skills during both; this is demonstrated by the rise in prep work shown in future drafts. The result is two-fold: This method encourages students to consider their deficiencies and mistakes, but perhaps more importantly micro-editing provides students with a tangible, user-friendly model for reworking their writing in the future.

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