Enhancing Student Writing and Making Marking Manageable: Doing Both Effectively!

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University of Waterloo
http://www.uwaterloo.ca

- Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
- 36,000+ students in undergraduate and graduate programs; 3,000+ faculty
- uWaterloo specializes in Computer Science, Engineering, Math & Arts
- 20,000+ co-op students - World's largest cooperative education program
- Renison specializes in Language Studies, Social Development Studies, Religious Studies & Social Work

Renison University College
https://uwaterloo.ca/renison/
Project Objectives

Centre of Teaching Excellence Full LITE Grant

Learning Initiative (LI)
- Writing as a core practice skill
- Consistent, constructive feedback

Teaching Enhancement (TE)
- Assessment tool development
- Integrate curriculum strategies
Best practices in writing studies call for lots of practice with feedback. How much writing is called for in the Social Work curriculum?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Assignments</th>
<th># of Courses</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is good news! Students do a lot of writing during their one-year BSW program.

**Food for thought:** What kind of feedback is provided, given field instructors’ concerns?
Language has three functions:

- to communicate ideas
- to conceal ideas
- to conceal the lack of ideas

- Otto Jespersen
We examined three components:

1. student writing skills
2. student writing confidence
3. faculty experience
Student Writing

- Examined student assignments manually for general writing quality: style, grammar and mechanics
- But what about readability?
- Examined assignments electronically for readability. We developed a new macro to streamline assessments and format results (Tran, 2015)
We selected readability measures from existing tests, adding one of our own:

1. Total words
2. Mean sentence length
3. % of words in introduction
4. Passives
5. % of 9+ letter words
6. Frequency of “this”

Macro developed by Tran (2014)

1. Strips formatting in document
2. Highlights words being analyzed
3. Computes custom variables and combines with Readability Stats
What we learned . . .

- BSW results paralleled others’ results characterizing features of higher level writing (esp. “hard” word scores)

- Formal (more academic) papers were characterized by
  - Longer, denser sentences
  - More passives
  - More hard words

- Students given a template were measurably more effective (simpler words, shorter sentences, fewer passives – less blather)
## Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Sentence Length (ASL)</th>
<th>% of Students with ALS ≥ 20</th>
<th>% of Students with “Wordy” Sentence¹</th>
<th>% Words with 9 Letters or More (e.g. “Hard” Words)</th>
<th>% of Passive Sentences</th>
<th>Ease of Readability (Flesch Test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journal A (N = 28)</td>
<td>22.46</td>
<td>78.6%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10.36%</td>
<td>17.00</td>
<td>52.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal B (N = 24)</td>
<td>25.77</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>12.59%</td>
<td>18.15</td>
<td>41.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study A (N = 30)</td>
<td>24.41</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>14.39%</td>
<td>26.87</td>
<td>36.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study B (N = 28)</td>
<td>23.85</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>13.39%</td>
<td>24.25</td>
<td>42.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ “Wordy” sentences contain deadwood, tautologies, and other problems with conciseness.
What we also discovered . . .

- Students with the highest combined error and style averages received lower grades from faculty, who were marking for content only.
- All 7 of the students who took advantage of the Writing Centre appointment improved their style average by at least 40% on their next reflection and 6 of them improved their error average:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Appointment</th>
<th>Post-Appointment</th>
<th>Class Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Style Average</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error Average</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Here's what we gave students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Sentence Length (ASL)</th>
<th>% Style (wordiness and tone)</th>
<th>% Errors per 100 words</th>
<th>% Words with &gt;9 letters (aka “hard” words)</th>
<th>% “This”</th>
<th>% of Passives</th>
<th>Readability (Flesch Test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall Journal</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Case Study</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Reflection 1</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter class averages</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Watch out for:
Punctuation (commas, semicolons)
Pronouns (this)
Sentence completion
Wordiness

Of the variety of readability measures available electronically, the Flesch test is one of the oldest. It is computed automatically by Microsoft Word to represent readability on a scale of 1 – 100. The higher the score, the easier a document is to read. A score of 50 suggests that one reader out of two will experience difficulty.
## Reflection Paper Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>% of Students</th>
<th>% of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students with ALS ≥25</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with ALS ≥30</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with high overall style and error averages</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall style average ≥2.75%</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with wordy sentences</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall error average ≥2.0%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall error average ≥3.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with repeated errors in punctuation</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>58.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with ≥1.5% vague pronoun use [“this”]</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Writing Confidence

• Students not engaged in their assignments produced longer, convoluted sentences and performed less editing

• Writing confidence increased when students engaged in their assignment topics and clear direction was provided
The purpose of this study is to do an analysis to identify the characteristics of families who require housing that is subsidized with the intention of making recommendations concerning the further support that might be of use to them. (39 words)

This study identifies the characteristics of families needing subsidized housing and recommends options for further assistance. (16 words)

Focused revision makes a difference.
Faculty Workshops

- Designing effective writing assignments
- Providing feedback and grading writing assignments
- Evaluation tools and measures (i.e. rubrics)

4-point grading rubric

4  
I did all you asked and more, that is why I got a 4.

3  
I did what you asked of me, that is why I got a 3.

2  
There was more that could do, that is why I got a 2.

1  
I did not do what should be done, that is why I got a 1.
Questions for Teaching Faculty

1. Do students know your expectations?
2. If you have high expectations for good writing, do you share these with students?
3. Do you wish students paid more attention to the feedback you provide?
4. Do you provide opportunities for students to compare their work with others?
5. Do you share your love/hate relationship with writing with them?
Roger Graves’ 5 Strategies to improve writing in your courses

• Identify the genre of the assignment
• Let students know how you’ll evaluate it
• Structure in opportunities for revision
• Assign low-stakes writing
• Contact the Writing Centre
What our 2-year project taught us...

• Pay attention to Grave’s strategies
• Remember that the more specific the instruction we provide, the more responsive and readable our students’ writing
• Do one readability assessment near beginning of term and have students revise accordingly
• Experiment with scaffolding assignments
Sample Scaffolded Assignment

1. One index card reflection – response to “What is your opinion on...?”
   – I like.... I don’t like...
   – I believe.... I don’t believe...

2. Why? What support can you provide? (one page)

3. Who agrees with you? Who disagrees with you? (annotated bibliography)

4. “They say, I say” 2-3 page reflection to assess for readability

5. Edit to polish
References


