

“Getting Textual: Teaching Students to Proofread and Edit”
Chapter by Brian Huot in the text *Practice in Context: Situating the Work of Writing Teachers* (NCTE, 2002)

The following are suggested activities that can be used in a writing classroom when dealing with lower-level issues of grammar, sentence structure, and mechanics. These activities are based upon the following assumptions:

- Students should learn that proofreading and editing are part of the overall process of writing.
- Error is a complex issue (as Joseph Williams has shown us).
- Teaching students grammar outside the context of their own writing is pointless.
- Many students lack any systematic approaches to proofreading and editing.

Some approaches (arranged in order of try first to try last):

- Write It Out: Students who tend to have error problems tend to do little writing both inside and outside of class (how many students talk about writing in their “What I Did During Summer Vacation” papers?). Thus, encouraging students to write (and write a lot) can help them write their way out of errors. Find different ways to get students to write (journals, formal papers, informal papers, freewrites, response to readings, revision). Thus, the first step is to give students’ the opportunity to practice their writing.
- Responding with Correctness: When responding to grammar issues, respond to the problem with corrected language. For example, if the student writes “I has two brothers,” you can respond “This really interested me; I also have two brothers.” Past studies have shown this to be a valuable way of correcting student errors.
- Talking and Nudging: Ask the student to read his text out loud (usually, students will read a text correctly, even if the paper contains grammatical errors). As he or she reads, nudge the student and point out times when the student says something different than what is on the page (you can also have a fellow student[s] listen and do the nudging in pairs or small groups).
- The Editorial Board: At the end of a semester or unit (before students turn in final copies) put students into different groups based upon different errors you have noticed in past papers (i.e. some students work with punctuation, others with sentence structure, and others with spelling). Try to group both strong proofreaders with those that are least proficient. Then, run the papers through the different boards, looking for and marking errors. I often have students write on the top of their paper what board they want to go through first, second, and so on.
- Working with Individuals: When all else fails, teachers can schedule one-on-one time to work with the student on these issues. Again, the goal should be to help the student learn how to proofread and edit his or her text.