

# Helping Students Improve Their Writing

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When a student paper states that performance anxiety can lead to sexual impudence, we might laugh. When a dissertation uses the expression *It is argued* more times than we can count, we might cry.

High-quality written communication is important at all levels of psychology education and in most fields of employment related to psychology. Accordingly, the APA's Task Force on Undergraduate Major Competencies (2002) named effective writing skills one of the top goals for undergraduate psychology education. Despite the importance of written communication, the quality of student writing in psychology courses, even at the graduate level, is often so low as to make academics despair. Although writing skills are not usually the focus of psychology courses, we believe that instructor efforts to improve student writing can be beneficial regardless of the course topic.

We provide below a list of strategies we use to help our psychology students improve their writing skills. The strategies are based on psycho-educational principles such as instruction, prompting, modeling, and reinforcement. In addition to actually improving writing skills, these strategies aim to increase motivation for writing improvement. We see enhancing motivation as the key to helping students because students themselves can find ways to improve their writing if they try. Also, with high intrinsic motivation, students will continue to strive to improve their writing after they finish any particular course. We also help students learn specific writing rules. We believe that helping a student learn just one writing rule (e.g., noun-pronoun agreement in number) can lead to a lifetime of improved writing.

## Strategies

- Encourage students to complete an additional university writing course and to work hard to improve their writing. This method has seemed the most beneficial in our experience.
- Emphasize to students that good writing skills are important, both to their satisfactory completion of the unit and to their future careers. We tell students that we comment on excellent student writing skills when we write letters of recommendation for graduate admissions or employment. We also tell students how important different types of writing, such as writing job-application letters and grant proposals, have been in our careers.
- Give at least one writing assignment in each course. We give assignments of only four to five pages so students can focus on quality rather than quantity.
- Toward the end of a class session, ask students to spend five minutes writing a summary of the content of the session. Next, have students comment on each other's writing, pointing out positive aspects and possible improvements. Aside from helping the student to organize the day's materials, this activity helps students learn through writing practice, through observation of how another student writes, and through providing and receiving feedback. The activity also gives students experience in obtaining comments on their writing. If they find the experience productive, they may be more inclined to ask other students for comments on their writing in the

future and may improve their writing skills and submit better work as a result.

- Recommend to students writing-rules websites, such as those of the University of New England Teaching and Learning Centre (2007) and the Purdue University Online Writing Lab (2004), and books, such as *The Writer's Workplace* by Sandra and John Scarry (2002) and the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2001).
- Inform students that you will consider writing quality in grading written assignments. Further, explain to students that you will consider the quality of writing because writing quality is important in conveying a message clearly, in helping the reader grasp the message quickly, and in creating a good image.
- Provide students with a list of poorly structured sentences from assignments of prior years. Ask the students to improve the sentences, and then discuss the improvements as a class.
- Encourage students to use software that checks grammar. Microsoft Word provides this option under the Tools menu.
- Correct writing errors on student papers and provide a statement of at least one important rule that the student violated. The students thus see the rule and an example of how to apply it correctly in the context of their own writing. The statement of the rule helps the student avoid related errors in the future. We usually obtain these rule statements from the websites mentioned above.
- Explain to students important writing rules that are often violated in student writing and give examples. For instance, we explain the value of using the active voice and give an example of a passage written in passive voice and in active voice. Giving students examples helps them understand what to do.
- Encourage students to learn the rules they violated in making writing errors on assignments. Students who do not know the rules of apostrophe use, for instance, can learn them — it just takes exposure to the rule and the motivation to change.
- Encourage students to pay close attention to the grammar and punctuation they see in textbooks, other books, articles, and sample papers.
- Tell students the following: With practice and feedback on performance, writing becomes better. Learning most complex skills involves many attempts; students need not feel discouraged if they are not instantly accomplished writers in a specific genre. Once a person reaches a certain level of skill, the process of writing becomes increasingly enjoyable. However, writing well always takes time and effort.
- Praise students freely for excellent writing, improved writing, and efforts to improve their writing. We preach positive reinforcement in the courses we teach — we might as well apply it ourselves!
- Show students that you are personally interested in writing well. We recently told our students how much we enjoyed reading Lynn Truss's 2003 book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. The title is based on a story of how one unneeded comma can alter the description of a panda.
- Describe to students the process you use to write journal articles and reports and how using the process benefits you. For instance, you might mention looking at a sample, creating an outline, writing and revising the document, checking the writing against the requirements and sample paper, and asking another individual to proofread the paper. When you submit a manuscript to a journal, tell your students how many drafts you went through. A number like 22 might give them a new perspective on how to write well.

- Provide students with a checklist of writing-process suggestions they can apply to a written assignment. We base the checklist we give students on the process we use ourselves.

## Conclusion

Other academics can best help students improve their writing skills by using methods from the list above that suit the academic's own style, a particular course, and the students in that course. Good writing, in and out of the field of psychology, is a rare and valuable skill. Students who improve their writing are likely to earn higher grades in the short term and higher incomes in the long term. We tell our students that we want them to be the ones at work who volunteer to write a job ad or a service grant proposal – we want them to apply their writing skills to help an organization and to advance their own careers. ?

## References and Recommended Readings

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