

ELEMENTS OF SENSE, THE PRINCIPLES OF EDITING

Objective (for all levels): Through direct instruction, guided practice, peer critiquing, and teacher conferences. Students learn the following concepts and implement them as principles of editing. Students become fluent in the idiom of editing as they become objective spectators to, as well as invested participants in, the writing process.

Curriculum Responsibility: Beginning in ninth grade, students directly study the following concepts (and attendant concepts, issues, and grammatical principles) in close proximity to writing assignments, for implementation of the lessons must figure in the evaluation of the proximate writing assignments and in all subsequent writing assignments. Students have to be materially responsible for what they have been taught. Teachers are also encouraged to derive from student writing teaching examples of the concepts for regular follow-up lessons.

Preparation and Materials:

1. students have reviewed MLA format and have a handout or resource in their notebooks to reference when they have format questions;
2. students have a usage glossary in their notebooks;
3. students have easy access to a dictionary and thesaurus.

1. MLA Format: (A common format aids evaluation, brings consistency to assignments, helps students help each other, makes them aware of the concept of format, and forces a close look at the page—a first step in encouraging close reading.)

2. The Complete Sentence:

simple, compound, complex, compound-complex

(parts of speech, subject, predicate, complements, phrases, independent & subordinate clauses)

declarative, imperative, interrogative, exclamatory

periodic sentence (increased formality)

loose sentence (the natural tendency of English)

3. The Major Sentence Errors:

fragment

comma splice

fused sentences

4. The Semicolon:

complete sentences,

phrases (prepositional, participial, gerund, infinitive, appositive)

clauses: independent, main, dependent

conjunctive adverbs (transitions)

complex items in a series

5. The Colon:

apposition

quotation introduction (usually appositional)

conventions

colon errors

with transitive verbs
with linking verbs
with prepositions

6. Parentheses/Dashes/Hyphens, the differences:

parenthetical elements
the emphatic versus the diminished
the core sentence and essential elements
restrictive vs. non restrictive elements, essential vs. nonessential elements
subordination
hyphenation and syllable division

7. The Comma:

items in a series
grammatical weight
double apposition
the negative before the “because clause”
coordinating conjunctions
compound sentence or compound verb/predicate
compound sentence or compound dependent clauses
parentheticals: openers, closers, insertions
essential & nonessential elements, restrictive and nonrestrictive elements
the meaningful pause

8. Quotation Integration:

large scale management of format, mechanics, grammar, and syntax.
quote plunk vs. full thematic integration
quotation sandwich
brackets
documentation

9. Agreement:

subject-verb
pronoun-antecedent

10. Pronoun Reference

11. Shifts (subject, person, voice)

12. Style:

parallelism: grammatical balance, stylistic device
expletive constructions: wordiness, indirectness
active and passive voice: action verbs (transitive and intransitive), wordiness
sentence combining: coordination & subordination, sentence combining, transitional expressions

Note: Items 2 through 12 either directly or indirectly affect of coherence. With knowledge, students can use them often artfully to effect coherence.

13. Literary Research: source evaluation, integration of research, documentation, the Works Cited

Notes and Discussion:

1. Grammar and composition texts address all these concepts; however, student awareness of them as operating principles of writing is often weak, no matter their previous instruction. Our goal is to make the concepts “live” in their writing process, and one way to accomplish this goal is to consistently make students apply the concepts in the peer critiquing process—which means we cannot merely give students a handbook and tell them to learn the concepts.

They need to be taught them; they need to practice them; they need to talk about them so that someday they may have the awareness and knowledge that would make consulting a handbook truly useful to them. Whether they acquire the good sense to consult a handbook we must leave, if we do our jobs well, to justifiable faith. In any event, how to teach the concepts is the pedagogical issue. Authentic teaching materials, examples drawn from student writing and from reading assignments, for example, help immensely, but the normal teaching sequence for skills—concept introduction, direct instruction, modeling, checking for understanding, guided practice, independent practice (peer critiquing), evaluation (continuous evaluation preferably in writing assignments), and reflective revision—seems unavoidable if we want to succeed.

2. My experience is that training students to be spectators to (not just participants in) their writing is the panacea. Close reading must be cultivated in composition studies as well as in literature studies. On writing-due dates, I turn the classroom into a writing clinic-writing laboratory environment. Students begin by reading their writing aloud to themselves or to a classmate or two; sometimes students read other students papers’ aloud to the writers. Much of what is problematic manifests here, although students are so used to hearing incorrect language that correct language will often enough sound wrong and incorrect language right; moreover, students often do not have the language to explain what is wrong beyond “this just does not sound right.” Students then read each other’s papers looking at specific issues as they have been taught and for anything they find troublesome, marking those places discreetly. Discussion between or among the peer critics follows. Both these practices give plenty of opportunities for personal and very pointed lesson reinforcement and individual coaching. Teachers can be particularly effective on an individual basis in this environment, reinforcing the concepts in the precise language of editing and evaluation.

To be truly effective, peer critiquing has to be rotated among students. Students may sometimes choose their partners, but they should not always have the same partners. Groups of three are often more effective than pairs, especially when the writing assignments are short.

Moreover, these lessons, which at first seem geared exclusively to format, grammar, mechanics, and usage, begin to extend (because close reading is critical reading) to matters of clarity, precision, logic, coherence, sentence fluency, organization, unity, and development. Of course these issues must also be directly taught (but that’s another discussion).