

Addressing Error

1. Prioritize your concerns. It makes sense to address larger issues of the development and organization of ideas before addressing matters of error. Explain to students what your priorities are and why you have decided to respond in this way.
2. View errors as a sign of learning. Errors may seem to indicate a lack of seriousness or commitment, but they are likely to occur even when students have worked quite diligently and carefully on their writing. Errors are inevitable in the process of acquiring an additional language (both English and the academic language of the course).
3. Provide multiple opportunities for informal writing before a formal paper is due. Errors may occur because of the complexity of issues students are trying to juggle while writing their papers. The more difficult and unfamiliar the task, the more likely the syntax will fall apart. The process of writing in stages drafting papers can promote the kind of fluency and confidence that can lead to fewer errors.
4. Provide in-class time for proofreading, at least once. Students need to learn the literate behavior of rereading for "performance errors": errors that are slips that students can control once they can focus on them. Using part of one class period to allow students to edit their papers before handing them in provides this learning opportunity.
5. Guide students to read their texts aloud on their own. What students have written (as an error) is not necessarily the way they would speak it. Written errors are often corrected by students when they have an opportunity to read their texts aloud.
6. Avoid shorthand markings. Many errors indicate what a student doesn't yet understand, or they reveal a partial or erroneous understanding. But these errors, as problematic as they seem, are usually systematic and logically derived. Consequently, corrective feedback rarely works when the feedback takes the form of inexplicit, vague, coded, or abbreviated marks or comments (e.g., "frag," "verb tense," "comma splice"). Shorthand markings make sense only if the writer already knows the way the grammar works. They don't address the hypotheses that students have formulated.
7. Limit the number and type of errors you address. Less is more. Rather than trying to address or correct all errors, which is likely to overwhelm both you and the students, read through a student's text and try to locate prominent or recurring patterns of error and help students understand those.
8. Evaluate students' work over time. It helps to have a long view on students' increasing control of language. Rather than worrying about every text and the errors that have yet to be addressed, look at a student's work over time to get a sense of and appreciation for the progress a student has made.