Dealing with Student Error

Introductory Notes
- Unfortunately, "correcting" final drafts doesn't make the difference most instructors would like. If no revision is required—and students are not asked to think deeply about recurring patterns of error in their work—corrections on a paper tend to be misplaced effort.
- Many of the language errors students make are rooted in problems with understanding content.
- Research on student writing development has shown that students will make even more errors when *processing new information or dealing with highly complex thinking tasks in their writing* (see Haswell 1991, for instance).

Assignment Design for Exploration and Developing Complexity
It's crucial to shape assignments that help students understand content. When students struggle to "find the right words" or their drafts demonstrate lapses/leaps of logic or other structural issues, it is often because they don't really understand the content they have been asked to master.

Writing tasks that ask students to explore concepts, teach concepts to themselves or each other, think about what they don't understand, come to better understand key terms or think about the differences of language use help them to write with more complexity about that topic.

Assignment Design Tips
- Include in-class conversation to support your students in developing increasing comfort with appropriate language/word choices.
- "Scaffold" assignments, breaking the task into smaller pieces that are submitted for comments or discussed in class. (This allows students to keep working on a piece in progress, applying what they have learned as the task unfolds.)
- Ask students to write informally or to freewrite about their topics in class. This will support them in developing a more complex approach.
- Discuss difficult readings in class, asking students to respond to the text before the discussion, then to revise their comments after the discussion.

Ask Students to Draft and Revise
Students who actually rewrite (or let their drafts develop over time) tend to develop more complex thinking and to hone surface-concerns over the course of a writing task. To support both their content acquisition and their abilities as writers:
- Offer models (of strong student responses) for discussion in class.

- Discuss as a class what sorts of conventions, forms, or other formal structures are necessary for effective writing in your field. (e.g. what does an effective thesis look like? in what ways might an author organize information? what sort of tone is most effective in an assignment of this sort. what will count as appropriate evidence?)
- In any comments you may give, focus on how well the student writer has followed the assignment guidelines or taken up a particular question posed in the prompt or class.
- Offer a set of style "rules" that they should follow as they are drafting.

Alternatives to Extensive Correction
Sometimes, it's just too hard to resist. Those irregularities, misplaced commas, or the confusion of "your" and "you're" get under your skin!

There are strategies that you can use in these moments and in your assignments themselves:
- Ask students to write to someone they know well about a topic—translating any specialized language into an every-day or conversational style. (Sometimes students will contort their language in order to sound smarter or to impress you, but—as we know— this may lend to less intelligible writing.)
- Keep in mind that all language is fluid and dynamic—constantly changing, always personal. You may want to think very carefully about your own preferences as an instructor. If you do not like the current trend to nominalize verbs, or the use of "one" to describe a person, this does not mean this usage is necessarily wrong. Think about commenting as a way to encourage a student's own highly personal voice and sense of the world. In what ways do students have a right to their own language?
- Focus on only one or two of the most frequently repeated "errors" you've noticed in a draft.
- Demonstrate how you would fix problem that repeats throughout a draft, rather than just noting the error each time you see it. (e.g. "I see that you have some issues in this draft with verb and subject agreements—keep in mind that when you use "we" you should also use "were" in this instance. You might look for other examples of this issue in the rest of your paper. Look for "am, are, were" and concentrate there. Ask me if you would like to go over how to find this in your next paper.")
- Tap into "Peer Power"—Peer review and revision can be helpful. Ask students to bring their drafts to class, pass each draft to the left and have another reader note (with an X) any issues. The students must revise before submitting their papers.
- Appoint resident "editing doctors." Select pairs of students to work as "editing doctors" early in a semester ("You two will become class experts on subject-verb agreement; you two on CSE citation form"). The pairs learn the rules in their area and other authors can consult them during or after the in-class editing workshop.
- Focus on what works. Focus your comments on students' writing strengths. When instructors highlight what students do well, students are more likely to focus on what they know how to do as writers and to see subsequent writing tasks as opportunities for new learning.