

7 Responding, correcting, and guiding

A man who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it is committing another mistake.

Confucius

- Ways of reacting to students' writing
- Ways of correcting students' work
- Ways of responding to students' work
- Peer review
- Training students to self-edit and self-correct
- Making homework successful

Ways of reacting to students' writing

In previous chapters it has been suggested that, at various stages in a writing activity, teachers should intervene with editorial comment, motivating suggestions, or language advice. Students, indeed, expect feedback on what they are doing or what they have done.

The ways we react to students' work will depend not only on the kind of task the students are given, but also on what we want to achieve at any one point. There are a number of ways of reacting (as we shall see) but these generally fall within one of two broad categories: responding or correcting.

Responding and correcting

When **responding** to our students' work we are not only concerned with the accuracy of their performance but also – and this is crucial – with the content and design of their writing. We might respond, for example, to the order in which they have made their points ('Why did you start with the story about the bus that was late? You could have begun, instead, with the problem of public transport in general.'). We might respond by saying how much we enjoyed reading their work – and then recommend that the student have a look at a book or website which has more information about the same topic. When responding, we are entering into a kind of affective dialogue with the students. That is, we are discussing their writing rather than judging it.

Correcting, on the other hand, is the stage at which we indicate when something is not right. We correct mistakes in the students' written performance on issues such as **syntax** (word order), **concord** (grammatical

agreement between subjects and verbs), **collocation** (words which live together), or word choice.

In a 'process-writing' sequence, where the teacher's intervention is designed to help students edit and move forward to a new draft, responding is often more appropriate than correcting. Our task is not to say what is unequivocally right or wrong, but to ask questions, make suggestions, and indicate where improvements might be made to both the content of the writing and the manner in which it is expressed. Feedback of this kind becomes more and more appropriate as the students' level improves and they can take advantage of such help. However, when students hand in a piece of homework we may mark it to show how correct the writing has been. This will often be the case with 'writing-for-learning' activities (see Chapter 3) and 'nuts and bolts' tasks (see Chapter 4).

The roles of the teacher

When teachers give feedback on students' written performance, they are called on to play a number of different roles. Chris Tribble suggests that at one extreme they will be seen by students as the **examiner**. Almost all teachers will set class tests or mark practice papers for the public exams their students are taking. The students will justifiably expect some kind of an objective evaluation of their performance. This role contrasts strongly with the teacher's potential as the **audience**, responding to the ideas and perceptions that the students have written about. Between these two extremes the teacher may act as an **assistant** (helping the student along), a **resource** (being available when students need information or guidance), an **evaluator** (saying how well things are going so far), or an **editor** (helping to select and rearrange pieces of writing for some kind of publication – whether in or beyond the classroom).

Students are often inclined to see the teacher as an examiner more than anything else. This is hardly surprising since it is generally teachers who mark tests and make decisions about final grades. It is therefore important to show that this is not the only role we can fulfil, especially when students are engaged in a 'writing-for-writing' activity (see page 34).

Who responds?

The previous discussion has assumed that it is always the teacher who gives feedback by responding or correcting. But this is not the case. We can also encourage students to look at each other's work and give advice and make suggestions about how it could be improved. Students become, in effect, their colleagues' audience and, sometimes, their evaluators. Such **peer review** is, as we shall see, an important element in writing activities.

What students do

Responding to students' work – and correcting it – only becomes useful if the students can do something with this feedback. This may just be the encouragement they receive from an enthusiastic teacher or from their peers – encouragement that spurs them on. But where suggestions have been

made, we expect students to at least consider their work in the light of these suggestions – and maybe act on the advice which is given.

When teachers return corrected work to their students, they should ensure that the students do not immediately put it to one side, with only a cursory glance at the grade and some of the mistakes. Good correction methods include ensuring that the students understand what the mistakes are and how they can be corrected – if possible, there and then.

As teachers it is our task to make sure students derive as much benefit as possible from our and others' reactions to their writing. However, we need to bear in mind that not all students – indeed not all writers – are as good at editing as others. Not all students are good at letting their mistakes work for them. In the end it is, to an extent, up to them to decide how much they want to (or can) take from what we or their peers suggest.

Ways of correcting students' work

Perhaps the most common way of correcting students' work has been to return it to students with a great deal of underlining, crossings-out, question marks, and the occasional tick. There may be a place for such correction, especially in test marking for example, but this kind of intensive correction can be counter-productive. There are a number of more effective ways of making correction a positive and useful experience.

Selective correction

A way of avoiding the proliferation of red ink all over a student's work is through selective correction. In other words, we do not have to correct everything. We could correct only verb tenses or only punctuation, or focus instead exclusively on word order. We might only correct paragraph organisation or the use of appropriate levels of formality. We might only correct two of the paragraphs in a composition, or only highlight mistakes in the layout of a letter.

If we are going to employ a selective approach, students need to know about it. When we tell them that this time we are only going to be looking at punctuation, they will then concentrate on that aspect of writing especially, something that otherwise they might not do. Selective correction is a good learning tool, in other words.

A way of making selective correction really effective is to discuss with students what the teacher should be looking out for. If they are part of the decision-making process, they are likely to approach the task with more commitment and enthusiasm than usual, and they will pay a great deal of attention to the area earmarked for the teacher's correction.

Using marking scales

Many teachers use a range of different marking scales when correcting written work and written tests. This means that though students may fall down on, say, grammar, they can still perhaps do well in the way they answer a task or in their use of vocabulary.

Teachers may want to give marks out of 10 for each category they have chosen for students (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, coherence, or cohesion). Together with indications of mistakes (where they occur), such marking

scales will help students to focus on the particular areas they need to work at.

Using correction symbols

In order to avoid an overabundance of red ink, many teachers use correction symbols. These also have the advantage of encouraging students to think about what the mistake is, so that they can correct it themselves. Many coursebooks include correction symbols in their writing training too.

There is no set list of symbols. Different teachers and coursebooks have their own ways of expressing different concepts. However, the following symbols are frequently used:

Symbol	Meaning	Example error
S	A spelling error	The <u>asnw</u> er is <u>obvius</u> .
WO	A mistake in word order	I like <u>very much</u> it.
G	A grammar mistake	I am going to buy some <u>furniture</u> s.
T	Wrong verb tense	I <u>have seen</u> him yesterday.
C	Concord mistake (e.g. subject and verb agreement)	People <u>is</u> angry.
∧	Something has been left out.	He told <u>∧</u> that he was sorry.
WW	Wrong word	I am interested <u>on</u> jazz music.
{ }	Something is not necessary.	He was not {too} strong enough.
?M	The meaning is unclear.	That is a <u>very excited</u> photograph.
P	A punctuation mistake	Do you like London _,
F/I	Too formal or informal	<u>Hi</u> Mr Franklin, Thank you for your letter ...

Correction symbols

The teacher writes the symbol above or next to the place in the student's writing where the problem occurs. The student, knowing what it means, makes the necessary adjustment to his or her writing.

In order for students to benefit from the use of symbols such as these, they need to be trained in their use, as we shall see on pages 118–119.

Reformulation

Reformulation is a way of showing students how they could write something more correctly. Instead of asking them to find the mistake and correct it, the teacher shows how he or she would write the incorrect sentence. The student then learns by comparing correct and incorrect versions. Reformulation is extremely useful during drafting and re-drafting.

Referring students to a dictionary or a grammar book

Sometimes teachers indicate that a mistake has been made and then tell students to go and look the problem up in a dictionary or a grammar book. If, for example, the student writes *I am not interested about sailing*, the teacher can say 'Have a look at *interested* in your dictionary'. In the same way we can suggest that students consult a grammar book if they are having tense, grammar, or word order problems. (For an example of material for training students to use a dictionary successfully in this way, see page 120.)

The advantage of referring students to books in this way is that it encourages them to look at the information with a purpose in mind. They will learn as they correct.

Ask me

Sometimes it is difficult to explain a mistake on paper, or it is impossible to understand exactly what it was the student wanted to write. In such cases teachers can ask students to talk to them so that they can sort out the problem face-to-face.

Remedial teaching

When teachers read students' written work and they come across mistakes which many people in the same class are making, remedial teaching will then be necessary. In such cases, correction can be effected by showing the whole class sentences produced by the students that exemplify the mistake and asking them to help to put them right. It is a good idea for the example mistakes to be anonymous so that no individual student feels held up to ridicule.

Ways of responding to students' work

All the examples in the previous section have been concerned with the correct use of language. Correction has been applied to issues of grammar and lexis rather than to text design or issues of content.

Many students value this kind of correction extremely highly and feel uncomfortable when other kinds of feedback are offered. Yet, if we want to respond to written work as an assistant or a guide (rather than as an evaluator or judge), for example, a focus on only lexical and grammatical mistakes will not be appropriate. Responding to our students' work is about reacting to their ideas and to how they put them across.

Responding to work-in-progress

When students are involved in a writing task in class – especially where this is part of a process sequence – teachers will often 'visit' students and talk to them about what they are writing. We may ask what a certain sentence means, or wonder why they have started a composition in a particular way, or suggest that they re-check some information they have made notes about.

When, as teachers, we are involved with work-in-progress we have to think carefully about the way we give advice or make suggestions. It is very easy to say 'I wouldn't do it like that, I would do it like this', which, because it comes from the teacher, is taken by the student to be more or less a

command. Sometimes there may be good reasons for this, and students may be very happy to receive such comments. Nevertheless, it is sometimes preferable to ask questions such as ‘Why have you done it this way?’ (asked as neutrally as possible) or ‘What do you want the reader to understand here?’, so that students have to come to their own decisions about how to revise and edit their work.

Students often get tremendous benefit from this kind of personal attention from teachers. For our part, we need to approach the task with great sensitivity, doing our best to draw decisions from the students themselves rather than telling them what to do.

However, not all students appreciate a teacher’s intervention at any stage of the writing process. Sometimes, therefore, students should be allowed to leave a sign on their desk indicating whether or not they wish the teacher to help them. A piece of paper with a cross, the words *no, thanks*, or some other symbol will tell the teacher that for the moment the student wants to work on their own. A tick or *yes, please* obviously means the opposite.

If the class is taking place in a computer lab – where students are writing individually or in pairs – the teacher can look at their work on his or her screen, and either speak to the student (using a microphone and headset), or use an editing tool such as ‘Track Changes’ (see page 114).

Responding by written comment

Sometimes our response is delivered in written form when students hand us a draft of what they are working on. In such circumstances, it is always a good idea to write down what we think is good in the students’ work. No one appreciates empty compliments, but encouragement is extremely important at this stage.

If students have written compositions about their childhood memories (see Example 4 on page 98), we may ask to see a draft version before they produce a final essay. Here it will be vital to be encouraging and helpful rather than judgmental. The teacher might write comments such as these:

I enjoyed your draft composition very much. I liked the description of your grandparents. They sound like interesting people. In some ways they are the most interesting part of your story.

I have one or two suggestions to make:

- How about starting the composition with that description of your grandparents’ house? It would be a good way in to the topic.
- I wouldn’t include the bit about your sister and the dog. It gets in the way of your story.
- Be careful with your use of past tense verbs. Check whether you should use the past simple (I ran) or the past continuous (I was running).

Written responses
to a student’s work

Such advice can be extremely useful and should help students to avoid mistakes in their final version. It will almost certainly be constructed more effectively than it would have been without the teacher's intervention. Nevertheless, as with feedback on work-in-progress, these statements from the teacher may look more like commands and may close down the students' thinking rather than encouraging it. We could instead put most of our comments in question form to overcome this, for example: 'Which part of your story would be the best way to begin your composition, do you think? How important is the incident with your sister and the dog?'

Post-task statements

At the end of a writing sequence, however long or short, teachers usually end up giving final comments. While working at a Japanese university James Muncie wondered how to make this feedback situation useful in the development of his students' writing ability, instead of being only a final evaluation. His solution is to have students write 'future' statements based on the teacher's feedback and the processes which the drafting has gone through. At the end of each assignment, therefore, they write about 'how I can improve in future writing assignments', thus taking the experience forward into forthcoming writing tasks and activities.

Taped comments

If teachers cannot give face-to-face feedback they might well consider taping their comments about a piece of student writing on tapes provided by the students. This has the advantage (for some) of allowing them to be more expansive than written responses sometimes are. Students may well enjoy getting reactions in this format since it is both more personal and more immediate than written comments at the end of a paper.

Electronic comments

A lot of feedback can now be given electronically, either via e-mail or through text editing programmes. For the growing number of students who have access to computers and do their writing via a keyboard, feedback of this kind is extremely useful.

E-mailing comments to students is an ideal way of responding to their work as it goes through various drafts, since as students work at their computers they can incorporate the comments that their tutor is making, or reply to questions that are being asked. However, teachers need to lay down guidelines here, since, without them, there is the danger that students will e-mail them every time they have a new idea, and their lives could be completely taken over by such e-mail traffic.

Text editing packages, such as the 'Track Changes' tool that comes with Microsoft's Word application, allow teachers or other responders to make amendments and corrections, and also to leave notes and questions on a word-processed document which the student can react to at the same time as they edit that document on the screen. Once 'Track Changes' is engaged, students can either accept or reject the amendments that the teacher or

Ricky Martin

Ricky Martin was born in Puerto Rico, South America on December 24, 1971. He's a singer. He sings in spanish and english and is associated with the success of latin music in the world. He won a Grammy as the best male Pop vocal Performer. He sang a song for the football world cup, "La copa de la vida". His career haven't finished. I think his career is starting now. He's very young, he's still alive.

Comment: Remember capital letters for names (including countries). Check through the text for more examples.

Deleted: He was

Deleted: the

Comment: Do you need a capital letter here?

Deleted: once

Deleted: om

Comment: The next three sentences are a bit confusing. What exactly are you trying to say? I think it's something like 'His career has only just started. He'll be around for a long time to come'. It's not that he's alive that matters, it's that he's going to go on singing. At least that's what I think you mean!

fellow student has suggested, and look, too, at the notes that have been attached to the document (see above).

A problem with this approach is that it can easily lead to the kind of over-marking we criticised on page 110. But if the relationship between teacher and student is one of sufficient trust, then the level of intrusion shown above should be acceptable.

As with all responding and correcting, teachers need to think carefully about what it is they want their students to understand as a result of the teacher's intervention. In the case of correction, we may just want to draw their attention, for example, to the fact that a tense has been misused, but at other times we may want to suggest that they should think a bit more carefully about what it is they want to say and how best to say it (as where the student above says *he's still alive*). We may want to tell them that while what they have said is perfectly correct, it doesn't express what they mean, or is said too inelegantly or idiosyncratically.

However, electronic comment and correction of this type differs from handwritten marking in one significant way – namely that it can be acted on instantly without the student having to find a fresh sheet of paper, rub things out, or make clean copies, etc. A click of the mouse accepts or rejects the changes. Typing is immediately 'clean', and a piece of correct writing can emerge within a very short space of time.

Peer review

Peer review is a valuable element in the writing process. It has the advantage of encouraging students to work collaboratively, something which, in a group, we want to foster. It also gets round the problem of students reacting too passively to teacher responses. As we have seen, it is sometimes difficult for students to see such responses from their teacher as anything other than commands which have to be obeyed. This reduces their self-reliance in the editing process. Although there are occasions where teacher correction and feedback may be extremely useful, still we want to develop our students' ability to edit and revise when they are on their own.

Peer review, therefore, is less authoritarian than teacher review, and helps students to view both colleagues and teachers as collaborators rather than evaluators. However, in order for it to be successful (especially when first introduced), students will need guidance from their teacher so that they know what to look at when they read their classmates' work.

When we ask our students to work on a new writing task, we may start by getting them to read an example in the same genre, or we may start by encouraging them to generate ideas and plans. In both cases, as we saw in Chapter 6, we will discuss what we can expect from a successful piece of writing, whether it is a report on traffic conditions, a biographical entry, a composition about 'my childhood', or a leaflet advertising a health centre. When we ask students to look at each other's drafts, therefore, we can refer them back to these discussions, so that they know what they are looking for. We can elicit from the students questions they might consider such as: 'Does the composition start in an interesting way? Is the story easy to follow?' They can look at each other's work to answer questions such as: 'Is the writing easy to understand?' or 'Is the writer's viewpoint clear?' Perhaps they could ask each other whether the language in the writing has the right level of formality, or whether enough information is given about the topic. These questions help to make peer review focused and productive. Without them, especially when students first start responding to each other's work in this way, the task may appear too amorphous for them to get to grips with.

When Victoria Chan organised a newspaper project with her class, she asked her students to consider the newspaper articles that their colleagues had written (as part of the project) in the ways we have described. She also gave them a comment form to guide them in their work:

From 'The Newspaper Project' by
Victoria Chan in *Modern English Teacher*

Comment form

When reading your classmates' texts, you could also tell them your responses to the following points:

My immediate reactions to this piece of writing are

I find the content

I like the part on

The part on could be further developed/elaborated.

You tend to

I'm not sure about

The specific language errors that I have noticed are

The best part of this writing is

Also, give suggestions on areas that need to be improved.

Although this looks highly prescriptive, nevertheless it gives student reviewers some clear points to consider, and shows how both positive and less positive comments can be useful for the editing process.

Peer review is not problem-free, however. In the first place, some students who rely on the teacher's approval may resent it, valuing their colleagues' opinions much less than their teacher's. Secondly, not all students work well together; the success of peer review may depend on exactly who is the reviewer and whose work is being reviewed. Finally, if students are not focused on the task, the quality of the feedback they have to offer may be questionable. Nevertheless, despite these dangers, getting students to help each other in the editing process can be extremely useful when handled in a sensitive and encouraging way.

Training students to self-edit and self-correct

If we want students to be able to edit their work based on teacher or peer review, or if we want them to be able to make corrections based on symbols, they need to know how to do this. Unless they know what the symbols mean, for example, the symbols won't be much use. Unless they believe in the editing process – and have some experience of it – they will not get sufficient benefit from this element of the writing process. We need, therefore, to train them to read their own work critically so that they can make corrections and changes with or without our guidance.

Finding mistakes

The first thing we need to do, when training students to edit their own work, is to enable them to notice mistakes. We can start this by putting incorrect sentences up on the board. Students come up and underline where they think the mistakes are, as here:

I don't enjoy to go to the cinema.
He like reading.
Reading is more better than watching TV.

Later we can increase the sophistication of the task by giving students a mix of correct and incorrect sentences. They have to identify the sentences which have mistakes in them, for example:

Which of the following statements and questions are correct? Put a tick or a cross in the brackets.

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----|
| a | She likes watching television. | [] |
| b | He hates playing football. | [] |
| c | She enjoys to play tennis. | [] |
| d | She is taller than her brother. | [] |
| e | Her brother is not as tall than her. | [] |

Understanding correction symbols

If we want to use the kinds of correction symbols described on page 111, students need to be familiar with them. We can foster this using a three-stage technique:

- **Stage 1** – the teacher explains that the class is going to look at symbols which indicate mistakes and then puts the symbols, one by one, up on the board. The students guess what the symbols mean before the teacher makes things clear by showing examples. If the symbol *P* has been put on the board, for example, the teacher might write up the following:

i live in new york what's your name,

By having their attention drawn by the teacher to the *i*, the *n* of *new*, and the *y* of *york*, the students are made aware of the capital letter deficit. In the same way they understand that a question mark is needed (rather than a comma) in the question.

- **Stage 2** – the teacher can copy a piece of student work onto the board, or (better still) photocopy it, or type and print it on an overhead transparency (OHT). Photocopies or OHTs are then given to students who have to find the mistakes and write correction symbols beside them. Alternatively, students can come up to the board and write their symbols on the sentences the teacher has written there.

If students have used marker pens to write symbols on an OHT, the teacher can project the transparency and discuss whether the symbols have been used correctly. Here is an example of how one group marked a **story circle** text (see page 79):

Once upon a time a ^{Sp}beautif princess lived in a castle by a river.
 She was very clever.
 She always read and studied.
 However she ~~hasnt~~^{T/ww} seen the ~~gergous~~^{sp} nature around her, where she
 was living,
 she had a ~~stem~~^{sp} mother that ~~hate~~^T her very much.
 She had a lovely dog.
 It was very ~~loyalty~~^{Gr}.
 One day, her stepmother bought a basket of red apples from the local
 market.
 The stepmother ~~putted~~^{ww} poison in ~~x~~ apples.
 Her dog saw what ~~the~~ stepmother ~~do~~, so, when the stepmother gave the
 apple to her, her dog ~~jumped~~^{ww} and ate ~~t~~ the apple. Then, the ~~P~~ dog died.

Student correction
symbols on a typed
OHT

The students can then discuss with their teacher whether the symbols have been used correctly (see, for example, 'ww' in the penultimate line), and the teacher can point out any mistakes that have been missed.

- **Stage 3** – the teacher hands the students some incorrect sentences with symbols included. The students have to identify the type of mistake (based on the symbols) and then write the sentences correctly.

Removing symbols gradually

Once students have become accustomed to the use of symbols – and to the idea that they will make corrections on their own when mistakes are indicated – teachers may want to gradually remove the help they give so that students are forced to do more of the correcting work themselves. This can occur in a number of stages:

- **Stage 1: Lines and symbols** – the teacher underlines the mistake and includes the symbol.
- **Stage 2: Underlining with no symbol** – the teacher underlines the place where the mistake occurs. The student has to work out what the mistake is.
- **Stage 3: Margin symbol** – the teacher writes the appropriate correction symbol in the margin next to the line where the mistake occurs. The student has to find out where the problem occurs and correct it.
- **Stage 4: Margin marks** – instead of using symbols, the teacher puts a mark (e.g. a cross) in the margin next to a line for every mistake there is in that line.
- **Stage 5: One margin mark** – the teacher puts a mark (e.g. a cross) in the margin next to the line, but does not say how many mistakes there are in the line. The student has to work it out.

Making corrections

When students are given back work, such as homework or drafts where their errors have been highlighted, it is a good idea if they are given time in class to rewrite the material correctly. However, it may be necessary to give them training exercises to develop their skills in correcting their work effectively. The activity on page 120 is an example of such an exercise, which is designed for dictionary training; it shows students how they can consult a dictionary (in this case) or a grammar book to help them make corrections.

It is worth repeating exercises like this from time to time to remind students how important it is to recognise and correct their mistakes, and how, each time they do this, it helps them to improve and learn more about writing in English.

A. Look at this piece of student homework.

The teacher has underlined some mistakes.

What was the student's mistake in each case?

Choose one of the following:

- a) The student used the wrong word.
- b) The student used language that was too informal, or spoken rather than written English.
- c) The student used the wrong adverb or preposition after a verb.

For example, the word **chap** in the first line is too informal. (Answer: b).

I used to know a chap called John who decided to leave school when he was only fourteen. He was more interested at money than work so he decided to rob cars. The only problem was that he worked at a snail's speed and so before long he was arrested and taken to court. He was charged with pinching a car without the owner's consent.

At his trial he pleaded good. He said he was only making a joke on people, but he was found guilty. The judge said she was appalled with the growth in childish crime and so she was going to do an example of John. She sentenced him for six years in prison.

In prison John started to study, and now he's a university professor. End of story.

B. Looking at your dictionary when you need it, correct the student's mistakes.

'Check and check again' from the Teacher's Resource Pack to accompany the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*

Error checklist

Some teachers give their students an **error checklist** for them to use when reading through what they have written. A checklist can be constructed in a very simple way, like this:

- 1 Subject-verb agreement: *he likes*, not ~~*he like*~~
- 2 Past simple or Present: *I saw him yesterday*, not ~~*I have seen him yesterday*~~

The teacher can change the error checklist depending on the particular errors that the class has been making recently.

Error checklists encourage students to edit their writing with care. The examples we have suggested have dealt with grammar, but we can equally well give them checklists on text layout and construction:

The first sentence of each paragraph should introduce the subject/topic of the paragraph.

or register checklists:

Business letters need formal greetings and 'signings-off'.

Directed questions

An alternative to checklists is to give students a series of questions for them to consider when editing their writing. We have seen an example of this in Chapter 6 where the teacher who asked students to write about their childhood experiences asked them to consider questions such as: 'Is the beginning interesting? Does it make you want to read on? Does it prepare you for what is going to come next?' Similarly, students who are working on a formal letter can be given questions such as these:

- 1 Where have you written your address? Is it in the right place?
- 2 Where is the address of the person you are writing to? Is it in the right place?
- 3 Where have you put the date? How have you written it?
- 4 What greeting have you used, and how have you signed off at the end of the letter?
- 5 What have you put in the first paragraph of the letter? Will the person reading it understand what the letter is going to be about?

Directed questions for letter writing

Discussing writing

When training students to deal with comments and corrections, it is extremely helpful to discuss these issues with them, and to hear their suggestions about how comments and corrections can best be offered and about how they themselves should respond. They may have marked views of their own which, if we can tap into them, will help the process work more effectively and smoothly.

In her book *Writing*, Tricia Hedge provides an activity where students have to decide on the relative importance of certain aspects of essay writing and then (in question 3 on page 122) compare their conclusions with the teacher's own checklist, in order to arrive at a negotiated list of priorities for successful writing.

There is no reason why we need to stick to the list in Hedge's activity. We might want to include other criteria for e-mails or business letters, for

Marking compositions

1 What do you think is most important in compositions? Put these things in order of importance (number them 1–10)

- correct grammar
- length
- originality of ideas
- spelling
- punctuation
- neat handwriting
- a good range of vocabulary
- complex and well-structured sentences
- good organisation with introduction, body, and conclusion
- keeping to the title

2 Is there anything missing from the list?

3 Find out from your teacher whether his/her criteria are:

- a. the same as those listed here;
- b. the same as your own.

4 What kind of grading system do you think is best?

- a. double (– figure + a letter) for content and language;
- b. single – a percentage out of 10;
– a grade.

5 Now use the criteria and the grading system to mark your essay.

From *Writing* by
Tricia Hedge

example. But whatever the details, such activities help to focus the students' minds on what good writing is and should be. Through discussion, they will have insights about the process which they might otherwise not have been aware of.

Making homework successful

Whether our students do the majority of their writing in class or as homework will depend both on the type of course we are teaching and on the number of hours a week that students are studying. In a general English course of only 3 hours a week, there may be little time for in-class writing, but the same will probably not be true on intensive programmes which train students for academic study. But even where students do some writing in class, we will also want them to do written homework assignments.

Homework is often seen as a rather unglamorous chore despite its obvious benefits. It is often less successful than it should be, partly because of the tasks that are set and also because of the attitude of both teacher and students. There are various ways of overcoming some of these problems.

Discussing homework issues

It is a good idea to discuss homework with students. There are various topics to talk about:

- **Why homework?** – it is worth talking with students about what homework is useful for. We can make the point that it is a time when they can study on their own, putting into practice things they have seen and learnt in class. It will help them to remember things, and to work out language and construction problems that have been puzzling them. It helps the teacher understand how well they are doing and to plan future teaching.
- **Homework load** – there is no point in setting homework that students won't or can't do because of their other commitments. Especially in a school or university setting where English is just one of the many subjects fighting for the students' attention, it is important to find out how much homework all the different teachers expect, and then get agreement from the students about how English can fit into this programme. Where students have other calls on their time, we need to discuss how much time they can realistically spend on homework. This does not mean that students should lay down the law on this subject; only that without their co-operation and agreement homework will never be very successful.
- **Appropriate homework tasks** – students will be convinced of the value of doing homework if the tasks are seen to be appropriate – or rather, if the students can see the point of doing the task. Although there is nothing wrong with saying 'do exercise G on page 26', students can sometimes think that this is not very valuable or carefully considered on the part of their teacher. They are much more likely to give time for an activity which seems useful and which fits into the activities they have been involved in.

One way of ensuring student co-operation is to ask them what kind of tasks they think would be helpful. What topics interest them? What kind of writing would they most like practice in? Students are far more likely to complete tasks which they themselves have chosen than ones which have been imposed on them. Once again, however, we are not suggesting that the teacher has no input in such discussions. He or she may well influence the students' preferences for different kinds of homework.

- **Explain the marking criteria** – it will help students if they know what the marking criteria for the homework are going to be. If we tell them that we are going to look at text organisation in particular, the students will spend more time on text organisation than they might otherwise have done. We can encourage them to concentrate especially upon spelling by making it one of our criteria. By saying what we will look at we make the homework process transparent and fair.

When homework is handed back to students they need to be given time to look at the comments and corrections that have been made so they can write correct versions of their work (or develop new drafts).

- **Punctuality and even-handedness** – it is impossible to force a student to hand in homework, although we can use all sorts of blandishments and pressure to try and get him or her to do so. Nevertheless, it will help greatly if we show that we expect homework to be handed in when we

have asked for it (rather than saying or showing that it doesn't really matter very much), and the homework procedure will benefit greatly from prompt marking on the part of the teacher. Students become extremely demotivated when the homework that they have worked hard to produce is left unmarked for an unreasonable amount of time.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have:

- discussed the difference between correcting and responding.
- looked at a number of different approaches to correction, including the use of correction symbols.
- shown how reformulation, referring students to dictionaries and grammar books, and asking students to talk to the teacher can also be extremely useful correction methods.
- detailed a number of different ways of responding to students' work – including spoken and written comments, and getting students to write post-task statements for future use.
- looked at ways of responding electronically to students' work.
- discussed the value of peer review and shown how, with judicious direction, we can help to make it a profitable part of writing.
- looked at ways of training students to use and understand various forms of correction and to edit their work.
- discussed the importance of homework and shown how getting students' agreement to it, setting appropriate tasks, and returning work promptly can all help to make it a success.

Looking ahead

- In the final chapter we will look at how writing journals can help students as writers – and also as learners.