

Addressing Higher-Order Concerns in Student Writing

Address **higher-order concerns** first. Higher-order concerns are the big issues in the paper, ones that aren't addressed by proofreading or editing for grammar and word choice. When addressing higher-order concerns, it may help to consider the following questions:

- Is the writer really addressing the assignment and fulfilling its terms?
- Is there a need for a thesis, and if so, is there one?
- Do arguments have the support they need? Is there an organization I can relate to as a reader? Is this piece addressing an audience in an effective way?
- Does the piece show appropriate levels of critical thinking?

In addressing higher-order concerns, a responder is more than an editor. You are a reader. By responding as a member of the audience, you are a teacher. In an essay on reader response, Stephen North points, "...the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their text, are what get changed...[O]ur job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). In order to achieve this goal, it can be helpful to use questions rather than directions. While asking questions, consider

- Avoiding yes or no questions;
- Asking questions when you really want to know the answers, as an audience member; and
- Using content clarifying questions ("What does this term mean?" "What is this paragraph's function?").

Sometimes questions are not the best route, and directness can be useful.

- If you see a major concern early on, like the paper is not fulfilling the requirements of the assignment, you could always say, "I am concerned about the way your paper addresses the assignment because..." and give specific reasons why. This kind of statement can show the writer honest respect.
- Addressing pressing problems can help to move the writer forward.

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Shaughnessy (1971) concludes that errors are a natural part of the learning process. In this context, errors are not bad; they are learning/teaching opportunities. Based on her ideas, Bartholomae (1981) asserts that errors in student writing take on three forms:

1. **Accidental errors** – these are errors that students can correct on their own once they are identified. Gayle Irish found in her study of student writing that up to 54% of errors in student writing are these types of errors.

How to help in revision – Have students read their paper aloud and make corrections as they see needed.

2. **Dialect related errors** – geographical or social dialects – home dialect. These types of errors are consistent – it has a grammar of its own – but it is not Standard American English – Edited American English, the Money Dialect, the school dialect...

How to help in revision – Underline errors in the student's paper. The student may be able to fix them on their own. If not, work together and encourage the student to shift dialects for this situation – from home dialect to school dialect.

A rich text environment can also help this. The more students see and hear the Standard American English dialect, the more comfortable they will feel while using it.

3. **Idiosyncratic errors** – These are consistent mistakes that are not accidental or dialect related. First, figure out the Approximate Rule that a student may be using in the error that is presented. For example, if you do not understand why a student continually places a comma before every 'and' in a paper, you may stop to ask that student why they choose to place commas there. They do it because it is their Approximate Rule System – it works some of the time; therefore, I will put it in all of the time. If we can figure out which kind of error they are making and why they are making it, we can start to help fix it.

How to help in revision – First when you have identified the errors that are being made repeatedly, and you have decided which one to address first, point out an example of the error to the writer.

- Ask the student how/why they chose to do what they did in their paper.
- After the student has explained their thought process, the student must be able to acknowledge that the way that they did it was wrong (the rule they had been following was wrong). This can be tricky for a couple of reasons. 1. They could just tell you and not really believe it was wrong. 2. They could tell you and even believe that the product was wrong, but they still do not understand why the process was wrong. It is your job to explain in the best way possible how and why it was wrong. You can look at examples of the correct way (if there are some in the paper you are working on) and explain how those work in comparison to the one that was incorrect.
- Explain the correct rule and why/how it is done and is correct. After you do a couple together, have the student identify some within their own writing to correct on their own.