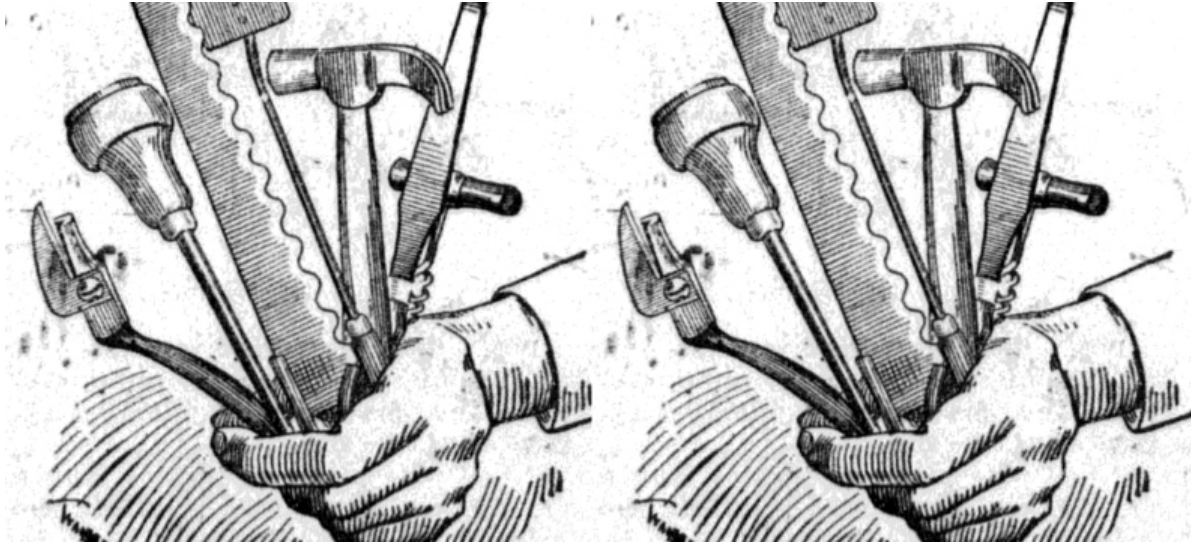# Vitae User

Academic Writing Consultant at ScholarStudio

9 Tools for the Accidental Writing Teacher

June 30, 2016

Image: 1904 advertisement for Henry Mohr Hardware of Tacoma, WA (via Library of Congress)

Most professors have to evaluate student writing at some point, but it's a task for which many of them feel woefully unprepared. Unless your field is English or composition, it is entirely possible to earn an advanced degree without *ever* discussing how to grade a sea of papers that demonstrate no functional knowledge of the comma, let alone those with serious structural or conceptual issues.

Faculty attitudes toward this part of their job vary. Some come to understand that teaching writing is an important part of their work. Others are resentful ("I didn't sign up for this"). Most, however, are just overwhelmed by the task ("I don't even know where to start").

Whichever of those best describes your views, here are nine ideas to help you preserve your sanity and improve your students' writing.

1. Check your assumptions. "My university has a required writing class," you grumble, "so why can't these students write?" Unfortunately, I have to be the bearer of bad news: Writing is a complex, iterative process that is not learned once and for all in a single semester. Even composition scholars strongly suspect that the skills learned in first-year writing classes don't easily transfer to other settings in the university. Perhaps that's because the genres taught in first-year writing don't fully reflect those needed in other disciplines. Perhaps it is because students don't get enough opportunities to practice their writing skills in other classes. Or perhaps it is because they were playing Candy Crush during first-year composition.

Or maybe you teach graduate students and find yourself thinking, "this is a *doctoral* program — surely if these students got in, they must have academic writing skills." Sadly, there's a good chance the admissions process in your

Ph.D. program doesn't look specifically at writing skills (just reading an applicant's personal statement does not cut it). At one time, graduate education primarily prepared people for a faculty career, but now, increasing numbers of professions require graduate degrees. As a result, we see more and more graduate students, including midcareer professionals, who are returning to academia with outdated or poor academic writing skills.

Whether you teach undergraduate or graduate students, the upshot is that between [rant about the deterioration of public education] and [rant about a public that no longer reads more than 140 characters at a time], the only safe assumption to make about our students' writing skills is that they need our help.

2. Stop correcting student work. Make them do it instead. Set up individual worksheets for students to record any errors they make more than twice in their writing. If the worksheets are on paper, each of you keep a hard copy. Better yet, set up a shared Google doc to track the repeat mistakes. Record things like "comma splice," "agreement between singular and plural" or "unsupported arguments." Make clear that students are responsible for correcting the errors in their next paper. Then, before you read their next paper, review their error sheet and look to see if they are self correcting.

3. Reuse feedback. If you're evaluating students' work in a Word or a Google doc, save yourself some time by creating a set of boilerplate explanations for common writing problems that you end up correcting frequently. Cut and paste those explanations rather than retype them over and over. Resist the urge to be snarky.

4. The word "confusing" can be confusing. When you write "confusing" in the margin of a student's paper, that word can mean "I understand the meaning of your sentence, but the syntax is wrong" or "I don't understand the meaning of your sentence because the syntax gets in the way" or "Your logic is flawed here." Instead of using a single word, try to explain the nature of the confusion and what the student can do to clarify. Make and use more boilerplate you can cut and paste to explain common types of confusion.

5. Teaching is the best form of learning. Create a 10-minute lesson block in your classes called "Because … English." Divide students into small groups and assign each one the job of teaching the class a lesson — about semicolons; commas (Oxford and otherwise); plural and possessives; dependent clauses, comma splices, contractions, sentence fragments, parallel sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, colloquial language, and whatever else drives you nuts. Make it a central requirement that the lessons be funny or memorable.

6. Should the first person or passive voice be used? Different fields have different ideas about the use of first person and passive voice. If possible, give an overview of where you and your field stand on that issue.

7. Use the book *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. The book helps me teach students not to use "hit and run quotations" (where students drop in a quote with no framing context or follow up). While roughly half my students feel oppressed by using this book's templates, the other half feel liberated. I encourage students to alter the templates. You can also make up your own.

8. Students become better writers by reading each other's work. Some professors fantasize that peer editing will do most of the work for them, but that's rarely the case. Students may add a few corrections and edits to each other's work (especially if you include the error worksheets in the peer-editing process), but that's not the real benefit of peer editing.

The most important benefit: Peer editing prevents procrastination. The student who writes a draft for a peer-editing session in class — no matter how half-assed it is — is not writing the paper the night before it is due and therefore has a chance to go through it a second time. That alone, I find, results in better written papers. In peer editing, students get to practice doing what you do when you read their work — struggle through M.C. Escher-like syntax, unsnarl paragraph-length sentences, and cringe at colloquial language. Ultimately, the most important result of peer editing

may not be the feedback that students get, but the skills they build as readers that they can then apply to their own writing.

Likewise, students gain perspective. Most will come away from peer editing thinking, "Well, I'm not the best or the worst writer in the class." That insight can reduce anxiety and help them understand that, despite their previous suspicions, your grading is not entirely arbitrary.

9. There's an app for that. Students want to use apps. Let them. At this historical moment no one should have to memorize the arcane laws of MLA or APA style. Teach them to use citation management programs like Zotero and Mendeley, which are free and awesome. Each have their strengths and they sync together beautifully. Better yet, have students teach each other how to use these.

Vitae User is an academic writing consultant who specializes in working with graduate students and graduate programs to support retention, equity, and success.

You can find more information at ScholarStudio.com and more articles relevant to faculty and student writing at scholarstudioblog.wordpress.com. Follow her on twitter @ScholarStudio.