Questions to Guide Students in Reflecting on Their Own Writing

Self-reflection can help students become better learners and more efficient writers. As so much of the research shows, reflection on one’s learning is central to our ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one context to another. You can help students acquire a habit of reflective practice—and help you understand them better as writers—by asking them to write about one or more of the questions below on the day their paper is due. It is usually a good idea to ask them to do this writing in class and to limit the number of reflective questions you ask them to write about for any given paper. Three is usually a manageable number.

Your goal is to prompt students to read the assignment and their own work carefully, to assess their own strengths and weaknesses as writers, and to provide other information that will help you to be a better reader of their writing.

Questions about reading the assignment, their own papers, and their peers’ responses:

- In your own words, describe the assignment to which you responded.
- Summarize your paper in six or fewer sentences; be sure to start the summary with your thesis.
- What did your other readers say about this paper?

Questions for reflecting on strengths and weaknesses as a writer, and on this piece of writing:

- How well does this paper demonstrate your strengths as a writer?
- How confident are you about this paper? Why?
- Are there places in the paper about which you feel unsure? Why?
- At this point in time, what are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?
- About how much time did you spend writing this paper?
- Describe your writing process for this paper.
- If you were to revise this paper, what changes would you make?

Questions for reporting and reflecting on what they learned from your comments on previous papers:

- What were the most useful comments you received from me on your previous paper?
- Do you have any questions about how to act on the comments you received on your last paper?
- How did you try to incorporate the advice I gave previously into this paper?
- How has your paper improved based on what you learned from writing your last paper?
- What advice about writing would you give your peers based on what you’ve learned from writing this and/or other papers?
Help Students Edit Their Own Writing

- Advise students to read their work out loud. (In tutoring sessions, when students read aloud, they typically correct as many as half of their errors themselves.) Recognize, however, that second language writers may not have developed an ear for the sound of writing in English and so may not hear errors they make.

- Suggest they read sentences out of order (e.g. from the last sentence of the paper forward) to catch errors out of a meaningful context.

- Ask students to bring copies of their paper to exchange for editing by other students. Consider giving extra credit to strong editors, whom you and/or students identify.

- Pair students by asking who is a good editor and who would like a good editor. (They can do this in writing and give to you before class.)

- Leave some class time for students to work in editing pairs. Consider giving them a list of editing guidelines and/or symbols to employ.

- Use a “cooling off” period. Collect papers the day they are due, but then give them back the next class period and ask students to proofread/edit them one more time.

- Ask students to start a personalized error log checklist to keep track of errors they frequently make and of those teachers frequently mark. The error log can address different types of errors: mechanics/grammar (e.g. there vs. their); structure/organization (e.g. transitions, signal phrase to introduce a quote/paraphrase); assignment/class/discipline specifics (e.g. correct length, correct citation style used). Students can use the error log for other assignments and courses and you can ask them to submit it with assignments. For a template, go to http://wac.gmu.edu/supporting/student_resources_landing.php (Revision).

- Decide what errors you can live with, particularly when it comes to ESL papers.

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