" 'Minimal Marking' to improve Student Writing"

Do you spend substantial time correcting students' mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and capitalization in early drafts of papers?
Do you spend time editing sentences that do not appear in the final draft?
Do you worry that higher-level writing problems such as content and organization get lost in the concern with sentence-level errors?
Do you want to make students responsible for correcting their own sentence-level errors?

In traditional marking:

the instructor has done all the work, yet it is through practice that students learn to identify and correct their own errors
the student may believe that little revision is necessary beyond that indicated by the instructor

In "minimal marking," the instructor:

puts the responsibility of editing on the students
has more time to comment on substance. Minimal marking should be used in conjunction with grading criteria that explicitly reward standard written English

Even with minimal marking, some students may still be unable to correct their mistakes. Rather than doing the work for your students, refer them to a section in a grammar handbook or to a tutor at the Writing Center in 205-213 Williams Hall (231-5436).


Handling Error in Student Writing

Some faculty may think . . . That conscientious teaching requires marking all errors.

But research shows . . . Students can catch more than 60% of their own errors if they are taught to proofread and held to appropriate standards of correctness. By marking every error, we are actually training our students to rely on us as copy-editors. Teachers can

mark errors on the first page
mark representative errors
place checks in the margins where errors occur
look over a set of papers quickly and return error-laden essays for proofreading and correction
use style editors or other software packages to scan student writing for error. (This last strategy requires some awareness of the limitations of these programs).

Some faculty may think . . . That teachers need to read everything that students write.
But research shows . . . Students can be asked to write for brief periods at the beginning or end of a class to help them focus or achieve closure. When discussion lags or reaches an impasse, students can be asked to write out a response to share. Students can bring to class written definitions of key terms to debate or questions to stimulate discussion. This kind of informal writing need not even be collected. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion and encourage active engagement with the material.

Some faculty may think . . . That teachers need to respond to every piece of writing they collect.

But research shows . . . Journals and informal writings, if collected, can be graded using a "minimal marking" point allocation scheme. Or students can be graded on a quantity/quality grid. They can be awarded credit for the number of entries submitted, and they can single out a limited number of these for closer scrutiny, grading, and response.

Some faculty may think . . . That requiring two drafts of an essay doubles the work.

But research shows . . . That students usually attend to comments only when they are given a chance to revise. Otherwise, they are likely to give a one-minute glance to the remarks you spent twenty minutes writing--or worse still, look at the grade and toss the essay. It makes more sense, then to invest time and energy responding to the first draft and to make these comments truly facilitative. Respond to the final draft only briefly, and let these comments be more evaluative.

Some faculty may think . . . That "writing-intensive" means that students should do 3-5 separate, unrelated assignments, each one entailing extensive time commitments in devising assignments and responding to them.

But research shows . . . That students often benefit most when the work of the semester can be conceived as one project, phased in stages or logical sequences. Moving through a logical sequence of assignments is one way to increase the level of conceptual difficulty gradually, and to ensure that students build on material they have studied in earlier portions of the syllabus. It is more cost-effective for instructors as well, since in some cases they will have seen and responded to smaller components of a project before the cumulative work comes in.

Some faculty may think . . . That more is better in terms of how much teachers respond and how thoroughly they address the conceptual problems of the essay.

But research shows . . . That students are often simply overwhelmed and paralyzed when they receive essays on which the instructor's comments trail into every margin and leave a depressing map of error and negative response. Even when response is positive, saying too much is often confusing. It is better to choose two or three elements of the essay to focus on, giving highly specific constructive advice or commentary, than to attempt to cover all possible areas of concern.

The kind of patient work that goes into devising appropriate assignments and responding to them intelligently does take more time than other kinds of teaching. But it need not pose impossible burdens. And some work that faculty undertake with the best intentions is actually counter-productive to the goals of improving student writing and thinking.