

## **Edit less, explain more: Using web tools to foster academic writing skills**

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### **Abstract**

Research students and early career academics need to write reasonable drafts of thesis chapters and/or manuscripts and, if they subsequently supervise their own research students or staff, substantial editing skills are also required. Rewriting of drafts for researchers may produce a higher quality publication without necessarily creating a better writer or editor. The challenges are often greater for clients from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB); however, many ESB writers also make numerous grammatical errors and/or write in a repetitive, verbose style. Although I did revise drafts comprehensively for my own research students and staff, even very experienced and/or talented team members did not necessarily improve quickly as writers or editors. This could be attributed to healthy disagreements over appropriate writing styles or a comfortable dependency on the editing I provided. Regardless of the reason, clients might still not have understood why specific changes were proposed.

Subsequently, as a writing consultant for style not content, I developed two web tools based on a numbered list of 20 writing faults. The innovation is not the list itself but rather the interactive web tool which allows clients to explore individual faults through multiple layers of explanations including corrected examples. Each number can be used to complement detailed editing of part or all of a document, or be used without any other editing to help develop skills more independently. A few of the 20 faults can be explained in writing workshops before the interactive web tool is introduced to participants, to encourage self-learning for the remaining faults. The roles that the tools and related resources can play in overcoming the limitations of feedback strategies are discussed.

### **Introduction**

It is clear that academics working with coursework students, supervisors of research students, and research managers in the Government or Corporate sectors can be frustrated by the failure of some of their clients to improve despite detailed feedback on their writing. Similarly, many editors work with the same client over time, often on different documents, and no doubt would prefer to not have to correct the same errors. Again, this is particularly relevant to editors working in the Government or Corporate sectors. My own experience over many years was that I

revised drafts comprehensively for my own research students and staff, yet even very experienced and/or talented team members did not necessarily improve quickly as writers or editors. This could be attributed to healthy disagreements over appropriate writing styles or a comfortable dependency on the editing I provided. In my new role as an Academic Writing Consultant for two university faculties, I decided that a different feedback strategy was needed particularly for younger clients who often prefer to obtain the specific information they need from internet sources.

It should be noted that the cohort of students can be a factor in influencing how effective feedback is and certainly there are additional challenges with international students e.g., with the use of articles. However, in my experience there is considerable overlap in the writing problems of research and coursework students and of native English speakers and non-English speaking background (NESB) students.

There is a large amount of academic research on feedback strategies to students on their writing skills, particularly for NESB students. A detailed analysis of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper but some of the factors that limit the effectiveness of different forms of feedback are summarised below. It is argued that providing very large amounts of editing and comments may not be the most effective approach. There is a risk of demoralising students through extremely critical feedback. A common problem is that the written feedback may not be readily understood by some students or there may be little guidance on how appropriate writing skills can be acquired. Certainly the feedback should be reasonably prompt but this is becoming a challenge for increasingly busy educators who may limit feedback to content rather than a more comprehensive approach that includes style and grammar.

Some students adopt a passive approach to their writing problems and need to be motivated to improve, for example, by linking writing skills to employment outcomes or by withdrawing convenient editing services. Research students are usually very motivated and may be well served by a “feed forward” approach where they are encouraged to apply feedback from one section of writing to subsequent sections or to other writing tasks.

To help overcome some of these challenges, I independently developed a coding system for specific types of errors, as have other academics and editors (Maguire 2008a). The more significant innovation is the much more expansive interactive web tool which matches the numbered fault types to multi-layered explanations of each fault, complete with corrected examples (Maguire 2008b). Generally I have had very positive feedback, on the usefulness of this approach, from research students and supervisors. The first tool is used in all editing I provide to research students and staff to ensure that they understand why most of changes were proposed. I encourage clients to explore their numbered faults via the interactive web tool.

The aim of this paper is to promote the use of these tools by supervisors of research students and to encourage staff, providing feedback to coursework students, to trial these tools in their

feedback strategies. They may also be useful to some editors who work repeatedly with the same clients. In this paper, the tools and the ways in which they can be used are placed in context with the feedback challenges summarised above. Ideally, adoption of these tools, by more academics and learning support staff, will help provide future opportunities for appropriate research into their effectiveness.

## Description of the tools

### The Numbered Writing Faults tool (Maguire 2008a)

This includes Faults 1-20 along with a simple example and advice (**in bold**), for the person editing, on highlighting the text that is causing the problem. This information is given below. This tool also incorporates a very simple grammar lesson, explanations of the editing symbols I use and a few key references.

1. Incorrect spelling (**highlight the word**). This may be (a) a simple error or (b) confusion between two words with different meanings but the same or similar pronunciation or (c) confusion between Australian/UK and US spelling or (d) confusion among variations on the same word group or (e) use of an informal version of word(s) in formal writing e.g., “haven’t” instead of “have not” or (f) an error in the use of possessives e.g., *team’s* as the possessive form of *teams* instead of *teams’* or (g) no fault, just two well accepted versions of spelling the same word, to convey the same meaning or (h) use of a foreign word but a distinctive letter is incomplete.
2. No subject/verb agreement (**highlight both subject and verb**) i.e., a singular subject (“dog”) requires a singular verb (“has” not “have”) e.g., The *dog* near my house *has* fleas. A special case is where there is no verb in the sentence for the subject to agree with e.g., “The music loud.” instead of “The music was loud.” or where the only verb is in a clause “The loud music which *was played* by guitarists.” (Verb = *was played*.)
3. No noun/clause agreement (**highlight both the noun & verb in the clause**). For a clause that qualifies a noun in a sentence, the verb in the clause must be consistent with the noun in terms of being singular or plural e.g., The *dog* which *lives* near my house has fleas. Note that “which *lives* near my house” is a clause and cannot be used as a stand-alone sentence as there would be no appropriate noun for the clause to qualify.
4. Mistake with an Article (**fix some of the “the/a/an/no article needed” problems for the student and highlight others**).
5. Tenses are mixed unreasonably (**highlight relevant words**) e.g., The dog *has* long hair which *needed* combing (*has* is present tense and *needed* is past tense; *needs* would be correct).

6. Parallel structure problem (**highlight words**). Internal consistency is required with the forms of words in a sentence or a short series of dot points e.g., “The pathway to heaven is via praying, giving and forgiving” not “via prayer, giving and forgiving”. A short list of dot points should all begin with the same type of word e.g. a noun; the short list for Fault 1 conforms to parallel structure, allowing for the use of articles; see Fault 4). This long list of 20 faults does not conform to parallel structure.
7. Statement not referenced or there is a referencing error (**highlight relevant statement or reference**).
8. Same word used repeatedly (**highlight each usage of that word**).
9. These text sections have the same meaning (**highlight each section**).
10. Self evident text (**highlight the text**) e.g., “The Introduction introduces the topic.”
11. Made this point already (**put a line through the sentence/paragraph**).
- 12a. Need a link word e.g., “however” (**indicate position with an arrow head**).
- 12b. Delete this link word (**highlight the word**).
- 13a. Add a topic sentence to lead into the next topic in the new paragraph (**mark position with “→”**). 13b. Delete this topic sentence (**delete text**).
- 14a. Add an interpretive summary to highlight the key issues and conflicts in a major section of text (**mark position with “→”**). 14b Delete this summary.
15. Sequence of paragraphs is not logical. **Indicate the appropriate sequence** e.g., **a, b, c, d**. (The student will have to deal with any continuity issues e.g., jargon was used in paragraph **a** but is now defined in paragraph **b**.)
16. An extra step is needed in this argument (**mark position with “→”**) e.g., a significant assumption was made by the student but this was not included in the text.
17. This text could be shortened by using an adjective or verb to replace a clause, phrase or other words (**highlight the text**) e.g., “The happy dog...” instead of “The dog which is happy...”.
18. Rewrite sentence/paragraph more directly (**highlight key information words e.g., in bold and use a contrasting highlight for less important words**). (Complement this by rewriting some of this text for the student.)
19. Text does not match table/figure e.g., an average of 22.3 given in the text but 23.2 was used in the table. (**Give table number (X) and highlight those data in text/table**.)

20. The sentence is incomplete and/or does not make sense e.g., a sentence without a verb. (Mark position with “→”.)

### The Interactive Web Tool (Maguire 2008b)

The following is the series of layers of information within this tool for just one of these faults, including the final layer for correcting the fault and applying a more direct style. The numbered list of faults is repeated but the initial text for each is a live link which allows access to the multiple layers of information. Hence each fault can be investigated out of sequence. It should be noted that this information is currently under revision to make it compatible with the information presented in the workshops I currently present to research students and staff. For example, information will be added to cover some of the exceptions to or difficult cases that conform to the rules below for subject-verb agreement. Importantly, the information below includes a technique for deconstructing a sentence so that the user can become adept at detecting the subject and verb in the main part of the sentence. Overall, the aim was to keep the wording in the document very user friendly and encouraging. Note that the references in the text below were merely invented and as such do not appear in the reference list for this paper.

## 2 No subject/verb agreement

### Short explanation (and highlighting instruction for editor)

No subject/verb agreement (highlight both subject and verb) i.e., a singular subject (“dog”) requires a singular verb (“has” not “have”) e.g., The *dog* near my house *has* fleas.

A special case is where there is no verb in the sentence for the subject to agree with e.g., “The music loud.” instead of “The music was loud.” or where the only verb is in a clause “The loud music which *was played* by a reggae band.” (*was played* is the clause’s verb). Clearly, such writing is unacceptable in formal writing. However, stand alone clauses e.g., “Which was played by a reggae band.” are used in some forms of creative writing.

### Advanced explanation with example(s)

The singular/plural status of the subject and the major verb in a sentence must be consistent. The name of an organisation is usually singular but students often match it to a plural verb, possibly because an organisation employs many people. On other occasions the complexity of the sentence defeats students. The trick, in a more complex sentence, is to temporarily delete all of the phrases and clauses so that the basic structure of the sentence becomes clear.

An example which combines both of these challenges is:

“The World Health Organisation of the United Nations argue..”. In this case “of the United Nations” is a phrase and, for just the purpose of checking the verb, it can be deleted.

We are left with:

“World Health Organisation argue..”. It is clear that Organisation is singular and that the verb has to be singular so we use “argues”. There may be potential for using abbreviations if already defined for these organisations i.e., “The UN’s WHO argues..”.

A less technical example may be easier.

“The boy, in the picture, who owns a lot of toys, are...” We temporarily get rid of the phrase “in the picture” and the clause “who owns a lot of toys” and the essence of the sentence is left “The boy are...” and there can be no doubt about the use of “is” instead of “are” i.e., “The boy, in the picture, who owns a lot of toys, is...” Notice also that the appropriate use of commas also helps us with seeing the essence of the sentence.

An example from another field may also help. “Expression of these genes overlap in the central nervous system”. If you delete the phrase “of the genes”, you are left with “Expression overlap in the central nervous system”. It is now obvious that “expression” is singular and hence we should use “overlaps”. The correct version is “Expression of these genes overlaps in the central nervous system”.

All of these examples highlight a process for achieving “subject/verb agreement”. This is probably the most common grammatical error made by students.

### **Example with a fault corrected and a more direct style applied**

An example of excessively complex writing that includes an error in the verb is given below. I adapted it from an even more complex example from a draft thesis.

“The problems and complexities of the duality of doing postgraduate research, which is applied but also attempts to make conceptual breakthroughs, as discussed by Albert (2000) who recognised that industry and academia can have different values, is evident within this project.” [41 words]

Delete two phrases. “The problems and complexities of doing postgraduate research, which is applied but also attempts to make conceptual breakthroughs, as discussed by Albert (2000) who recognised that industry and academia can have different values, is evident.”

Delete five clause-like sequences. “The problems and complexities is evident.” Clearly, the subject “problems and complexities” is plural so the verb “is” should be made plural i.e., “are”. “The problems and complexities are evident.”

However, we can write the complete statement much more directly. My suggested version is:

“This applied postgraduate research poses the dual challenges of being useful to industry and making the conceptual breakthroughs valued by academia (Albert, 2000).” [It contains 23 words and is easier to read.]

## **Discussion**

The research tools are highlighted in this paper to encourage their use by academics who teach coursework students, and supervisors of research students to use them. (They may also be useful to some editors.) The tools were developed for use with individual research students who are also supported by workshops, individual meetings on their writing skills, and a set of on-line editing exercises. There is also an on-line, comprehensive writing advice document (Maguire, 2007) which is referenced in the interactive web tool. Not all clients of academics and editors have access to such resources; however, coursework students usually have access to other writing workshops and to learning advisors who conduct individual meetings with clients.

The introduction to this paper noted some of the challenges with providing effective feedback. Below, the ways the tools can be used to address them are considered. Editing part of a document thoroughly and just highlighting faults for the remainder with fault numbers should lessen the chance that the student is overwhelmed by the feedback. This approach may motivate passive students by showing how their writing can be improved, without an editing service being provided. I also use the “feed forward” approach with research students by often editing only a part of a document and then requesting independent revision of the next section, based on assimilating the types of faults addressed in the first section. Motivating students to improve, through linking writing skills to employment outcomes, is reflected in Maguire (2007) and my research tools-based workshops.

The two challenges which the tools address most directly are avoiding feedback that confuses students or does not provide a strategy for acquiring the skills needed to overcome specific writing faults. Finally, the tools should help meet the challenge of providing timely feedback by reducing the need for staff to draft comprehensive explanations of style and grammar problems or to edit all of the text thoroughly.

## **Conclusion**

The tools are presented in this paper as efficient devices for assisting and encouraging students to improve their writing style and grammar. Feedback on the tools from supervisors, individual research students and writing workshop groups has been encouraging. However, their broad utility cannot be demonstrated without wider adoption and rigorously designed research. This research will be explored after significant revision of the interactive web tool to provide greater depth of information, albeit without altering the established list of faults covered.

## **References**

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