

RESPONDING TO ESL STUDENT WRITING

Faculty Resource Series

Illinois Tech hosts a large population of students who are not native speakers of English. While this enriches our community greatly, it also poses some additional challenges for instructors: you may have received a paper with so many substantial language errors that it felt nearly incomprehensible, and found yourself thinking “What do I do? Should I try to start correcting everything? How can I even grade this?”

Don’t panic. You can be helpful to this student without spending hours as their copy editor. This guide will give you some strategies for how to do that.

Why is responding to international student writing challenging?

International students are writing in a second or third language when they write in English, and there are a large variety of root reasons behind why their writing may sound “off.”

Lack of familiarity with conventions of North American academic writing. We have quite a few “unspoken” rules of academic writing in North America, which are not necessarily consistent around the globe: getting to the point quickly, writing concisely, presenting ideas in the point-explanation-evidence order to which North American readers are accustomed. Students who learned academic writing in another country and language may not know about these conventions fully.

Little experience writing in English. Many ESL students have a lot of passive grammar knowledge of grammar, but little experience actually writing in English. Additionally, English grammar is a mess! Students may make the same mistakes again and again, especially with grammatical structures that break standard grammar “rules.”

Trying to translate from their first language. When speakers of a new language are not quite sure how to say something right, it is common for them to try to translate directly from their first language. However, these lexico-grammatical patterns may not actually translate well to English.

Being under time pressure. Reading and writing in a second (or third) language is time consuming. Students may be under such significant time constraints that they take “shortcuts” like copying a piece of text without providing a citation, or using generative AI to do the writing for them.

How can I respond effectively to ESL student writing?

Based on these difficulties, here are a few strategies you can use when responding to writing from an ESL student:

Strategy 1: Focus on higher-level writing concerns first.

Native and non-native speakers of English are really more similar than not when it comes to writing problems: all tend to struggle with higher-level writing concerns like argument structure, cohesion, backing up their claims, and so forth. If you are reading through a student text and notice both heavy language-level issues and higher order concerns around things like argument structure, focus on the higher-level concerns first. Remember, the student may not actually have experience in *how* to create a good written argument, per North American rhetorical standards.

Additionally, there is no need for the student to polish up the grammar in a paragraph that they are going to rewrite because of structure anyway. See our guide on “Responding to Student Writing” for help on doing this.

Strategy 2: Don’t copy edit. Rather, identify recurring issues and have the student fix those.

For all students, looking at a page full of red marks can be overwhelming. Additionally, when presented with line edits, many students will simply accept the edits without thinking critically about them and learning for next time. Save time for yourself and help your students by focusing in on 1-3 language-level errors that interfere most with the meaning and readability of their writing. For example, if a student is consistently using inappropriate transitions, simply note for the student that the transitions they chose here are not effective and explain briefly why. Ask the student to correct this on their own. If they aren’t sure how to, direct them to [the writing center](#) for help.

Strategy 3: Avoid giving inflexible language rules. Instead, explain what is off and why.

Many of us went through school learning inflexible language rules like “passive voice is best in technical writing”, “never use ‘I’ in academic writing,” or “never end a sentence with a preposition.” But English is a messy language full of contradictions and exceptions! It can sometimes feel like a favor to give a student a rule like this. However, most fixed language rules only add to the feeling of English being chaotic, and will leave the student overwhelmed and confused when they come across an exception to that rule.

Instead of giving rules, focus on explaining why a student’s language use is a problem. Perhaps they are using a word that is translated differently in their native language, or perhaps their use of active voice in a lab report adds an unnecessary focus to the agent who did the action. By focusing instead on why a usage is inappropriate or strange for the text’s purpose, you give students the chance to engage with the flexibility of the English language and set them up for success down the road.

Strategy 4: If you cannot understand the student writing, ask the student to discuss the paper with you in person.

Rather than struggling through a paper that you only half understand, shoot the student an email asking them for a quick meeting to discuss their paper. When they

arrive, assure the student they are not in any kind of trouble, but you simply had some difficulty understanding the paper and wanted to see if they would walk you through it. Ask them to summarize the argument and structure of the paper to you. If a student struggles to do this, it is sometimes effective to go paragraph by paragraph and ask, “what is the main takeaway of this part?” This strategy is usually quite effective at getting a grasp on the paper quickly, and helps you to then identify what the main problems are that the student needs to address.

Strategy 5: Grade with a clear rubric.

Sometimes as instructors, it can be hard to look past an abundance of low-level writing problems and give the student credit for what they did really well. This is where a clear rubric can come in handy: by isolating different elements of a paper and grading just on those, it can be easier to cognitively move past language problems and refocus on other parts of the paper. See our guide on “Developing Writing Rubrics” for help on doing this.

Strategy 6: Use campus resources.

If a student seems to be really struggling with reading, writing, speaking, or listening in English, make sure they are utilizing our [English Language Services \(ELS\)](#). You may also shoot their adviser a note—sometimes students fall through the cracks upon admission, and are not necessarily getting the English language support they need. In addition, you can direct students to the writing center for writing-specific help.

If you are struggling to teach students who are nonnative speakers of English, there are a few resources around campus that can help. The [Communication Across the Curriculum \(CAC\) program](#) can help you develop reading and writing curriculum and assignments; [ELS](#) can help you get your students to the right forms of language help; and the [Center for Learning Innovation \(CLI\)](#) can help you teach most effectively for a wide range of students.

A note on generative AI, Grammarly, etc.

Online tools like Grammarly or even ChatGPT can be helpful for students trying to clean up grammar and low-level language concerns in their drafts. Consider explicitly allowing students to use these for these purposes. However, in this case, the student should be using it as a tool to check grammar, not to do the work for them. Refer to Illinois Tech’s guides on generative AI and teaching for more guidance on using these well.

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