

Marking Student Writing

A TA Training Workshop

Student Academic Success Services



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- too general, vague, or brief (applies to positive comments, as well, e.g. “good”)
- overwhelming
- lacks guidance (no suggestions for improvement)
- focuses on only the negative
- seems unrelated to assessment criteria
- too sophisticated
- doesn't seem applicable outside of particular assignment (sometimes comments seem geared towards a 1st draft rather than a final effort)
- inconsistent (from paper to paper, from t.a. to t.a., from course to course)

Issues for Students

Marking as Writing: Understanding Purpose and Audience

Marking is a form of communication, so it is important as a writer/marker to ask yourself the following questions:

What is the purpose of my marking? What do I want to happen?

Who is my audience? What are the abilities, needs, and expectations of my students?

How can I communicate my message most effectively?

Why is achieving consistency in marking important?

Consistency between markers

- ensures that students are treated fairly
- prevents confusion among students regarding expectations and grades

Consistency within one's own marking

- allows students to build on skills and track their own progress

Marking Student Assignments

1) Guidelines

- Assignment instructions

Be familiar with the assignment and any written or verbal instructions students have received from the professor – link your feedback to these instructions.

- Rubrics

- Expectations of the department/course

Confer with the professor and other markers to establish standards and criteria for grading – determine what is expected for each assignment

- Goals and themes of the course

Be familiar with the goals and themes of the course and link feedback to these whenever possible

2) Providing Effective Commentary

- Determine how much feedback to provide – in-text commentary and corrections, summary at the end

How much feedback is enough? How much is too much?

It may be helpful to focus on only 1-3 main things that you want the student to work on so the feedback is not overwhelming .

- Determine your priorities for marking

Higher Order Concerns (HOCs)

- thesis or focus
- audience and purpose
- organization
- development

Lower Order Concerns (LOCs)

- sentence structure
- punctuation
- word choice
- spelling

- Avoid concentrating on minor concerns if you haven't addressed major concerns.
- Avoid inaccuracy – be sure you are familiar with all of the course material.
- Point out instances of strengths in the student's assignment that the student can build on/use as a model.
- Provide students with specific strategies for improvement (for example, model a good thesis or topic sentence).
- Ask questions (but consider their function)
- Refer to evidence or material that might have been useful, with an emphasis on “next time”
- Elaborate on and be specific in comments—if something is “good,” why? If “bad,” why?

- Be aware of tone

Be positive and encouraging without being fake. It is important to avoid focusing only on the weaknesses of an assignment and being overly negative or critical.

Be objective – avoid using a tone that could be misconstrued (e.g., exclamation marks or questions in the margin that seem to imply that the writer is stupid). As well, avoid expressing your personal opinion with regards to the writer's topic or point-of-view.

Additional Tips

- Address students directly, by name.
- If writing, write legibly. If using track changes (or similar) avoid over-using.
- Direct students to specific resources.
- Keep a record of a student's progress (via comments, rubric, etc.)

Group Exercise: Evaluating feedback (markers and students)

“Markers”: Examine the exemplary marked essay hand-out. As markers, discuss the feedback provided. (How much feedback is necessary/possible? Where would you concentrate your efforts—marginal/in-text commentary, rubric, comments, HOC/LOC? What 3 things would you want this student to work on? How would you present that feedback?)

“Students”: Examine the exemplary marked essay hand-out. As “students,” discuss the feedback provided. (What would be most useful? What would you find discouraging or unhelpful? What could there have been more/less of?)

Higher Order Concerns: Marking for Argument and Structure

The Thesis Statement

The point of writing an essay is *communicate* to a reader something that the writer thinks is significant in some way. That something should be articulated very early on via the thesis statement.

Have your students ask themselves the following question:

By the time my reader has read my essay, I want him or her to have understood ... **what?** The answer to this question will help students craft purposeful thesis statements.

Encourage students to think in terms of the questions posed in the assignment. What is the subject or focus of the paper? What does he or she most want to tell readers about this subject? What primary question will the paper answer? And, finally ... **SO WHAT?**

Look out for the not-a-thesis statement thesis statement:

- **NOT** a description (This essay will discuss the wage gap and the way it affects Canadian women ...)
- **NOT** a statement that is self-evident (The wage gap disadvantages women more than it does men ...)
- **NOT** a statement of fact (The wage gap continues to affect women in the Canadian workforce ...)
- **NOT** a question (Does the wage gap still exist in today's Canadian workforce?)
- **NOT** a matter of personal opinion or preference that cannot be argued against (Men do not deserve to make more money than women ...)
- **NOT** a broad generalization (Men tend to have more advantages than women ...)

Encourage the use of What/How/Why; mark accordingly:

WHAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the matter at hand• the topic or incident to be examined
HOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the means by which the topic will be examined• example, key images, etc. (i.e. the major discussion points of your essay)
WHY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• interpretation of the events, topic, etc.• significance of examining the topic from the angle you have chosen• conclusions to be drawn (i.e., the "SO WHAT?" of your argument)

Evaluating the thesis

Thesis #1:

Throughout history, women have received less wages than men for doing the same jobs. This paper will discuss the wage gap as it currently applies to women in Canada's work force.

This is not a thesis—it is a statement of fact, followed by a description of what the writer intends to do (but what will he *say*?). Moreover, it uses the dreaded “Throughout history” type of opening).

Thesis #2:

Generally, women in the Canadian workforce earn less money than men, doing equal work for less pay and working at jobs that have traditionally been considered “female.”

Addresses the “how,” but not the “why,” and describes rather than argues (and the writer might want to include other discussion points to round out the argument).

Thesis #3

Women in all sectors of the Canadian workforce earn substantially less than men due to systemic discrimination.

Tells the reader what the writer intends to argue but fails to address how the argument will be developed.

Thesis #4

While some would argue that women have achieved equality in the work place, current research reveals that women in all sectors of the Canadian workforce continue to earn substantially less than men. This disparity is the result of systemic discrimination, manifested in occupational segregation, unequal pay for equal work, and the “glass ceiling” effect.

Tells the reader what the writer intends to argue and how, offering a clear interpretation of/position on the issue. Introduces the “other side” of the debate—provides some context for the argument.

WHAT:

- the matter at hand
- the topic or incident to be examined

Women earn less than men

HOW:

- the means by which the topic will be examined
- examples, key images, etc. (i.e. major discussion points of essay)

"women's" jobs, less pay for same work, glass ceiling

WHY:

- interpretation of events, topic, etc.
- significance of examining topic from angle chosen
- conclusions to be drawn (i.e., the **"SO WHAT?"** of the argument)

result of systemic discrimination

Recommend an outline

- begins with a thesis statement
- is organized in sections, paragraphs, and points
- contains sentences that express each main point in support of the thesis
- indicates where examples or other evidence will be used
- includes references

Example of an outline

Thesis Statement: Women in the Canadian workforce earn substantially less than men due to systemic discrimination, manifested in occupational segregation, unequal pay for equal work, and the “glass ceiling” effect.

- I. A large percentage of women in the Canadian workforce are employed in what are still considered to be “women’s jobs” as a result of ...
 - A.
 1. Breakdown of university jobs (Martin and Smith 2008)
 2. 2006 study of gender in workplace (Dobson 2006)
- II. Women who work in professions formerly dominated by men are habitually paid a lower wage for the same work, a symptom of ...
 - A.
 1. wage study (Irwin 2007)
 2. example from Barry (2005)
 - B.
 1. case study (Dixon 2002)
 - a. quotation (Dixon 2005)
 - b. example from Dobson 2006)
- III. When women do advance in male-dominated occupations, they often encounter the “glass ceiling” effect, that is the, inability to rise above a certain level in a given organization. This phenomenon can be attributed to ...
 - A.
 - B.

So what are you looking for?

The essay: must-haves

Title:

- every essay requires an appropriate title
- should be engaging and indicate clearly the subject and approach to the subject (an informative title)

Introduction should establish essay's focus, parameters, and writer's specific argument and include

- some opening remarks related to the issue
 - not too general
 - avoids “since the beginning of time” openings
- introduction/brief explanation of theory/approach (and why relevant)
- context the reader needs to make sense of the issue and the thesis statement
 - titles, dates, names
 - geographic, temporal limitations
 - *key* information about the issue
- thesis statement—the point writer intends to make
 - generally appears at the end of introductory paragraph
 - usually 1-2 sentences that include the what/how/why elements of the argument
 - in some disciplines, the ideas that lead up to the expression of the main point can be considered part of the thesis)

Body should consist of a series of paragraphs/sections that develop the argument and present credible evidence to support it):

- **each paragraph should be built around a clearly expressed key point** (or sub-point) that *the student* (not a source) makes about the subject/issue
- **each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence** that clearly articulates *the student's* (not a source's) point (the “mini-thesis” of the paragraph), explicitly connected to the thesis
- **each paragraph should include evidence, illustration and examples** from the student's research to support her/his point, all of which are correctly cited in the body of the essay and referenced in the list of References
- **each paragraph should be characterized by *the student's* synthesis** of his argument and the other material included
- **each paragraph should be linked to the next by an appropriate transition**, showing the connection between the student's ideas and the logical development of the argument (note that transitions come at the *beginning* of paragraphs, linking *back* to previous ones — not at the end of paragraphs, linking forward)

What/How/Why again ...

What (the point)	The main idea to be discussed (best introduced in a topic sentence, the introductory sentence of your paragraph)	1-2 sentences
How (the proof)	The evidence used to substantiate the point or back up the argument: examples, paraphrases, summaries, etc.	Varies according to length of paragraph
Why (the comment)	Commentary outlining the significance or implications of the claims and evidence Your explanation of how and why these ideas fit together: relationships, contrasts, conclusions, implications, etc.	Varies according to length of paragraph and may be distributed throughout paragraph

Things to note about paragraph length:

- A paragraph that is very short (2-3 sentences) lacks the scope to fully flesh out an idea. Too-short paragraphs can leave a discussion seeming fragmented and scattered.
- A paragraph that is very long often ends up blurring that idea (dealing with more than one key topic), repeating itself or otherwise losing focus. Too-long paragraphs cause the reader (and sometimes the writer) to lose track of the point at hand.
- Paragraph length should be roughly balanced throughout the essay. Note that introductory and concluding paragraphs should be in proportion to the essay's length.

Conclusion should:

- avoid mechanically repeating every point already made.
- avoid stating the thesis for the first time in the conclusion.
- avoid introducing new information not directly related to argument or evidence that should have been used in the body.
- avoid concluding with sentimental commentary that is out of keeping with the analytical nature of the essay.
- **revisit key arguments to remind reader how the ideas fit together but should avoid word-for-word repetition.**
- **look beyond the immediate concerns of the paper and consider the implications of the ideas and arguments presented.**
- **end with the student's own words**

Evaluating student's use of sources

- Consider how the sources used are expected to **function** in the student's argument.
- Determine if the student is **engaging meaningfully** with sources or using the "slot-filler" approach.
- Verify that the student demonstrates **understanding** of the source material.
- Ensure that the secondary sources used have served as **catalysts** for analysis, rather than as replacements for the student's own thinking.

Plagiarism and paraphrasing

Improper paraphrasing is one of the most common causes of *plagiarism*. Evaluate if paraphrases

- capture, in summary form, the underlying argument, ideas, opinions, or main point of an external source
- focus on the author's central argument and the assumptions underlying the argument
- omit unnecessary details
- avoid borrowing key phrases/wording
- ensure the original meaning of the passage remains intact
- Include attributions throughout (for longer paraphrases/summaries) and proper citation(s)

When paraphrasing and summarizing, students should

- attribute as they go by beginning summaries with a phrase crediting the source (rather than **just** a citation at the end): e.g., According to Jonathan Kozol Kozol further suggests that ... (192). However, he neglects to consider ...
- put any words or phrases that they don't want to change in quotation marks: e.g., "Savage inequalities" exist throughout our educational system (Kozol).

Acceptable paraphrasing

A grand unified theory has long been the holy grail of physicists. Since ancient times, physicists have sought minimalist explanations of nature. Theories with four basic particles are considered better than theories of ten.

Source quotation from Alan Lightman, *Ancient Light: Our Changing View of the Universe*

X A grand unified theory has long been the central goal of scientists. Since the dawn of time, men of science have looked for minimalist explanations of natural phenomena. A theory with four elementary particles is considered better than a theory of ten (Lightman 106).

This example would be considered plagiarism, despite the inclusion of a citation. The writer has merely made a few cosmetic changes to the original, but the overall syntax, voice, and details remain the same.

X Physicists have long had the grand unified theory as their holy grail. Science always tries to give minimalist explanations of nature. The best theory is the one with the fewest elements.

This example would be considered plagiarism. No attribution/citation is provided, and some of the wording remains the same as that of the original source, despite some rearrangement. Note, as well, the disjointed nature of the paraphrased sentences.

✓ Lightman suggests that physicists have long sought “a grand unified theory,” since scientists have always preferred theories with the fewest elements (106).

This version would be considered an acceptable paraphrase—the writer has focused on the central idea and summarized it briefly, in his/her own words. Unnecessary details have been eliminated, and any original wording the writer wishes to borrow has been quoted. A citation is provided and the writer clearly attributes the information to the source at the beginning of the sentence.

Create a checklist for yourself (some examples)

- ✓ The writer has addressed the readers' expectations and met the aims of the course/assignment.
- ✓ The writer's focus and the topic's parameters are clearly articulated.
- ✓ The writer has provided a clearly-written, argumentative thesis statement that presents an interpretation, explanation, or position.
- ✓ The writer has used an effective essay structure that includes an appropriate title, introduction, series of body paragraphs, and conclusion.
- ✓ The essay is coherent—paragraphs are ordered in a logical sequence and the writer has used appropriate transitional words and phrases to signal connections. The end follows from the beginning, and points and evidence are relevant to and consistent with the overall argument.
- ✓ The writer has supported all claims with appropriate evidence and/or illustrated points with useful examples.
- ✓ The writer has appropriately incorporated sufficient and credible secondary sources, using proper paraphrasing, quoting, and citing techniques.

Lower Order Concerns: Marking for Stylistic and Grammatical Considerations

“Not long ago ... an essay writer showed me a sheaf of earlier papers in which a marker had left copious notes. The notes apparently meant little to the student. He asked me (very earnestly—this was a very earnest student) what the marker intended by the margin note “awk.” There were scores of these throughout each essay. Flocks of “awks.” They perched near large sections of underlined text. Of course anyone who has graded papers knows that “awk.” is not intended to have any meaning for student writers. The notation is, instead, a form of spontaneous self-expression by essay markers. It is a signal to no one in particular of extreme anguish and exasperation—a *cri de détresse* borrowed from the language of crows: “awks” are squawks.”

(Peter Christie, formerly of Queen’s Writing Centre)

What are elements of effective academic writing?

Clarity – writing should accurately convey the writer's ideas and be easy for a reader to understand

Conciseness – a writer should use the fewest possible words to express an idea fully

An appropriate tone – good academic prose is written in a formal tone but does not sound stilted or awkward

Good academic writing should be simple, direct, and clear.

Clarity

- Writing should be in plain language

Word choices should be precise and accurate. It is better to use simple, familiar language, even to repeat a word that means precisely what you want to say, than to use a word that is inaccurate, confusing, or overly colorful. Writers should avoid using words that they really don't understand or that may be too challenging for a busy reader in order to make their writing more sophisticated.

Not: Statistics Canada was tasked with actioning and conducting the inaugural national study of temporal expenditure at the naissance of the nineteen eighties.

But: In 1981, Statistics Canada conducted the first national study of time use.

- **Writing should be specific and precise**

Use concrete nouns (things knowable through the senses—computer, annual report)

Use abstract nouns (intangible things knowable only through the intellect—integrity, loyalty, justice) more sparingly, or pair with concrete nouns

Too abstract: Social programs can lead to opportunities for growth.

Abstract combined with concrete: Social programs, such as those offering retraining courses, can lead to job opportunities.

- **Writers should quantify facts and avoid vague qualitative statements**

Tell readers how much, how many, or what type you mean; specify when something happened or happens; identify by title or name the agents and recipients of particular actions.

Vague: A lot of unpaid work is done by women.

Specific: Women do *two-thirds* of the *2.5 billion hours* of unpaid work performed in *Canada annually*.

- **Writers should avoid broad references using *this*, *that*, and *it***

When you use *this*, *that*, and *it* by themselves, make sure the reader fully understands what the pronoun renames and replaces. Make sure the pronoun reference isn't ambiguous (i.e., that the pronoun doesn't refer to more than one thing). If the pronoun refers to a noun that has been implied but not stated, you can clarify the reference by explicitly using that noun.

Vague: With the spread of globalized capitalism, American universities increasingly follow a corporate fiscal model, tightening budgets and hiring temporary contract employees and teachers. *This* has prompted faculty and adjunct instructors at many schools to join unions as a way of protecting job security and benefits.

Clear: With the spread of globalized capitalism, American universities increasingly follow a corporate fiscal model, tightening budgets and hiring temporary contract employees as teachers. *This trend* has prompted faculty and adjunct instructors at many schools to join unions as a way of protecting job security and benefits.

Conciseness

- **Writers should eliminate unnecessary words and phrases**

Wordy: Three out of five women who raise families on their own without the help of spouses or partners struggle to achieve an acceptable level of subsistence, in effect living below what is designated in Canada as the official “poverty line.” (40 words)

Concise: Three out of five female single parents live in poverty. (10 words)

- **Writers should eliminate noun conversions or nominalizations**

It is more concise to use *conclude* rather than *reach a conclusion*, *assume* rather than *make an assumption*, *decide* rather than *make a decision*, *consider* rather than *give consideration to*, etc.

- **Writers should eliminate redundancies**

– terms such as *absolutely* essential, enter *into*, *past* experience, refer *back*, *mutual* co-operation

- **Writing should be in the active voice in most cases**

Sentences in active voice are usually easier to understand than those in passive voice because active-voice constructions indicate clearly the performer of the action expressed in the verb. In addition, changing from passive voice to active often results in a more concise sentence.

Clear and more concise (active):

In 1990, Commonwealth ministers responsible for Women's Affairs agreed to fully recognize the paid and unpaid contribution of women.

Not as clear and concise (passive):

In 1990, the full recognition of paid and unpaid contributions of women was agreed to by Commonwealth ministers responsible for Women's Affairs.

Tone

- **Writers should be sure to write in a suitably formal tone by avoiding the following:**

The second-person point of view (you, your) – the third-person (he/she, they) is generally preferred in academic writing

Contractions (don't, can't, etc)

Clichés – these stock phrases (her reaction was *over the top*) are often too vague or imprecise to be clearly understood by a reader

Grammatical considerations

There are several common grammatical problems in academic writing:

- Sentence faults – comma splices, run-on sentences, sentence fragments
- Problems with pronouns
- Inconsistency in voice or point-of-view

It is important to understand these problems, be able to identify them in student writing, and show the student how to correct them or direct him or her to instructive resources.

A brief, non-exhaustive marking checklist, in no particular order

- Incorrect use of possessives versus plurals
- Its versus it's
- Overuse of there is/there are
- Comma splices; “however” splices
- Sentence fragments
- Run-on or spliced sentences (not the same as an excessively long sentence)
- Overuse of passive voice
- Italics vs. quotation marks for titles
- Subject-verb agreement
- Incorrect word choices
- Excessively long sentences (*not* the same as a run-on sentence)
- Excessively long or short paragraphs
- Missing topic sentences
- Noun/pronoun agreement
- “Naked” this (or that)
- Overuse of “there is/there are/it is/it was”
- Weak parallelism
- Poor contextualization of quotations
- Failure to cite sources properly (or at all)
- Missing transitions
- Incorrect use of colons, semi-colons, commas, ellipses, and other punctuation

Marking Exercise

Introduction

Throughout history, men have been more likely to work in high-paying industries such as mining, construction, or manufacturing while women do well in higher education. When compared to men are more likely to be in clerical jobs and to work in the service industry. According to feminist ideology, women are not encouraged to take on higher education and more challenging jobs and the male dominated society tends to regulate women to domestically-oriented work. But many women deliberately choose to work in jobs that pay less. Although some studies claim the existence of a pay gap even when a woman and man hold the same degree and same experience level. The gender pay gap is a myth.

Writing Centre Resources

Handouts on thesis development, organization, paragraphing, style, and grammar are available on the Writing Centre website: <http://sass.queensu.ca/writingcentre>

A useful guide is ***A Writer's Handbook***, edited by Leslie Casson. It is available at the Campus Bookstore.