

Tips for ESL Students on Reviewing and Improving Written Work

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This article covers five practical tips for students to self-review, revise and improve the pre-submission standard of work written in English.

Introduction for Teachers

This worksheet describes five practical ideas to encourage students to improve their writing in English before it arrives on your desk. It is addressed directly to students and where feasible contains working examples of problems we often encounter in our students' writing. You may wish to have the students read it, then act on the advice, or you may isolate given suggestions and raise them in the classroom using the examples given or your own. The latter approach may be better for some students.

Dear Students

As a teacher one of the more frustrating things about checking students' writing is finding small mistakes that are (or should be) so easily picked up before the writing assignment is submitted. Another frustration is seeing words that are just too easy and simplistic--we (teachers) know that you (students) know more than you think you know! This means, you have a deep vocabulary but you don't use it enough. Of course we teachers also understand that writing is difficult and that you want to finish your homework and get on with life. In a race we can have a **false start** and then a **re-start**. You probably took a little while to start your writing: thinking, stopping, rethinking and re-starting based on a clear plan. Finishing your homework is really a **false finish** and as such needs a **re-finish**. If you take a little more time once you have **finished** a writing activity (paragraph, report, essay etc.) there can be a much more satisfactory outcome all round: for yourself, your teachers and your language ability (your grade). It might also be useful beyond your language studies and even beyond university. Here are some practical tips for you to think about and use.

Preparation

Before we start, there are a number of items that you will need:

- a set of different colour highlight pens or coloured pencils (five would be a good start)
- a record-play back source (cassette or MD)
- a thesaurus
- a friend
- a piece of your original writing

Up-grade Your Vocabulary

Most students write using their existing and largely **surface** vocabulary - words that come to you without much thought. This is understandable because, as you write and think you have to juggle many things in your mind. Your vocabulary is like an iceberg. You can only see 20% of an iceberg above the water, but most of it is below the surface. Similarly you know and recognise many more words than you actively use. You can improve your writing by up-grading, or improving, your vocabulary by **diving under the surface** for better words and expressions.

Select certain highlight pen or pencil colours for certain vocabulary items. For example, yellow for nouns, green for verbs, and other colours for adjectives, transitions and so on. Go through your writing and highlight or underline all the examples you can find. Then,

think (consider): "Is that word the best I can do?" Do the words actually (precisely) say (express) what you want to say (convey)? Can you find another, better (superior) word? Either you can think more carefully about words you know or go to a thesaurus. A thesaurus is a book like a dictionary except that it lists words of the same meaning. You can buy (purchase) print versions, Roget's Thesaurus being the most famous, but most electronic dictionaries and computers have them. I thought about many words in this paragraph and put a better word next to them in parenthesis (). One of them was the word **say**. The thesaurus on my computer suggested many words instead of **say**: *state, speak, remark, utter, express, voice, declare, pronounce*. Not all examples in a thesaurus will mean the same thing so you need to cross-reference with a dictionary to make sure it is the meaning you really want.

Try this now. Find a thesaurus and look up these words: *state, speak, remark, utter, express, voice, declare, pronounce*.

Understand Your Problems and Weaknesses

This is fairly simple: understand what kinds of mistakes you make (often very small ones) or habits you have that weaken your writing. If you don't know, look back at any work that has been corrected by a teacher. Often the same mistakes are made? Do you forget or mix up articles (a, an, the)? Are all your sentences about the same length or similar structure? You might also look at whatever writing textbook you have used and list the kinds of things that it focuses on. It might also have checklists you could use. Make a list of these things, keep it somewhere prominent and refer to it when you check your writing.

Listen to Your Writing

As you write and re-read your work, your eye and brain become used to seeing the words. In some cases you become too familiar with your own writing so you miss small mistakes. In fact,

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Hopefully your spelling is not that bad, but, one way to check is to have someone else read your work. However, that not always possible. Instead, listen to your writing. Read your own writing aloud onto a tape or MD. Even reading it aloud to yourself will help, but you have to vocalise, or say, the words clearly. As you do this you may catch some things. But, the next step is important. Replay your reading-recording to yourself as you follow along by reading your work. As you do you may:

- catch small mistakes (articles, tenses, grammar etc.)
- realise the **rhythm of your writing** is too monotonous (similar word length etc.)
- find you don't move smoothly between ideas and sections (transitions)
- see (hear, actually) you have used the same word too much or the words are too simple (vocabulary)

Pause and make corrections to your writing as you listen, and do it a number of times to be sure. At first you may be shy doing this recording and even shocked at hearing yourself speaking in a foreign language. But if you can sing in front of people at least you can do this.

This activity has benefits beyond writing as it makes you aware of your own voice and pronunciation, it also requires you to speak quite loudly and at length. Try doing the recording a few times if you need to. Try to read with expression. Are all the sentences about the same length? This will help you see if you need to vary the length of sentences by using conjunctions (e.g. so, but, and etc.).

Check Spelling in Reverse

This seems obvious and easy to do. Computers can check spelling for you. My computer spell check went crazy over the *Listening to Your Writing* section above. Electronic spell checks are not perfect.

The smell cheque on you computer can only check four worms that are knot collect.

Is something **strange** about that last sentence? My computer does not think so, but there are seven spelling mistakes! Firstly, spell check using your computer, then do it using a thesaurus. One way to do this to avoid the problem discussed in *Listening to Your*

Writing above is to read your writing backwards, in reverse. When we read we group words together in our mind. We do not (or should not) read each single word individually, so we might overlook spelling mistakes or omissions in the process. Reading from back to front makes us focus on individual words and we can more easily pick mistakes. Still, you may not catch all the mistakes so this leads us to the last suggestion.

Try this now. Find the seven mistakes and write out the correct sentence.

Find a Friend: Peer Review

It is advisable to have another person read your final product before you submit it. If it is someone in the same class or who has the same assignment you can do it as an exchange. A native speaker of the language would also be helpful, but perhaps too helpful. A native speaker who is not a teacher might tend to do too much work for you and you will not benefit in the long-term. Find a friend who is willing to spend some time on your writing and give you constructive comments, advice and criticism. If you are a friend, be honest about where you think improvements can be made. If you are the writer, be open to criticism and consider the advice you are given. Both of you would benefit from the task of **peer review**, which is what we call this. A **peer** is someone who is **equal** to you such as a classmate or fellow student. Often a peer can give you much more feedback than a teacher who might have many papers to check.

Finally

These are only five basic ideas you could use to improve the quality of your writing before you submit it. Admittedly it adds time to your writing activity. It might be time that you **invest** now rather than time **withdrawn** later by your teacher who asks you to rewrite it! I hope, however, that you can see that being a little harder on yourself after you have 'false finished' a piece of writing will result in a superior product. Earlier I used the **race** analogy: maybe the old story of the rabbit and the tortoise applies here, too. It is better to go slowly and carefully rather than race through things too quickly. Taking your time at the **re-finish** also has other positives. It makes reading your writing much more enjoyable and easier for the reader, and this is usually a teacher who is going to give you a grade. The fewer mistakes I find when I am checking papers the happier I am. I don't mean to say that you should only write to make teachers happy. What I mean is that a polished piece of writing satisfies everyone.

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