

Suggestions for Responding to Written Work

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Grammar vs. Rhetoric

What's going to throw off most readers is sentence-level stuff—word choice, odd syntactical structures, and some missing “supportive elements,” such as prepositions or verbs that don't carry strong action (Be, Do, Have, etc.) But when interacting with students and the texts they produce, **our first task is to separate any grammatical confusion from the primary rhetorical aims of the texts**—the structural “moves” of the essay. These can include:

- 1) The aims or ingredients of the essay: “Analyze the company competitive position under the lens of Porter's Five Forces” or “Describe a time when you were faced with a dilemma—how did you eventually solve the problem?”

These are usually stated and separate from the “coded” or even unstated expectations below:

- 2) A macro-level outline or organizational scheme
- 3) Paragraph-level structures, such as “Assertion-Evidence-Analysis” in body paragraphs or a particular way of setting up the introduction and thesis (or particular introductions to *avoid*).
- 4) “The evidence of critical thinking”: integrating and responding to what others have said, making assertions grounded in evidence rather than making “reaction-level” judgments, anticipating and responding to objections, and balancing, limiting, and specifying assertions.

Think about what you're asking students to do in your classes. What “moves” do you expect to see in each paper? Do these expectations build over the course of the semester? Is time set aside to teach these? It's worth mentioning that the average American freshman can usually benefit from the same rhetorical-level instruction you would give to English language learners.

Before any meaningful interaction takes place, instructors must be able to identify and clearly explain the rhetorical aims and expectations—perhaps in several different ways.

Furthermore, imagine that there are other “moves” and structures that are highly-valued in other cultures and contexts. Since our rhetorical tradition is not universal, **consider the possibility that the student is masterfully using rhetorical moves that are highly-valued in their home context, rather than botching our familiar structures due to an inadequate grasp of English.** A common example is the integration of age-old aphorisms into essays from some Asian cultures, which view this as the mark of a well-informed, sagacious thinker. (Unfortunately for the student, we call this anecdotal evidence, a bandwagon/ad populum fallacy, or an “unsubstantiated claim”!)

Oddities and their Origins

In the Writing Center, we often exchange emails with professors who are very concerned after they've read the first writing sample from an English language learner. Sometimes, we look through our records and find that the student has not visited the Writing Center, or if they have, they came in for a “brainstorming” session, eventually writing and editing the essay on their own. If it also turns out that the student has not met with the professor during the writing process, then the logical conclusion is that more involvement from the professor or from support staff would result in an improved product. The professor may have assumed that the student understood the prompt or the customary moves of analytical writing summarized above.

Sometimes, we receive emails from professors who haven't read any writing from the student yet, but notice that they are quiet in class, speak with a heavy accent in broken English, or share that they don't feel they are strong writers. Granted, these clues often do reveal a developing writer, but it's important to base conclusions on the best evidence possible. Some very strong writers exhibit all of the above "symptoms." Some very weak writers share nothing with that profile. **Consider it "best practice" to incorporate some low-stakes writing into the first week of class** so that you can work from a more accurate picture.

Some students, especially during their first one or two semesters, seek a bit of outside "help" from a translation tool. I say "help" because these tools often do more harm than good. It's rare for students at our level to plug the entire essay into a translator, but some students will use these tools for phrase-level translations and individual words. This practice is fraught with danger and we discourage it.

Special Note on Mandarin and Cantonese

Mandarin and Cantonese do not work the same way as English in terms of sentence structure and syntax, as smaller bits of phrases suffice where English would require a more "complete" phrasing. A linguist would say that Mandarin/Cantonese "does not always express grammatical subjects and copulas." Their sentences seem incomplete according to our grammatical system.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about. The following is a direct translation from a Mandarin news article into English:

"According to understanding, incident pollution reason already basically investigate clear. By Jili Chemical Limited Corp. towards Mengliu River in deliberately release chemical waste water cause."

→ *The cause of pollution is clear; Jili Corp deliberately released waste water into the Mengliu River.*

The above is a word-for-word translation; any modern translator will do a better job than this. Still, it's worth noticing patterns—fewer supportive elements, with the words creating "clouds" of meaning, like a linguistic Jackson Pollack painting. English is quite rigid about syntax compared to most other languages, and when that complete syntactical support is missing, we sort of freak out.

Compare the above translation with this sentence from a student (I've tried to help fill in the context):

"[I used to rely on a touristic view of the United States based on my previous travel experiences]: azure sky, spacious street and various colors of people. [Now that I'm here for study,] **It is simplex, with only visual scenery, but could be more closely to the ideal. In other words, travel purpose takes effect.**"

→ *...But this is overly simplistic, based on superficial/visual scenery, and could be an idealized version of reality. In other words, the purpose of travel has an effect [on one's perceptions].*

You'll notice those "word clouds" creating nebulas of meaning. It can strain a reader who's not used to it—and yes, it does need to improve to fit our high expectations here at Skidmore.

More common are low-frequency words and phrases that surprise us—again, perhaps because the translator doesn't have a native speaker's sensibility built into it, but also perhaps because the writer

lacks a native speaker's sense of what's "common, but not casual" or "academic, but not obscure." Mix these low-frequency word choices with some unique phrase structures, and you have one tricky read:

"The depressive tone"

"It is a pleasure to carry the normal habit"

"Travel is not only confronting with a new environment but also reminiscence"

"Travel with a repressive emotion"

"What is more trustful is to travel with a positive status, which is a comparison to de Botton with a grey London affection."

In local Chinese schools, students are taught that word choice is the surest sign of an advanced writer. They will be very particular about the words they choose in Mandarin/Cantonese. When these "perfect" words are plugged into a translator, the outcome can be interesting to say the least. They may also refer to a thesaurus and yearn to include more opaque words—again, based on their previous training.

You may also notice moments where the student is perhaps experimenting with the language and actually coming quite close to something that we'd recognize as skillful and articulate (we call this "hypothesis testing," and it's a good sign that the student is expanding their linguistics repertoire by crafting new sentences at the edge of their abilities). I've made some notes on an actual essay and attached it to the bottom of this guide. Read my English-to-English translation and see what you think. With the sentence-level stuff pushed aside, maybe the table is set for a more productive conversation about the direction of the paper. (Since my personal understanding of narrative is that it allows for a lot of flexibility, I only saw a few problems at the rhetorical level, but it's still a good exercise to create these English-to-English translations. It helps you get a feel for how close the writers are to producing phrases that we would understand effortlessly, as well as the seemingly arbitrary distinctions we hold about which words can go together. **It builds empathy—and expertise.**)

Your Conference Checklist

After pushing aside the linguistic underbrush, so to speak, your first job will be to get a handle on the student's writing process. Is she using a translator? (If she thinks she'll be punished or chastised, she likely won't level with you. Approach this question tactfully.) In the interest of efficiency, make sure she is not using a translator because they simply lead to more messes. She's here at Skidmore, so it's time for her to draft in English—but that's **only for her own practical efficiency**; there's no other valid reason for asking this. Calculators are usually right; translators are usually "almost right"—or worse.

Next, and perhaps most importantly, you need to address rhetorical-level concerns first. (The Writing Center is notorious for not being on the same page as the professor, who often has a more nuanced view of things. Don't rely on a student tutor if you have specific expectations that won't be obvious to an outside supporter.)

If the writer missed the point on this assignment or made moves in the text that surprised you, talk with her about it. Ask her why she chose that move, and offer an explanation for why it confused you. What did you expect to see? Is that a rock-solid expectation, or can you see validity in other patterns of organization? **Is the error related to a structure that you've gone over in class, or something you assumed students would come armed with?** As a writing instructor myself, I make these hasty assumptions often, learning the hard way not to take the students' background for granted. Very clear organizational and behavioral guidelines can save you a lot of hair-pulling. An example is below:

Example Rubric—*There are endless variations; find what works for you. You'll notice I have not applied percentage "weights" to each item, though I might for a different assignment.*

1. Behavioral Rubric

- ☐ I have thought about this topic in a focused way—I've read the text closely, I've searched for other voices (texts) that can complement the main text, and I've spent time drafting my ideas so that the essay I turn in is NOT simply my initial reaction to the topic.
- ☐ I have sought commentary for my ideas—this can come from WC tutors, but also friends and classmates.
- ☐ I have edited my essay at least twice before turning it in.
- ☐ I have paid attention to our grammar and style topics, including S-V agreement, writing complete sentences, writing concisely, and writing efficiently with appositive, gerund, and participial phrases.
- ☐ I have visited the Writing Center.

2. Content Rubric

- ☐ Followed a Context → Problem → Solution introduction structure.
- ☐ Included an argumentative thesis that does not merely explain my reaction to Packer's essay; instead, I have clarified the issue for my readers. For example, I have proposed a definition of charity and analyzed the used-clothing trade under these terms, or I have proposed another way of understanding the practice (such as globalization), analyzing the practice under those terms.
- ☐ Followed an Assertion → Evidence → Analysis body paragraph structure, and my paragraphs begin with argumentative, personal statements that are supported by evidence. I do NOT merely report or relay information from Packer's text; instead, I use pieces of Packer (and other sources) to support my assertions, which are the main focus of the essay.
- ☐ When quoting, I have followed the "Quote Sandwich" format.
- ☐ I have included at least 2 or 3 additional outside sources.
- ☐ I have followed MLA format.

3. Qualitative Portion

In addition to the above items, your instructor reserves a portion of the grade for evaluating harder-to-measure items: the overall structure of the argument, the unity of the essay (does it wander off-topic?), the strength of your reasoning, etc. Note that I WILL attempt to poke holes in your reasoning, so you might anticipate the objections I will offer and respond to them.

After the Conference

Moving forward, English language learners must begin to build a sense of high-frequency and low-frequency words and phrases. This comes through exposure (reading and listening), having meaningful and focused conversations with other writers about what they would write/say, and **time**. I recommend students create personal journals for useful phrases they encounter, with the hopes that they might be able to re-use or manipulate them. **I'd recommend that students try to notice how, when, and why writers refer to other sources, respond to those sources, hedge, limit or specify their own assertions, and balance multiple (oftentimes opposed) ideas within or across sentences.** These are the more linguistically-challenging tasks that we ask of writers here—and importantly, they are absolute part and parcel to the kinds of careful thought we expect students to demonstrate.

The Writing Center can be a valuable part of a writer's drafting and editing stage, and again she should take special note when tutors offer her those "high-mileage" items that are germane to academic discourse. Gerald Graff's *They Say I Say* has a set of stock phrases for argument, such as "While focusing on _____, X overlooks the deeper problem of _____." It's a book I think every international writer should own. The University of Manchester's [Academic Phrasebank](#) offers an online database of similar phrases that may be closer to hand than any book can be.

I highly encourage instructors to consider whether a stock phrase or template could help a student get a firmer grasp of the overall aim or the subordinate "moves" the professor expects to see. For example, I once spent an entire class day trying to explain a "re-envisioning" move that's common when analyzing advertisements and other persuasive appeals. But once I offered students a stock phrase, I could see the "click" of understanding immediately:

"I know this appears to be an ad about _____. But in fact, this ad is really about _____."
(For example, insert "littering" and "responsibility.")

This was especially useful for me because I don't always feel comfortable handing out model essays to students (even though I do think this practice can be helpful at times). Oh, and you might be interested to know that students did not regurgitate my stock phrase verbatim in their essays, although it wouldn't have bothered me if they had.

I've also developed a mini-course that trains students to use [an English corpus](#) (collection of texts from native speakers). Students can learn the shades of meaning that surround words and the patterns of their use; for example, that "eminent" means important, but can only describe people—or that "trustful" is not a possible word form. Students who are interested in putting in the time to use this tool should see me directly. Instructors should know that the time commitment involved is a bit like taking an extra 1-credit course.

Barring the above options, due to the nature of language learning and our intent to avoid the Writing Center becoming a "grammar Laundromat," **the only way to reasonably expect native-like fluency is for the student to draw from a native-speaking support system—i.e., friends and classmates.** You can help set this up through peer critiques, study groups, or keeping in touch with upperclassmen (both native and non-native speaking) who may be able to lend a hand to a struggling freshman. But even here we see drawbacks—research shows us that the student doesn't learn to correct their own errors; instead, they learn to rely on others to get by.

Grading

Some errors, being more important than others, are worth monitoring and penalizing; some other errors are simply part of the package when it comes to this group of students—a “written accent.” **Don’t expect any student to make obvious improvements during the semester when it comes to prepositions, articles, auxiliary verbs, gerund/infinitive choices, verb tense, or any small detail item that the student lacks a natural sense for.** The writer’s cognitive energies are focused on the higher-order concerns of the writing task anyway. One possible option is for students to make multiple passes, editing for one specific error type each time. But realize that many errors, having already been missed, will be missed again when editing.

I would like to report one hopeful piece of research. **When alerted that errors exist, students are remarkably effective at correcting them on their own.** Some studies show more than 90% error correction when mistakes are merely underlined or highlighted. Less-impressive studies still show substantial improvements at around 40-70%.¹ Still, this doesn’t mean that the students have “learned the rule” (in fact, they probably already knew the rule) and we can expect that student to make the same mistake in the future. In my field, we have heated discussions about whether or not articles (a/the) or prepositions can be “learned” at all, fueled by the fact that 99% of language learners never achieve native-like fluency before they die.

What may surprise instructors is that their students have likely scored very well on grammar tests (which opened the door for them to enroll at Skidmore), but muck up those same items when trying to use them **in context**. This is completely normal and the research shows fairly clearly that time spent focusing on these errors is basically wasted. Furthermore, from my personal experience, nothing creates a “needy” student faster than a draconian grader who feels that reading minor errors is beneath him or her. It just overloads things on our end, and—I can’t stress this enough—the student just won’t learn grammar in the same way they can learn physics formulas or state capitals. I realize this is not particularly encouraging, but understand that our students **do** improve greatly over four years, though mostly from the rich social environment here at Skidmore rather than from my own genius or from teachers “holding them accountable” for their errors. Start thinking about what you’re willing to read.

I suggest dividing errors into categories of importance. Are there foundational skills being taught in the class, like introduction structures, paragraph structures, quoting structures, etc.? These rhetorical-level skills can be taught and graded much more objectively than, say, “clarity” or “quality.” Do you see errors from students attempting to use those “high-mileage items”? This is a good sign. Note them, correct them, explain their importance, and let the student know that you’ll be looking for these to improve. But don’t expect “elegance” or total accuracy. Finally, **decide up front how well students can do if they nail those higher-level concerns, but do so in a very awkward way**—for me, I place the maximum penalty at 10-15%, depending on the assignment (whether it’s the first or last of the semester). It helps to consider the grade level of your students, the main focus of the course (is the content the primary aim, or is effective written communication one of the course goals?) and their future coursework (will other courses help fill these gaps, or are you the final gatekeeper?)

Looking to the Future

As instructors, you’ve probably noticed that we are undergoing a transformative moment at Skidmore. If you teach Scribner Seminars, you can expect more and more students who come with diverse writing profiles and a few who require substantial attention. We no longer rely on Westernized international

¹ See Dana Ferris’ *Treatment of Error* for a complete discussion of responding to student errors.

schools or United World College to provide the bulk of our international students, so the international students you may have taught 5 or 10 years back no longer fit the current profile. **They haven't necessarily had training rooted in our Western academic traditions, which is new for a private school with as high standards as Skidmore.** Luckily, they will be taught by professors who enjoy a firm command over the unspoken cultural practices that comprise this tradition. We can serve these students best by sharing what we know best. How lucky we are to already have many of the answers for these curious, eager students! Oftentimes, we simply need to **slow down** and embrace our role as reflective practitioner, mentor, or cultural insider.

As instructors, we need to find a balance between “burn-out” and running away from the issue altogether. The Writing Center is a very good resources, but it's no substitute for a the rhetorical expertise of an instructor *coming from the perspective of their discipline*—Art History is different from Anthropology, and the moves, structures, and concerns of expert insiders reflect these differences. Students at Skidmore actually learn a variety of “Englishes” as they write lab reports, reading responses, and senior theses. They will function across these Englishes with a “written accent.”

Remember that you don't need to turn English language learners into native speakers (you can't), and remember that correcting every little article or preposition error won't translate into long-term gains (they won't). By recognizing that grammatical concerns differ markedly from rhetorical concerns, you can contribute to a student's growth as writer and actually measure the change from the first lecture to the last day of class. Keep asking yourself, “What are my students learning?” Gauge that learning by the content that they produce, and see if you can separate that content from their grammar.

Speaking from experience, **it's best to engage these issues early** so you can get a sense of how you want to personally handle these sorts of errors. Time spent thinking about this now—and time spent working alongside these writers in your office learning what to look for and how to respond—save extraordinary amounts of effort in the future.

Also, feel free to expand this important discussion with others in your department. We should be honest with ourselves: like many other colleges, we are expanding into new geographical regions before thinking carefully *as a collective faculty* about standards, equity, and the nuances of linguistically-diverse classrooms, which few of us have been trained to address. **If we ignore the additional responsibilities that pertain to this group, we risk underserving them and even deceiving our promises to them; if we ignore legitimate concerns voiced by faculty, we risk a fractured landscape, grave inefficiencies, and a strained relationship between practitioners on the ground and our administrative decision-makers.**

I'd love to know your thoughts or respond to your questions.

Always feel free to contact me at tniles@skidmore.edu or via phone at extension 8114.

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Appendix: an "English-to-English" translation
- Read original first, then the "translation" that follows.

Short Essay #1 my travel narrative: encountering Saratoga

After the ups and downs in temperature, winter has prepared to befall here, as well as in de Botton's London. I walked on Broadway on Friday evening.

Those well-designed houses with trimmed green in the quiet blocks made me homesick. Sometimes I couldn't believe that I had already been here for half a month with the question "what is going to happen when I say goodbye to my parents at airport" solved. Besides the fall between anticipation and reality narrated in de Botton's chapter, there is also the gap between tourist's thought and native's view. I used to have another choice to retain the tourist view of US from last travel experience: azure sky, spacious street and various colors of people. It is simplex, with only visional scenery, but could be more closely to the ideal. In other words, travel purpose takes effect. My trip here is based on study pursuit initially, though the college town plays a role during the choosing process, it is still on the second stage. Otherwise the Barbados one is only for pleasure. When it comes to pleasure or happiness, people would become greedy that always expect more. "The higher expectation, the more disappointment", said in Chinese.

Saratoga did not let me down, though the wrong estimation of Google Map made me think that the town would be bigger more or less. "Any sadness I might have felt, any suspicion that happiness or understanding was unattainable, seemed to find

already encouragement in the sodden dark-red brick buildings and low skies tinged orange by the city's streetlights." (de Botton, 5) The statement of streetscape portrayed Saratoga in the way I regard, but the depressive tone was not what I wanted to offer. Before coming here, I have been notified that Saratoga is an artistic city with the fame of ballet and horse, but can't believe that they set those miscellaneous, colorful statues everywhere. The density of placement nearly overtakes the emergency blue light on campus. The travel brings me the contentment of getting surprised.

Straightly along Broadway for about four blocks, another spot here that attracted me is those vintages stores, along with there is also second-hand bookstore. Back home, I am one of those people who go to bookstore three or four times a week. It is a pleasure to carry the normal habit. Yes, visiting bookstores has already been one of my habits. The dust, stain and unorganized placement overlapped with where I used to go. Strange places cause uncertainty nevertheless familiar elements bring ease. Travel is not only confronting with a new environment but also reminiscence, which I trusted some more after first living alone from home. If you are not even satisfied with your proper life, but travel with a repressive emotion, how can travel itself or the place settle you. What is more trustful is to travel with a positive status, which is a comparison to de Botton with a grey London affection.

"There is a contrast between the vast projects we set in motion, the construction of hotels and dredging of bays, and the basic psychological knots that undermine them." (de Botton, 25) With fewer stores and fewer people, there is the congress park.

Fortunately, de Botton and I both physically travelled instead of only holding a two-dimensional or former view as des Esseintes did. My short travel in Saratoga was going to take a curtain call. I do not have such extreme emotion as he does. However, the encounters with his article and with Saratoga remind me much.

* You will notice faulty management/treatment of quotes.

"Quote sandwiches," etc. = culturally-determined practices + quite related to the level of intimacy with the target culture. Author is not unlike any new freshman in this regard.

Short Essay #1 my travel narrative: encountering Saratoga

~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

I've focused just on language/meaning, NOT rhetorical-level concerns.

After the ups and downs in temperature, winter has prepared to befall here, as just like it did well as in de Botton's London. I walked on Broadway on Friday evening.

Those well-designed houses with trimmed green in the quiet blocks made me homesick. Sometimes I couldn't believe that I had already been here for half a month ^{lawn} ^{neighborhood} ^{it's already been 1/2 a month since I reconciled/grappled with}

with the question "what is going to happen when I say goodbye to my parents at airport" solved. Besides the fall between anticipation and reality narrated in de Botton's chapter, there is also the gap between tourist's thought and native's view. I used to have another choice to retain the tourist view of US ^{the luxury of relying on my touristic} ^{based on my previous} ^{distorted view} ^{more mundane/informed/realistic} ^{contrast} ^{expectation} ^{move} ^{experience} ^{from last travel} ^{overly-simplistic} ^{based on} ^{superficial/visual} ^{and} ^{an idealized version of reality} ^{only} ^{experience: azure sky, spacious street and various colors of people} ^{It is simple, with} ^{only} ^{visual} ^{scenery} ^{but} ^{could be} ^{more closely to the ideal} ^{In other words, travel}

The purpose of travel has an effect

purpose takes effect. My trip here is based on study pursuit initially, ^{and} ^{the motivation behind my travel (i.e., features related to study and everyday living)} ^{though} ^{the} ^{only secondary} ^{college town} ^{plays a role during the choosing process, it is still} ^{on the second stage}.

In contrast, a trip to Barbados

Otherwise the Barbados one is only for pleasure. ^{But} ^① When it comes to pleasure or happiness, people ^{should be called} ^{who} ^{that} ^{always} ^{expect more}. "The higher

expectation, the more disappointment", said in Chinese. ^{VERY typical. Reference to old wisdom} ^{is highly-valued, an "insider move"} ^{in China... Not valued in our context.}

Saratoga did not let me down, though the wrong estimation of Google Map made

me think that the town would be bigger more or less. "Any sadness I might have felt,

any suspicion that happiness or understanding was unattainable, seemed to find

already encouragement in the sodden dark-red brick buildings and low skies tinged

orange by the city's streetlights." (de Botton, 5) The ^{description} statement of streetscape portrayed ^{aligned w/ my perception of Saratoga} Saratoga in the way I regard, but ^{de B's} the depressive tone was ^{stronger than my feelings toward Saratoga.} not what I wanted to offer.

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of ballet and horse^s, but can't believe that they set those ^{various/assorted} miscellaneous, colorful statues

everywhere. The density of placement nearly overtakes ^{that of} the emergency blue light ^s on campus. The travel brings me the contentment of getting surprised. ^{Even in a small city, pleasant surprises can still be found.}

Straightly along Broadway for about four blocks, another spot here that attracted me is those vintages stores, ^{among them a} along with there is also second-hand bookstore. Back

home, I am one of those people who go to bookstore three or four times a week. It is a pleasure to carry ^{on with} ~~the~~ ^s normal habit. Yes, visiting bookstores has already been one of my habits. The dust, stain and unorganized placement ^{of items} overlapped with where I used

to go. Strange places cause uncertainty, ^{means/is about} nevertheless, ^{reminded me of} familiar elements bring ease.

Travel is not only confronting ^{-ing} with a new environment but also reminiscence, which I ^{for the 1st time} value ^{away} trusted ^{some} more after first living alone from home. If you are not even satisfied

with your ^{own} proper life, ^{and} but travel with a repressive emotion, how can travel itself or the place settle you. What is more ^{reliable/useful} trustful is to travel with a ^{optimistic view/} positive status, which is ^{outlook} a ^{in contrast} comparison to de Botton ^{is} with a grey London ^{experience} affection.

"There is a contrast between the vast projects we set in motion, the construction of hotels and dredging of bays, and the basic psychological knots that undermine them." (de Botton, 25) With fewer stores and fewer people, there is the congress park.

one def. of proper = referring to one's own

hint of familiarity w/ travel narrative genre?

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the encounters with his article and with Saratoga will stay with me for a long time. remind me much.

Cohesive device
w/ "second stage"
earlier?

