Ideas for Improving Editing Skills

Modeling editing. For many students, it can be helpful to watch as the instructor puts a piece of his or her own writing up on the screen and demonstrates how he or she would edit it, talking the thinking process out loud. First of all, it's useful for students to see that even English teachers need to edit their writing. The specifics of how the instructor edits may not be as helpful as seeing the process itself . . . how much time and effort go into editing.

Early in the semester, it's probably a good idea to model the entire revision process so that students can see that revision involves re-arranging, adding support, clarifying points, and other large scale changes. After this, modeling editing for sentence-level error at the end of this process is also important.

Minimal marking. Traditionally, the most common instructor response to student error is to mark the error perhaps by circling it and then to write an abbreviation like "frag" or "apost" in the margin. One of the common reasons students are not able to edit out many errors is that they don't see them. When we ask them to read the sentence out loud, they do so correcting the error, revealing that simply don't see the missing –ed ending or the missing –s. When we circle these errors on their papers, eliminate the possibility of their practicing their editing skills. Richard Haswell suggested, back in 1983, that we not mark errors, but simply place a check mark in the margin indicating there is an error in that line. Alternatively, you might highlight or underline sentences with errors. I like to use this "minimal marking" after we've worked on a particular grammar skill. For example, if we've worked on the major punctuation rules, I would only mark sentences with those errors. This allows students to work on both *finding* the errors and *correcting* them.

Group editing. I do a lot of this; it's one of my favorites. I divide students into groups of no more than four and give each group one copy of a student essay that I have prepared by eliminating all errors except whatever we have been working on in class. I prefer giving each group just one copy so they will work together; when I have given each person a copy, too often they work individually. I tell them what the type of error is and tell them to find and fix as many as they can in a half hour.

What I like about this exercise is we're working with real writing, not numbered sentences taken out of context. And I love to listen to the groups' conversations. I learn a lot about what is causing any confusion. Sometimes I can ask a question or point out something they've overlooked that helps them when they're "stuck."

Sometimes I give a small prize to the group that finds the most errors.

Individual editing. While group editing has its advantages—primarily that I get to listen in on their conversation and gain insight into their thought processes, I also make a great deal of use of individual editing. For this, I almost often use each students own writing—usually one of the "one pagers" that I have them write frequently. Sometimes I will give the student a quick discussion of the type of error he or she is making. Then I will give him or her a copy of a recent paper and ask that he or she edit it for just that type of error.

There are two advantages to this individual editing. First, the student is working with a piece of his or her own writing, not someone else's. Second, each student can be asked to work on a type of error he or she is making, so the exercise is tailored to each student.

Inductive grammar. Give students some data illustrating the grammar rule you want them to figure out inductively. Have them work in groups to figure out the rule. I do this by giving them 4 X 6 cards with pairs of sentences printed in black and red. The black sentences follow the rule according to Standard Written English; the red sentences contain a violation of the rule.

Here's an example:

> What can you figure out about punctuation rules from the following sentences. The sentences in black are correct; the sentences in red contain an error.
>
> Tom lives in Overlea, and his brother lives in Parkville..
> Tom lives in Overlea and his brother lives in Parkville.
>
> Drew bought a Mac, but he has not learned how to use it.
> Dres bought a Mac but he has not learned how to use it.
>
> Wendy went to the ocean, and it rained every day.
> Wendy went to the ocean and it rained every day.

Working in groups, students figure out the rule in their own words. It is important for the instructor to monitor the groups' discussions to help them when they get lost up a blind alley or when they are arriving at a conclusion that is not accurate. In these cases, a couple of leading questions can usually get them back on track.

Computers and editing. I think we have a responsibility to talk with students about the weaknesses of grammar checkers: first, they overlook a number of errors and, second, they mark some things as errors that are not errors. To demonstrate these problems I give each student a copy of the same student essay. Together, we find and highlight every sentence-level error we can. Then we run the essay through the grammar checker. Inevitably, the computer will skip some of the errors we found and highlight others that we do not think are errors.

My advice to students is not to use grammar checkers today. Perhaps, at some time in the future, they will be more effective, but right now they cause more problems than they fix.

I do urge students to use a spelling checker; checking spelling is something computers are good at.

I also urge students to use the FIND function on their computer. If they keep a list of errors they frequently make, they can use FIND to locate these and check them. For example, a student who makes errors frequently with apostrophes can use FIND to locate every apostrophe in a paper. Computers are nearly infallible at finding things, but are not very good at deciding whether they are right or wrong.

Sentence combining. In the second half of the semester, I like to introduce sentence combing to my students. Here's how it works.

I organize the class into groups and give each group a set of sentences like the following:

> My sister bought a new car.
> She bought a Volkswagen Passat.
> Her Volkswagen gets 37 miles per gallon.
> She used to own a Honda Civic.
> She totaled her Honda in an accident last week.

Their task is to combine the short simple sentences into one complex sentence that still communicates all the same information. It does not, of course, have to use all the same words.

Here are a couple of typical student answers:

> My sister totaled her Honda Civic last week, so she bought a new Volkswagen Passat, which gets 37 miles per gallon.

> My sister bought a new Volkswagen Passat, which gets 37 miles per gallon, because she totaled her Honda Civic last week.

> My sister bought a new Volkswagen, a Passat which gets 37 miles per gallon, because she totaled her Honda Civic last week.

What's always interesting is the discussion of the various groups' solutions. Students sometime ask which one is "right," which leads to a discussion of how they can all be right. Instead we focus on what the difference is in the various versions and what different effects they might have on a reader. amazingly, the students move from a focus on simple correctness to a discussion of various stylistic options.

Of course, these exercises also allow for a review of various grammar rules we've covered earlier, especially punctuation rules, the groups take delight in pointing out a missing comma or a misused semicolon in another group's solution.

Word games.

Sometimes, for the first few minutes of class or the last few, I will introduce what I call a "word game." For example, I might place the following sentence on the board and ask them whether they think the sentence is true or false or something else:

> Their is four misteaks in this sentence.

Most students will argue that it is false because there are only three mistakes: the "their," the "is," and the misspelled "misteaks." But some students will argue that the word "four" is also a mistake; it should be "three." Surprisingly, the status of the sentence is actually neither true nor false, but "something else." Notice that as soon as we agree that it is true because "four" is a mistake, "four" is no longer a mistake. And as soon as "four" counted as the fourth mistake, it is not longer a mistake because there are four mistakes. I claim that this is a sentence that flashed back and forth between being true and being false. As soon as it's true, it's false, and as soon as it's false, it's true again.

Below is a list of the kinds of word games I've used in this way. The idea is to get student to be more interested in language and to find pleasure in playing around with it.

1. Their is four misteaks in this sentence.
2. Why "I" is capitalized. It seems to have resulted from confusion between the letters I and J, which were once the same letter.
3. Why do we say this:
   > Do you have some change?
   > Yes, I have some change.

   But we don't say this:
   > Do you have some change?
   > No, I don't have some change.
4. Why does this sound funny: the German green small car
5. What's the difference between envy and jealousy?

6. What does it mean to say "It's all downhill from here." Is that good or bad?

7. Is zero singular or plural?

8. When do we say "how many," and when do we say "how much"?

9. What is the word we use to refer to an entrance to an interstate highway? Answer: an exit.

10. When to use "few;" when to use "less."

11. Play around with these decapitated/capitated; deboned/boned; de-thawed/thawed

12. What do "troops," "pants," and "scissors" have in common. Answer: they are singular in meaning but plural in form.

13. Why is it "I am going to the library," but not "I am going to the church"? Hint: notice that no one would say "church burned down last night."

14. What is the rule for forming possessives. Is this right: the queen's of England carriage?

15. What is a steep learning curve?

16. if adults commit adultery, do infants commit infantry?

17. Based on the following chart, what are "autological" and "heterological" words:

autological words	**heterological words**
short	long
polysyllabic	monosyllabic
seventeen-lettered	three-lettered