

Improving Your Students' Writing: Arts and Drafts

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More and more psychology instructors are having students write multiple drafts of research papers. This process leads to better final papers and is closer to what psychologists do when they write their own scientific work.

However, faculty members are often frustrated by the enormous amounts of time needed to comb through and respond to rough drafts. Likewise, students become frustrated and overwhelmed when their papers are returned with a mass of red ink, with every extraneous comma circled, and with each page littered with multiple occurrences of “AWK,” as if the paper were annotated by a tropical bird.

Assumptions

This Teaching Tip column provides instructors with advice on how to improve the scientific writing of their students. We start with two assumptions. First, writing well is not so much a matter of correct grammar as it is a matter of expressing ideas well. Indeed, grammatical and stylistic problems often arise from unclear thinking about one's ideas. Second, early drafts of research papers demand different types of comments than do final versions. Responses to early drafts should be supportive, helping students formulate and develop their ideas. Only later should stylistic and grammatical concerns become a focus of attention.

Our basic approach is to limit the length and number of our responses to each paper while providing students with useful and substantive comments. We spend time helping students organize their thinking and convey their ideas rather than marking every dangling modifier, vague pronoun, or split infinitive. The result is a more efficient and effective process.

We have divided this column into two sections. First, we outline general guidelines for responding to drafts. Second, we outline the common problems in drafts and suggest ways to respond to these problems.

General Tips for Responding to Drafts

Focus on Ideas and Thinking

Grammar and writing style are less important at this stage. Our major role as instructors should be to help students develop and convey their thinking. We can expect students to take more responsibility for editing their own papers once they know what they want to say. Interestingly, grammar and style often improve markedly as students discover how to think about the issues addressed in their papers.

Adopt Reader's Perspective

Share responses as a reader rather than as a critic. This will help students keep their audiences in mind and make your comments seem less punitive. For example, “I was confused when I read this; I could use more explanation,” might work better than, “This is vague and poorly written.” The former statement gives information about the experience of the audience and gives the writer direction, while the latter seems more negative and provides little direction.

Be Collegial

Teach students how psychologists work with each other by treating students as we [as scholars] treat colleagues. Good comments are ones that stimulate additional thought and productive conversations among students and between students and instructors.

Be Specific, Up to a Point

Some comments by instructors are so vague they provide no guidance at all. Others are so detailed they offer no opportunity for students to rethink their work. The goal should be to provide brief suggestions without rewriting the paper.

Anticipate Problems That Students Will Encounter

There are normal *developmental milestones* in the production of a research paper. Inform students that problems, such as the 10 listed below, are not errors or evidence of weak writing skills. Rather, they are normal and unavoidable aspects of the writing process. The process itself helps writers organize their thinking and solidify their understanding.

Forewarned that they are bound to make at least some of these mistakes, students may catch and correct them at earlier stages in writing. And, they may feel freer to take risks because they understand how impossible it is to write a perfect draft. They are also more likely to view resulting feedback on their drafts less as condemnation than as helpful guideposts.

Top 10 Problems

1. The Early Exaggeration

Many students portray their topics as the most important ever to confront humankind, or they approach the topic from such a broad perspective that they could hardly hope to adequately cover the issue even in a dissertation. For example, a paper about current student reactions to the words *politically correct* need not start with a comprehensive discussion of the history and disastrous effects of stereotypes. We need to help students understand that papers can contribute to the literature even when they address small parts of larger issues. Helpful feedback might be as follows: “My first impression was that this is a paper about stereotypes rather than a study of student attitudes. How about starting closer to your topic?”

2. Providing Partial Pictures

Students often take shortcuts and leave out important information, or they neglect to show how the information they do provide relates to their topic. For example, a student may report Smith’s assertion

that people often recover repressed memories in the late afternoon, but neglect to say whether this conclusion is based on theory, clinical experience, or empirical data. Instructors often respond to this type of problem by marking “incomplete,” or “rework.” Or, they spend an inordinate amount of time actually filling in the missing content, an activity which is understandably very agreeable to students but which does not help them become better writers. We suggest more efficient yet informative responses such as “How does Smith support this assertion?” Or, we could make a statement that highlights the importance of the audience, such as, “Readers who have not read Smith’s article may not understand the basis of this argument.”

3. The Plethora of Particulars

Including too much information in drafts often leads to the opposite problem: Too much detail makes it hard for the reader to follow the discussion. In a case study, for example, the eye color of the client, or the number of years a therapist has been in her present location, are usually not germane. In this situation, a direct statement will suffice: “Omit these details that readers don’t need.” Or, simply, “Omit unnecessary details.”

4. Data Dumping

Students often simply summarize and report what they have read, assuming that their grade will be based on the quantity of the material they present rather than on the quality of their thinking about that material. We have all encountered papers that are little more than a string of one-paragraph abstracts of each paper the student has found. An expression of curiosity rather than scorn may stimulate some thought: “I’m interested in how you relate these data to your thesis.” Or, “How do these two paragraphs tie into each other, and into the rest of your paper?”

5. Strutting Sources’ Stuff

A variant of data dumping occurs when students incorporate the conclusions of other authors, often by stringing together long quotations. In order to encourage students to do their own integration and interpretation, we might say, “You’ve read more than anyone on this topic; what sense do *you* make of the issues?” Or, “Paraphrase these quotations, and explain their significance.” Excessive use of quotations may also indicate that students have lost their focus. In this case they may need only a gentle reminder: “Omit the quotations. How do the *ideas* relate to your thesis?”

6. The Petrified Position

Students often gather and present data from a narrow and rigidly held ideological position, and they may either interpret or ignore alternative information and perspectives. For example, students may adhere to a psychodynamic viewpoint while minimizing family systems or behavioral explanations either by omitting them or by treating them as mere variants of their initial perspective. As instructors, we need to remind students of the attitude that underlies research in general, and of the creativity and objectivity necessary for good thinking. Questions such as, “How would a family systems theorist interpret these data?” or, “What are the distinctions between behavioral and psychodynamic approaches?” may stimulate a fruitful discussion.

7. Focusing on the Flashlight

Consider a paper with the objective of applying ethical principles to a given problem. Students will often devote the majority of their paper merely defining the ethical principles they have studied in class and then impulsively proffer a solution devoid of an actual application of the principles learned. When students repeat but do not apply what they have learned, it is as if they take us into an uncharted cave but spend all their time describing the flashlight rather than the cave. We might respond, “I need less definition of the principles and more about *how* they apply.”

8. The Conclusion Cliff

Students often jump precipitously from the body to the conclusion of their papers, and assume that the reader will intuitively understand their reasoning. After a careful summary of the literature on both sides of an issue, students might conclude, for example, that “serotonin indeed yields a better explanation than does norepinephrine” but provide the reader with no clue about how they moved from the conflicting set of studies to such a confident judgment. We need to encourage students to think more carefully, as well as to explain and convey their thought process to the reader: “I don’t understand how you came to your conclusions. Your reasoning is the most interesting, creative, and important part of your paper! Please share your thinking with me.”

9. The Ending Equivocation

While some students are busy jumping over the conclusion cliff and proving petrified positions, others are refusing to take any position at all at the end of their papers. They often fear making judgments or offering personal conclusions. We need to encourage them to take the risk: “After all your good analysis, I’d love to hear your personal conclusion; what is your judgment on the ethics of deceptive research?”

10. Stilted Style

Finally, there are times when the student’s writing style does overcome substance and needs to be addressed. The temptation may be quite strong for us to rewrite sentences. A better option is to point out the *types* of errors that students make rather than take it upon ourselves to mark each one. For example, we might say, “Watch out for passive voice throughout the paper,” or “You have a number of run-ons and sentence fragments.” We thus place responsibility for finding and correcting grammatical errors on students; plus, we have 20 extra minutes and lots of extra ink to spend on our crossword puzzles or rewriting our own papers.

Conclusion

By providing students with more productive feedback on draft versions of research papers, much of the frustration of both students and instructors can be avoided. The research paper should be a vehicle instructors use to help students think better and develop their own excitement and passion about psychology. When instructors are freed from responding to papers as grammarians, we can instill in students- through the writing process- more of the excitement about the ideas that attracted us to the teaching of psychology in the first place.