

Grading Multilingual Students' Papers: A Practical Guide

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(for a fuller discussion, see *Grading Multilingual Students' Papers: What Are the Issues?*)

Here are some questions to consider when deciding what grade to give papers written by multilingual students, with a marking strategy suggested for each type of problem. Items #9-13 focus on challenges in grading in the sciences and social sciences, but also contain material relevant for the humanities.

1. Frequent errors in grammar, like plurals, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, modifiers, and articles.

Questions: How distracting are these errors? How many times do you stop to debate the student's meaning? If the errors are frequent and distracting, you might want to take the grade down significantly. Yet you also may want to balance your view by assessing the quality of the thinking and the level of detail at which the student is able to communicate his or her knowledge. Does the paper reflect careful reading and good critical thinking? If so, the grade can also reflect the quality of the paper's content.

Marking strategy: Point out just some instances of an error and say that they repeat. Name the error or correct it just once. Circle other problem areas but don't rewrite extensively. Point out where grammar is interfering with meaning, as verb tense errors, for example, often do. Respond to the student's content to show what has been communicated. Grammatical errors seldom exist in isolation; often the student is also struggling to express precise meaning, and your comments can focus on pointing out where thinking can be developed. Avoid being so distracted by poor grammar that you don't articulate to the student what is confused or undeveloped in his or her thinking. Often developing this thinking and improving the grasp of logical discourse can straighten out grammar or make the errors less distracting.

2. So many errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc. that the meaning doesn't come through.

Questions: Is this student able to understand the lecture, discussions, and reading material? If the student comes to talk to you and it becomes apparent that there are related difficulties in reading, listening, and speaking, he or she may need a referral to other resources such as a Writing Centre, the ELL program (for Arts and Science students only), or the Academic Success Centre.

Marking strategy: Even if this isn't a passing paper, try to find at least some area where an idea has been communicated, and point that out. Also show the students examples of areas where meaning is lost. Stress that there is a barrier in communication. This student may also need to learn basic essay or paragraph structure, so give the link to the online writing resources at www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice.

3. Paper contains much faulty word choice and few areas that are really idiomatic English.

Questions: As with grammar, diction errors can be assessed in terms of how much of a barrier they pose to communication. How frequently is meaning lost? How frequently are the connotations of a particular word unfortunate but the student's intended meaning apparent?

Marking strategy: Choose some areas where the faulty diction poses a barrier, or where it has very unfortunate connotations. Give an alternate word in these areas, and say that there are many other similar areas. Encourage the student to pay more attention to the vocabulary in the reading and to use the terms from this discipline. The mark may be lowered significantly for faulty diction, but this can be

balanced, as with grammar, by the presence of solid thinking and grasp of the course material. Again, use as a guide how well the student has communicated.

4. Paper seems disorganized and shows little grasp of paragraph development or structure.

Questions: Are you still as confused at the end as you were at the beginning? Does the paper contain much of the expected content but just in a somewhat disorderly presentation? Or does the paper really fail to develop any of the expected ideas?

Marking strategy: Before giving it a low grade or writing many comments, read it all the way through. You may want the grade to reflect the relative presence of the expected content, even if it's not presented in an orderly fashion.

5. Paper seems initially disorganized and has no stated thesis. Yet by the time you finish reading, you see where it was going.

Questions: Do the paragraphs, too, seem structured to lead up to ideas rather than stating them directly? Does this paper come together in a convincing way, even if it takes more time and patience to see its structure and intent, to grasp its meaning? Do you sense some authority in the writing?

Marking strategy: Trust your own perceptions of the quality of thinking and expression, and try to be open-minded about acceptable organization. Students may come from cultures that prefer to lead up to or allude to ideas rather than stating them outright. In some papers, though, you may have to mentally supply content that should be articulated by the student. Ask some marginal questions to show what was not communicated clearly. Be honest about your responses as a reader, but try not to be rigid about an expected structure. If you feel the writing must be more direct, mark the thesis (or some statements that could have been made into a thesis) and show the student where you expected to see it.

6. Paper is well organized and written in clear, generally correct English. Yet a closer look at it reveals many generalized and possibly illogical statements.

Questions: Are you so relieved by the surface competence of the paper that you mentally supply some of the content? Are sentences correct in terms of grammar and diction, but not actually saying much?

Marking strategy: Write some questions in the margins or at the end to show the student what doubts remain in your mind after reading his or her writing. Point out where course content may be alluded to but not expressed in appropriate detail. This student may have an intermediate grasp of English and may not fully comprehend the course lectures and readings. Or he or she may be just too uncertain of what's wanted to take the risk of expressing an original idea. Point out a few examples of places that lack sufficient explanation. In determining the grade, you may wish not to be swayed much by the surface correctness of the writing, which in cases like this may be rather formulaic.

7. Paper is not plagiarized but shows confusion in use of source material, paraphrasing vs. quoting, citations, etc.

Questions: How thorough a job of research was done? Has the student accurately understood the sources? Has the student been able to make a careful and meaningful selection of material from these sources for use in the paper? Are the sources being used to support the student's points, or are they just being summarized and used as padding?

Marking strategy: If you feel the paper is plagiarized, be sure to follow university policy, in conjunction with your course coordinator if you have one. If the paper is not plagiarized, look at how well the sources support the argument, and also at the originality of the thesis. Evaluate whether the student was able to synthesize a number of sources in one paragraph, organizing the paper

conceptually, or whether the paper is really just a long annotated bibliography, summarizing first one source and then another. Your marginal comments can point this out. Also point out where quotations are used too extensively and paraphrasing would be a better strategy.

Misunderstanding a source or using sources that don't logically support the point may have a heavy impact on a grade. On the other hand, the grade may be higher for a student who is synthesizing sources and putting forth an otherwise effective argument, yet simply hasn't developed the language skill needed for paraphrasing and ends up quoting too extensively.

8. Paper competently or even impressively reports on research, yet shows little evidence of original thinking.

Questions: Does the assignment clearly state that students are expected to critically evaluate their sources, to address opposing viewpoints, and to propose original concepts? Have students seen this kind of thinking modeled in lectures and tutorials? How essential is original thinking to this assignment? Does the writing display other types of intellectual competence?

Marking strategy: This student may have received an education that emphasized rigorous but rote learning. He or she may not understand the purpose of original thinking on an undergraduate level, and may even have difficulty believing this is truly wanted. Ask some pertinent questions in your final comment to show how one or two concepts could be developed in a more original direction. Sometimes, a student's synthesis of source materials displays strong evidence of careful thought, which may balance the lack of a more daring interpretation. Even as you prompt the student's critical development, you may wish to reward this intellectual seriousness.

(Note: Points 9-13 are especially relevant for science and social science writing, and elements are applicable to the humanities too.)

9. Scientific terms or words are misused, sometimes so seriously that the paper loses its meaning.

Questions: Can you see that if one term or word is substituted for another, the description would make sense? Has the student reversed similar or related terms?

Marking strategy: If these errors pose serious barriers to communication, you may need to lower the mark enough to warn the student that s/he needs a better grasp of terminology. However, if the student's meaning is still evident, you might weigh these errors less heavily.

10. Literature is reviewed with one source per paragraph.

Questions: Does the student elsewhere show an ability to develop concepts in the writing? Is the source material well-chosen and adequately processed? Is each paragraph focused on the pertinent details from the study, or is the presentation of the source unclear?

Marking strategy: It is likely that this student doesn't understand that the writing should be structured conceptually. While the paper's disorganization may earn it a lower mark, you may be able to put this student on the right track quickly. Include in your end comment a brief, bullet-point outline showing what should have been the main organizational sections, and mention that the references to literature need to be selected and integrated. On the other hand, if the presentation of the sources is also unclear, the student may not have a full grasp of the reading. Students may be confused as to the hierarchy of information in an article; they may be focusing on minor details but not grasping the larger points. Ask a marginal question to show what is unclear in the discussion of a particular source. Show the student what to read *for* in these texts.

11. Paragraphs jump from topic to topic and do not seem unified.

Questions: Has the point been achieved by the end of the paragraph? Does the paragraph show evidence of a process of logical thought, even if the verbal presentation of it is not the best? Or are there gaps in the explanations?

Marking strategy: If the student makes good points but doesn't present them clearly, use one paragraph as an example, marking what would make a good opening/topic sentence. Show how specific details, explanations, and supporting evidence should follow further into the paragraph. Point out that the writing should follow a general-to-specific structure.

Students may get particularly confused when comparing two items; point out that a paragraph can present first one item, and then a contrasting one, rather than hopping back and forth. If paragraphs are severely disorganized or their function in the overall analysis is not evident, you may wish to take down the mark more than if the intended function is apparent.

12. Paper contains statements that are specific and grammatically correct but extremely illogical.

Questions: Is there other evidence that the student is having overall language difficulties, perhaps also in reading and listening? Does the paper seem carelessly done, or is there evidence of effort and understanding in some areas? Or does the student simply not recognize fallacies, such as sweeping generalizations or oversimplifications, which could be remedied by qualifying the statements?

Marking strategy: These papers will usually not receive good marks. Try to strike a balance between justifying the lowered mark and giving advice that will help the student next time around. If the student needs overall language improvement, suggest some further resources (Writing Centre, ELL, group workshops). Circle some examples of faulty logic, and give a brief explanation. Avoid sarcasm.

This student may have very little writing experience in any language, so you might suggest doing practice writing, perhaps through Reading eWriting. The student may also be learning English mainly through reading scientific or technical material, and a broader exposure to the language may be needed. The ELL website has a list of suggested links for outside reading.

13. Sentences are logical, but their structure is unnecessarily complex, and the writing is difficult to follow.

Questions: Is the student mistakenly aiming at an elaborate, "high" English style, and then becoming verbally tangled? Does the student seem to think that the goal of the paper is to display a grasp of every detail mentioned in the course, rather than to apply this knowledge to a new task?

Marking strategy: The degree to which the student achieves the given task and communicates concepts should be your guide in deciding on a grade. Choose just a couple of sample sentences, and show how you would rewrite them. Avoid extensive rewriting. Show all your students (perhaps using a sample article) how clarity can be achieved in science writing by placing "old" information at the beginning of a sentence and "new" information following it, to build the explanation step by step.