

# **Individualized explanatory feedback handouts in a jiffy**

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## **Summary**

Individualized explanatory feedback handouts are used to provide a permanent record for student writers. Initially, any language that deserves attention is highlighted in the student's manuscript. Tailor-made handouts are created from a master document, and anonymized extracts from the student's manuscript are inserted. The handouts are used to enable students to correct the types of error found in their writing. Students then improve the highlighted sections of their manuscripts and discuss any issues with the tutor. Explanations and examples can be reviewed afterwards.

## **Abstract**

Given that writing conferences are conducted orally, advice may be forgotten once the writer leaves the consultation. With no permanent record to refer to, there is no easy way to recollect the advice received. Hastily written notes and pithy end-of-session summaries may be insufficient or illegible. To address this issue, individualized explanatory feedback handouts are used.

Student writers of long or short research articles in the fields of science and technology tend to make the same types of errors. Based on a corpus of 200 draft research articles, I created a master document that deals with errors of accuracy, brevity, clarity, objectivity and formality in research articles. In order to enable student writers from different disciplines to understand the explanations, an easy-to-understand theme of monkeys and bananas was chosen. For each error, there are activities, explanations, authentic anonymized extracts, further practice suggestions and references. Individualized handouts for each student writer are tailor-made from this master document.

In our writing center students submit manuscripts online and then a consultation is scheduled. Prior to each consultation, intrusive errors and the first instance of any common errors on their manuscript are identified and highlighted. A copy of the master notes is created and renamed. Then, anonymized errors from the student's manuscript are copied and pasted into the relevant sections of the individualized notes. Irrelevant sections are deleted.

Following initial questions and expectation setting, student writers are guided through the activities and extracts in the notes. After this, student writers are left to work independently to revise highlighted sections of their manuscript. The consultation resumes when the student is ready. Specific errors are discussed, and any questions are answered. After the consultation, the explanation, further practice and reference sections can be referred to.

**Abstract (550 words)**

Given that writing conferences are conducted orally, the advice may be forgotten once the writer leaves the consultation. With no permanent record to refer to, there is no easy way to recollect the advice received. Hastily written notes and pithy end-of-session summaries may not be sufficient or legible enough for the student to recall the key details. To address this issue, individualized explanatory feedback handouts are used.

Student writers submit written drafts through an online submission system. Submissions tend to be research abstracts, conference proceedings, short research articles or full research articles although other research-related documents, such as response to reviewer are also submitted. Most students submit short (4-8 page) research papers which have been vetted for content by their professor. The student writer selects up to five aspects that they suggest the tutor to focus on (e.g. coherence, clarity, noun phrases).

In this writing center all the writing tutors are full-time faculty. The tutor arranges an appointment with the student writer and prepares for the consultation by identifying key teaching points given the external constraints of submission deadlines.

One-to-one writing conferences enable tutors to pinpoint areas which student writers can develop, and provide advice either directly or indirectly on how to improve their ability to write or specifically how to improve a particular piece of writing. One problem that occurs, however, is that student writers may forget the advice or, in fact, may have never actually understood the advice given. Hastily written summary notes by the tutor or student often do not provide enough detail for the student to recollect the advice given.

In order to provide students with a more comprehensive record, a set of master notes titled common errors in research articles were created. In order to enable student writers for different disciplines to understand the explanations, an easy-to-understand theme of monkeys and bananas was chosen.

The master notes are divided into five categories based on the type of common error, namely: accuracy, brevity, clarity, objectivity and formality. Each category is divided into a number of parts, reflecting types of errors within the category (e.g. accuracy is divided into verb phrases, etc., which is in turn divided into sections, such as: tense, voice, etc.) Each section consists of five subsections namely: activity, explanation, extracts, further practice and references. The activity section is used in the consultation to convey a teaching point. The extract section, which begins with an extract taken from the student's submitted draft is also used in the consultation. The explanation, further practice and reference sections are for the student to refer to afterwards.

Prior to each consultation, intrusive errors and the first instance of common errors are highlighted on the manuscript. Based on these errors, a tailor-made version for each student is created by adding in extracts of student errors (with some anonymization), tweaking activities to reflect the research area (e.g. word choice) and deleting any irrelevant sections.

The first part of the consultation deals with any issues raised by the student writer and then moves to the teaching points identified in the student's paper and uses the tailor-made explanatory handout. After this, the student receives their paper and rewrites short sections of the paper that have been highlighted. The consultation resumes when the student is ready. Specific errors are discussed, and any questions are answered.

**Biodata**

John Blake is a research lecturer at the Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology. He has taught academic writing at universities and schools for over 20 years in Japan, Thailand, Hong Kong and the UK.