



Effective Guidance for Student Writing

Three rules and three questions for helping a student work on their composition

There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to helping students write effectively. Instead, this quick guide gives you several useful strategies.

Three Rules



Rule One: Writing is a process

Effective writing (or presenting) doesn't just happen on its own. Instead, strong compositions are a result of a series of steps: pre-writing, composing, feedback, and revision. Keep this in mind and remind your student about it as well. Each step is just as important the others.



Rule Two: Listen to the instructor

Most assignments will have clear instructions and criteria. Always start there. Have the student show you a copy of the assignment instructions as well as the criteria their instructor uses to grade the assignment. If either are unclear, contact the instructor directly.



Rule Three: Ask guiding questions

Effective feedback (and the language learning that comes with it) involves dialog, so avoid just giving your student the correct answer. Instead, ask them to explain their meaning, how they understand (or don't) a certain grammar point, or how they could add enriching details.

Three Questions

1. Are we just starting out?

For the pre-writing phase, here are three effective strategies to help students gather useful language elements and organize their thoughts. Pick the one you or the student like best.

- **Brainstorm.** On a piece of paper, have the student list possible subjects or details. This can be free-form, or you can guide them to create an idea map.
- **Clustering.** Have students generate useful language elements in three categories: vocabulary, grammar, and transitions.
- **Outline.** Help the student to create a hierarchical list that clearly states a main idea, at least three supporting ideas, and a conclusion to connect the subject to other areas.

2. Are we practicing?

Free-writing is an effective way to practice spontaneous writing. If your student wants some general practice (or perhaps to prepare for a test), give them an appropriate prompt and have them write for five minutes without editing or censoring themselves. They should try to write in complete sentences, and if possible, in paragraph form. After five minutes, review their writing using one of the strategies below.

3. Are we revising?

*Always **avoid** giving feedback about every single error; it's overwhelming and unproductive. Instead, there are two categories of effective revision strategies.*

Global revision

- Have students **read their writing aloud**; stop them occasionally and ask about things that aren't clear to you. Give them time to think about clarifications or new details.
- Read the composition aloud yourself and **stop at the end of each paragraph**. Summarize what you understand and ask for clarification or about what the student could add.
- Read over the entire composition and give them a **feedback sandwich**:
 - Identify what the writing does well
 - Identify recurring problems that *interfere with meaning*
 - Invite the student to address the problems together

Sentence-level revision

- Use **highlighters** to identify errors. Ask students what they think is wrong and how they might correct it.
- **Interview**: ask the student where they struggled. Then, target those phrases for the student to rewrite while you suggest helpful grammar or vocabulary.
- **Modeling**: provide a similar, correct sentence. Have the student analyze the differences.