

Minimal Marking: A Sane Method for Dealing with Errors

Minimal marking allows students to work toward their goals of writing that is clean and error free. While I do not allow sentence-level errors (or their correction) to affect the project's evaluation, students cannot receive credit for completing the project until the minimal marking has been completed. I remind students that errors do have an effect on readers. The minimal marking process helps students recognize, diagnose, and correct their own typical errors, without overburdening the instructor or overwhelming students by marking every error in a project. It also reduces the impatience instructors generally feel when they encounter students' errors repeatedly throughout the work.

The teacher's process:

1. Bracket a section of the student's work, usually from 2 paragraphs up to a page, that is fairly representative. I usually do not use either the first or last page unless the piece is short.
2. Read that section closely for sentence-level errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. In the margin next to each line of that section, put a check mark for each sentence-level error in that line. I usually also put the number of the main section of the style handbook for the class next to the check mark, to help students locate the general source of the error (for example, punctuation). To make this reference work easier, I have photocopied the table of contents of the style handbook to refer to as I am doing the minimal marking. The style handbook reference number also makes it easier for me to remember which problems I've marked when students return their corrections.
3. Either before or after minimal marking, I make the usual comments on the ideas, reasoning, organization, supporting evidence, and so on for the project as a whole. In either case, I am much less impatient about the errors I encounter, since I can disregard them at that point. If you are grading the project, you will probably want to record the grade for the project in pencil, to be inked when the student has completed the corrections.
4. Return the project to the student, together with the student handout, below, and assign the minimal marking corrections.
5. When the student returns the corrections together with the original page, you can quickly check to be sure all of the corrections have been successfully made, and credit the project. This takes me less than 5 minutes each. If the student has missed some of the corrections, simply circle the number of those sentences, and return the page for further revision.

<example of a handout for students>

Correcting Sentence-Level Errors in Revisions

When I read your revised essay, I'll first read for your ideas, logical reasoning, organization, style, and use of sources; and I'll respond in writing to what you've accomplished. Then, I'll mark off a section of your work--a paragraph, a page, sometimes more--and analyze it closely for sentence-level errors, such as grammatical, spelling, and punctuation mistakes.

I'll indicate any line in which there is a sentence-level error by putting a check in the margin. In online work you will find an asterisk at the end of each sentence that contains an error. Two checks indicate two errors. I may code one or more errors so that you can find information about the problem in the style handbook recommended for the class. The code will indicate the section of the book that will give you information about the error and how to correct it.

Once you've corrected all of your errors in the selection I've marked, I will check the corrections. When this is done, you will receive credit for the project.

Here's what you need to do:

1. If you are working with an online text, print out the text selected for corrections. Number each sentence that contains an error.
2. With the help of the recommended style handbook, identify each error and decide how to correct it.
3. On a separate piece of paper, rewrite every sentence in which there is an error. Do not write out just a part of the sentence. Write out the entire sentence, unless the only error is a misspelling; then write out the correctly spelled word. If you can't identify an error or figure out how to correct it, catch me after class or come see me during my office hours.
4. Number your new sentences to match the numbered sentences where errors were indicated.
5. Turn in both the original selection from your text, with the marked sentences, and your corrected version.

This approach to error provides you with a highly efficient strategy to reduce errors in your writing. It is efficient because you work only on your own errors. You come to recognize the kinds of errors you make and learn ways to correct them.

M. A. Syverson, adapted from Richard Haswell, "Minimal Marking," *College English*, 45, No. 6 1983