

## Miscellaneous

A great many errors do not fall neatly into my rough categories of Grammar and Style. When students misremember the spelling of “receive,” confuse the fraternal twins “its” and “it’s,” or use the second cousin of the proper word, there is no need for a marginal note or correction. Simply circling the error puts the burden of correction on the shoulders of the writer and fosters informed independence—or at least sends him or her to a dictionary, a handbook, a thesaurus, or Writing Tutorial Services.

## Positive Commentary

You needn’t feel obliged to mark every error. Studies tell us that over-marking does more harm than good. Students may productively attend to half a dozen wavy underlines on a page, but are likely to shut down when confronted by twenty. Even if you mark only those errors that fall outside your comfort zone, you are still putting your students on notice that matters of expression are worth their attention.

Back in the Pleistocene my favorite instructor would put only a check in the margin beside a particularly well-turned phrase, and, as the saying doesn’t go, that check spoke volumes. A “good” or “well put” can be the most fruitful of comments; a scornful or ironic marginal note is unlikely to improve a student’s performance and may arouse hard feelings. As any author of seminar papers or articles knows, people grow exceedingly sensitive when they bare their intellects through writing.

## A Final Exhortation

The students in your course will be writing primarily to learn the subject matter of the course, and your comments should be aimed primarily at helping them learn. I won’t presume to tell you how best to get your subject across; I do hope that you will consider lite marking as an economical way of demonstrating to your students that style and substance are in a very real sense indistinguishable and that the quality of their prose is important only insofar as it obscures or illuminates their thinking. Finally, lite marking might free some time for asking questions of substance in the margins rather than marking errors.

{Portions of this Guide were taken from Douglas Hunt’s “No-Tears Marking.”}

## A Quick Guide to Lite Marking

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### May we agree on the truth of two premises?

Courses in disciplines other than English composition are not and should not be devoted to insuring sentence-level correctness in students’ prose.

Most teachers from disciplines other than English composition who use writing in their classes do so because it makes students’ thought visible.

Only the second premise needs elaboration. When a student’s thought is visible, the teacher can intervene (or not) in the learning process in profitable ways, watching and commenting, for example, as a writer first encounters a discipline and its forms of discourse or attempts to determine how truth is established in that discipline. The bottom line here is that teachers use writing to improve their students’ understanding of course material and to encourage them to think critically about it.

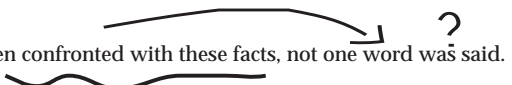
But that thinking is sometimes obscured when a student wanders outside a reader’s “comfort zone,” committing the sorts of errors that would give almost any educated reader pause. My aim here is to give you an easy method of dealing with grammatical and stylistic errors that will: 1) discourage your students from repeating them; 2) nudge your students toward independence in editing their work; 3) **allow you to do the real work of the course.**

The system of marking I propose is the product of a rare happy marriage between convenience and good pedagogy, but would hardly be approved of by the publishers of some grammar handbooks. *The Harbrace College Handbook* (9th ed., not the latest) would sternly admonish a student who wrote

When confronted with these facts, not one word was said.

to “Avoid dangling elliptical adverb clauses” (Rule 25b(3), p. 305). This is advice that we would all do well to follow, but experience tells me that very few students can understand Rule 25b(3) and that few teachers (even of composition) know when to invoke it. Here’s another way to handle that sentence:

When confronted with these facts, not one word was said.



Note the wavy line under the offending clause and the quizzical arrow pointing to “word.” I might write just “MM” (see below) in the margin rather than using these hieroglyphics. That’s all. Don’t bother to explain the rule; students can find a handbook or tutoring at Writing Tutorial Services (Ballantine 206, 855-6738). In marking the sentence in this fashion, you have in effect said “I don’t understand what this clause modifies, and your argument is consequently weakened. Please avoid this sort of error and be more precise and attentive.” If we would all circle such errors when we notice them, most students would eventually be moved to detect and correct 25b(3) and errors like it independently.

Let me suggest that you limit your marking to a few marginal notations and symbols, to wit:

### Marginal Notations

- |                                        |                                      |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1) <b>AGR</b> (agreement)              | 7) <b>//STR</b> (parallel structure) |
| 2) <b>FRAG</b> (fragment)              | 8) <b>Wordy</b>                      |
| 3) <b>MM</b> (misplaced modifier)      | 9) <b>Choppy</b>                     |
| 4) <b>CS</b> (comma splice)            | 10) <b>Unclear</b>                   |
| 5) <b>REF</b> (reference)              | 11) <b>Awkward</b>                   |
| 6) <b>PRED</b> (illogical predication) | 12) <b>Good</b>                      |

### Symbols

- 1) circles locating errors confined to one or two words
- 2) wavy underlines noting larger errors
- 3) checks praising good word choices
- 4) straight underlines highlighting well-put phrases or sentences
- 5) arrows and question marks pointing out puzzling connections of words

### Grammar—Very Loosely Defined

The experts are in surprising disagreement about what errors one must mark, but nearly all of us would agree that students should be made aware of at least the following grammatical errors:

#### 1) Errors in agreement. [AGR]

The number of fatalities have been increasing in recent years.

Everyone who plays the lottery has their chance to win.

#### 2) Sentence fragments. [FRAG]

The man crying his eyes out in the rain.

If a dog whined for even thirty seconds.

#### 3) Misplaced and dangling modifiers. [MM or DM]

Concentrating on his studies, the music was not even heard.

She had an emerald in her earlobe which was one of the biggest in the world.

#### 4) Comma splices. [CS]

Sports makes a person strong and brave, on the other hand, art makes a person gentle and sensitive.

Coleridge wrote “Frost at Midnight,” however, he did not mean Robert Frost.

#### 5) Faulty pronoun references. [REF]

Chris sent Bill a letter every day while he was in the hospital.

The shower tiles leaked and water ruined the carpet. This drove Bill over the edge.

#### 6) Illogical predication. [PRED]

The double helix model of DNA is an example of hard work.

An adherence to the Monroe Doctrine cannot imagine Nicaraguan independence and self-sufficiency.

#### 7) Parallel structure. [//STR]

I like running, cycling, and to swim.

Weber demonstrates his biases through his sources and disregarding countries that do not fit his model.

If you have difficulty locating the problems in these sample sentences, let me know—we can work together to help sharpen your eye.

### Style—More Loosely Defined Still

Dealing with stylistic problems is tricky business, because matters of style are often matters of opinion. Your opinion counts, of course, for a great deal, but a mark that means implicitly “I wouldn’t have written it that way” will make you appear arbitrary or even mean-spirited. I do think that most of us could agree in determining passages that were **wordy** (in need of condensing), **choppy** (a rough ride for the reader from one idea to the next), **unclear** (enough said), or **awkward** (tortured syntax).