

Marking Papers for Grammar and Mechanics

Carolyn Haynes
Director of Windate Writing Center
Miami University (Ohio)

Writing should improve students' learning of course material and encourage them to think critically about it. Sometimes, that thinking is muddled when a student commits certain grammatical and mechanical errors. Below is an easy way to deal with grammatical and stylistic errors that will (1) discourage your students from repeating them; (2) nudge your students toward independence in editing their work; and (3) allow you to do the real work of the course.

The *Harbrace College Handbook* would reprimand a student who wrote: "When confronted with these facts, not one word was spoken," to avoid "dangling elliptical adverb clauses." This is advice that we would all do well to follow, but few students grasp. Another way to handle a grammatical or mechanical error is the following:

- Put a wavy line under the offending clause and a quizzical arrow (arrow accompanied by a question mark) pointing to "word." Don't bother to explain the rule. Instead, refer students to a handbook. In marking the sentence in this way, you are saying, "I don't understand what this clause modifies, and your argument is consequently weakened."

Surprisingly, experts disagree about how to mark errors, but nearly everyone would agree that over-marking does more harm than good. Students may productively attend to half a dozen wavy underlines on a page, but are likely to shut down when confronted by twenty. Focus on those errors needing to be improved the most. Try using the following marginal notations to mark these most serious mistakes:

Marginal Notations

- **AGR** (agreement)
The number of fatalities have been increasing in recent years.
- **FRAG** (fragment)
The man crying his eyes out in the rain.
- **MM** (misplaced modifier)
Concentrating on his studies, the music was not even heard.
- **CS** (comma splice)
Sports makes a person strong and brave, on the other hand, art makes a person gentle.
- **REF** (reference)
Chris sent Bill a letter every day while he was in the hospital.
- **PRED** (illogical predication)
The double helix model of DNA is an example of hard work.

- **//STR** (parallel structure)
I like running, cycling and to swim.
- **Wordy** (in need of condensing)
- **Choppy** (a rough ride for the reader from one idea to the next)
- **Unclear**
- **Awkward** (tortured syntax)
- **Good**

Symbols

- Circles locate errors confined to one or two words (such as a misspelled word).
- Wavy underlines note larger errors.
- Checks praise good word choices.
- Straight underlines highlight well-put phrases or sentences.
- Arrows and question marks point out puzzling connections of words.