



Minimal Marking

Author(s): Richard H. Haswell

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Minimal Marking

It is a disturbing fact of the profession that many teachers still look toward the marking of a set of compositions with distaste and discouragement. Reasons are obvious, not the least being the intuition that hours must be put in with little return in terms of effect on the students or on their writing. C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon's recent survey of the research on the effect of marking unfortunately supports this intuition. Positive results of teacher intervention through written commentary simply have not yet been found ("Teacher Commentary on Student Writing," *Freshman English News*, 10 [1981], 1-4). The problem is analogous to that of the teaching of grammar in composition courses—hundreds of thousands of hours spent, and being spent right now, on a task of little proven benefit. Fortunately, however, Knoblauch and Brannon balance their description of unfruitful paths with a model of paths still promising. Otherwise, an essentially useful method that is easily discredited because easily disliked might seem finally unprofitable.

Whether Knoblauch and Brannon's model of beneficial written commentary can be verified by research remains to be seen, but I would like to provide evidence here that suggests it will be. In essence they propose commentary that 1) facilitates rather than judges, 2) emphasizes performance rather than finished product, 3) provides double feedback, before and after revision, and 4) helps bridge successive drafts by requiring immediate revision. All these requirements are met by a method of marking surface errors in writing that I have been using for several years and recommending for use by teaching assistants. Admittedly errors of this sort—misspelling, mispunctuation, etc.—constitute a nonessential element of writing, or at least one I do not wish to spend much time on at any level of instruction. But the method by which I comment on these errors, besides conforming to Knoblauch and Brannon's criteria, brings measurable improvements and serves as a paradigm for a scheme of written commentary that may be transferable to more central aspects of writing, especially aspects not amenable to peer evaluation.

The method itself is by no means solely my own, no doubt having undergone autogenesis time and again. I developed it for my own use six or seven years ago; a retired colleague of mine said he knew of a teacher at Vassar who used it

Richard H. Haswell has recently stepped down as director of the composition program at Washington State University, where he remains a member of the faculty of the Department of English. He is working on a study comparing the writing of students during the first two years of college with that of adults who write on their jobs.

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in the early 1940s; recently Sheila Ann Lisman has described it as her “X system” (“The Best of All Possible Worlds: Where X Replaces AWK,” in Gene Stanford, et al., eds., *Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1979-1980: How to Handle the Paper Load* [Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979], pp. 103-105). My own application is as follows. All surface mistakes in a student’s paper are left totally unmarked within the text. These are unquestionable errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar (including pronoun antecedence). Each of these mistakes is indicated only with a check in the margin by the line in which it occurs. A line with two checks by it, for instance, means the presence of two errors, no more, within the boundary of that line. The sum of checks is recorded at the end of the paper and in the gradebook. Papers, with checks and other commentary, are then returned fifteen minutes before the end of class. Students have time to search for, circle, and correct the errors. As papers are returned to me I review the corrections, mending those errors left undiscovered, miscorrected, or newly generated. Where I feel it is useful, mistakes are explained or handbooks cited. Within those fifteen minutes I can return about one third of the papers in a class of twenty-five, and the rest I return the next session. Until a student attempts to correct checked errors, the grade on the essay remains unrecorded.

The simplicity of this method belies its benefit. First, it shortens, gladdens, and improves the act of marking papers. Because the teacher responds to a surface mistake only with a check in the margin, attention can be maintained on more substantial problems. The method perhaps goes a long way toward dimming the halo effect of surface mistakes on evaluation, since much of this negative influence may arise from the irritation that comes from correcting and explaining common errors (*its* and *it’s*!) over and over. On the second reading the teacher does not lose the time gained initially, for according to my count students will correct on their own sixty to seventy percent of their errors. (Lisman reports her “least capable students” are able to find sixty percent of their errors.) Conservatively, I would say the method saves me about four minutes a paper. That is nearly two hours saved with a set of twenty-five essays.

Second, the method forces students to act in a number of ways that have current pedagogic sanction. In reducing the amount of teacher comment on the page, it helps to avoid the mental dazzle of information overload. It shows the student that the teacher initially assumed that carelessness and not stupidity was the source of error. It forces the student, not the teacher, to answer the question. It challenges students with a puzzle (where is the mistake in this line?) and reinforces learning with a high rate of successful solutions. It engages students in an activity that comes much nearer to the very activity they need to learn, namely editing—not the abstract understanding of a mistake someone else has discovered, but the detection and correction of errors on one’s own. Finally, improvement is self-motivated. The fewer mistakes students submit originally, the sooner they leave other students still struggling in the classroom with checks by every third line. Progress during the semester is also easily seen, if not by checks on individual papers at least by totals in the gradebook shared with a student during conference.

Third, this method will help teachers analyze the nature and sources of error in ways that lately have proved so insightful among composition specialists.¹ Consider the following breakdown of the corrections that twenty-four freshmen in one of my recent classes made on their first inclass essay (without recourse to a dictionary).

| Category of Error | Number of Errors Checked in Margin by Teacher | Number of Errors Correctly Emended by Students | Percent Corrected by Students |
|--|---|--|-------------------------------|
| Semantic Signalling (capitalization, underlining, quotation marks, apostrophes) | 97 | 74 | 76.3% |
| Syntactic Punctuation | 142 | 81 | 57.0% |
| Spelling (including hyphenation) | 132 | 74 | 56.1% |
| Grammar (including tense change, omission of word, pronoun disagreement) | 30 | 16 | 53.3% |
| All Errors | 401 | 245 | 61.1% |

Crude as this breakdown is, a useful fact immediately emerges. Students are able to find and correct different kinds of errors at about the same rate. In short, more than half of the surface errors students make, *regardless of type*, occupy a kind of halfway house between purely conceptual and purely performance-based (only a few seem truly slips of the pen). They are threshold errors, standing on the edge of competence in an unstable posture of disjunction (“I know it is either *conceive* or *concieve*”) or of half-discarded fossilization (“I don’t know why I capitalized ‘Fraternities.’ I *know* that’s wrong.”). It is good for the teacher to be reminded that, after all, the majority of errors—all kinds of errors, and differently for different students—“mark stages,” in David Bartholomae’s words, “on route to mastery” (“The Study of Error,” p. 257). Further, the method isolates, for each individual student, those errors of deeper etiology. It is re-

1. See especially Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford, 1977); Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer, “Error-Analysis and the Teaching of Composition,” *College Composition and Communication*, 29 (1978), 242-248; and David Bartholomae, “The Study of Error,” *CCC*, 31 (1980), 253-269.

markable how often the method winnows away a heterogeneous clutter of threshold errors to leave just a few conceptual errors—errors, though again idiosyncratic and multiplied by repetition, now accessible for focused treatment. So the method is an ideal first step in the pedagogical attack on error recommended by Paul B. Diederich, Beth Newman, Ellen W. Nold, and others: keep records, isolate a few serious errors, individualize instruction.²

Even for teachers who have less time than they would like for individual instruction, there will be progress if this method of marginal checking is maintained during the entire course. At least there has been in my classes. Using inclass, fifty-minute, impromptu essays written the first and last week of the semester, with two switched topics to eliminate influence of topic, I have calculated change in error rate in three regular freshman composition sections. Overall, the drop was from 4.6 errors per 100 words to 2.2 (52%). This rate of decline was consistent despite different semesters and different topics and considerably different course plans (52%, 53%, 50%). Further, nearly all students participated in the improvement; only four of the sixty-nine did not register a decline in rate. This improvement in error rate, it should be noted, was not acquired at the expense of fluency, for final essays were 23% longer than first essays. Pearson product-moment correlation between initial and final error rates is high (.79), suggesting little connection between initial verbal skill and subsequent gain. Even though, given the above figures, it was nearly superfluous, I calculated a correlated *t*-test for significance of pre/post change in rate, largely to relish (at least once in my life) a truly giant *t*-value ($t = 25.43, p < .001$). Of course what other factors influenced this gain must remain conjectural. I devoted a small amount of class time to three or four common errors of punctuation, worked occasionally in conference with individual problems, and reminded students to save five minutes at the end of an inclass essay to proofread. I have not had the heart to set up a control group to isolate this marking technique; it has been valuable enough for me that I prefer to sell it rather than to deprive any students of it deliberately.

The ultimate value of this method for me is that it relegates what I consider a minor aspect of the course to a minor role in time spent on marking and in class, while at least maintaining and probably increasing the rate of improvement in that aspect. Crudely put, less work for the teacher, more gain for the student. But the gain may be compounded in ways more complex than this suggests. Knoblauch and Brannon rightly point out that commenting must be evaluated in terms of the “full teacher-student dialogue.” Now too much commenting can harm this dialogue in at least two ways. It will embitter the teacher with the

2. Diederich, *Measuring Growth in English* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974), pp. 21-22; Newman, *Teaching Students to Write* (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1980), pp. 292-297, 398; Nold, “Alternatives to Mad-Hatterism,” in Donald McQuade, ed., *Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition* (Conway, AK: L&S Books, 1980), pp. 103-117. See also Shaughnessy, Kroll and Schafer, and Bartholomae above. Marginal checking isolates deep errors in a way parallel, but not identical, to Bartholomae’s method of “oral reconstruction” (“Study of Error,” pp. 259-268). The two methods may prove to have different, though overlapping, diagnostic values.

knowledge that the time and energy spent on it is incommensurate with the subject and the results. And it will frustrate both teacher and student because judgmental commentary unbalances the teacher-student equilibrium in an authentic learning situation, that is, where the student is doing most of the work. Long ago Comenius put it best: the more the teacher teaches, the less the student learns. (The more you teach, one of our older teaching assistants said to me mournfully, the more you quote that maxim.) In terms of Elaine O. Lee's useful scale ("Evaluating Student Writing," *CCC*, 30 [1979], 370-374), this marking technique postpones correcting, emoting, and describing—where the teacher does all of the work—and instead suggests, questions, reminds, and assigns. Because students do most of the work, the discouragement of which I first spoke subsides, and a certain freshness and candor return to the dialogue. (Lisman's article describes this renewed energy well.)

Can this method be transferred to other aspects of writing? I think so, although right now I must speculate. Certainly problems of writing that lend themselves to spot improvement could well be marked with marginal checks: injudicious diction, needed transitions, unsupported generalities. Larger, structural problems such as stumbling introductions and disordered paragraphs might be signalled with marginal lines. More interestingly, so might fallacies and other lapses in thinking. In each case the effort would be to find the minimal functional mark. The best mark is that which allows students to correct the most on their own with the least help. An obvious pedagogical truth—but one that runs counter to the still established tradition of full correction.