An Efficient Technique for Giving Feedback on Student Writing

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Abstract

Giving feedback on student writing can be time-consuming and exhausting. The autocorrect feature in Word can speed up the process. A list of frequent comments, along with short codes for each, can be added to a customized list of autocorrect items such that Word will replace the typed codes with the associated comments. In this session I’ll share directions for inputting a customized list in autocorrect, and how I’ve used the technique. The time that is saved by using these customized comments regarding grammar, structure, and writing style issues can be used to give students substantive feedback on content.

*Keywords:* feedback, writing, autocorrect

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According to NACE’s (National Association of Colleges and Employers) *Job Outlook 2016* survey, 70.2% of the employers surveyed said that *Communication Skills (Written)* are an attribute they seek on a candidate’s resume (“Job outlook 2016”, n.d.). This attribute ranked third, after *Leadership* (80.1%) and *Ability to Work in a Team* (78.9%), and tied with *Problem-Solving Skills* (70.2%). Yet PayScale’s *2016 Workforce-Skills Preparedness* *Report* found that writing proficiency is the most commonly lacking hard skill in recent college graduates, cited by 44% of the hiring managers surveyed (“2016 Workforce-Skills”, n.d.). (Critical thinking/problem solving was the most commonly lacking soft skill, cited by 60% of hiring managers.) What can we, as college professors, do to help our students improve their writing skills? As with any other skill, the way to improve is through practice, practice, practice. Unfortunately, along with the benefit to the students of writing assignments comes the time-consuming burden on the faculty member to provide feedback on those assignments. I’ve found a way to reduce the time spent giving written feedback to my students by using the autocorrect function in the Word program. The technique can be used in both undergraduate/graduate and traditional/online classes.

The autocorrect function is what changes a “teh” typo to “the”. While the Word program comes pre-loaded with autocorrections for words that are commonly mistyped and/or misspelled, users can add to the pre-loaded list to create their own customized list (customized lists are only available on the user’s computer). I’ve customized my list with short codes for comments I frequently give on student papers regarding grammar, structure, and writing style. Then when I type a code from my list, Word replaces the code with the lengthier comment.

The first step is to type up a list of the common comments you give to your students. Each comment can be up to 255 characters long, including spaces. Then create a short code for each of those comments. For example, I regularly suggest that students read their papers aloud before submitting them. My comment is “I suggest that you read your paper out loud, which should help you identify awkward wording, grammar issues, and incorrect sentence structure.” My code for the comment is “read”. HOWEVER, if I customize the autocorrect program to replace “read” with my comment, every time I type the word “read”, Word will change the word into the comment. So, I put an exclamation point in front of the word. My code is now “!read". Whenever I type that code, the autocorrect program replaces it with my comment.

Once you have your list of comments and codes (don’t worry – you can add to the list at any time), you’re ready to customize your autocorrect list. Here’s how:

* Open a document in Word
* Click on “File” (upper left-hand corner)
* Click on “Options” (bottom of the list)
* Click on “Proofing” (third item in list on left)
* Click on the box that says “AutoCorrect Options”
* Within the “AutoCorrect” tab there is a statement “Replace text as you type”. Be sure the box before that statement is checked
* Under that statement is a row with two cells. The first cell is labelled “Replace”, the second is labelled “With”
* Type your code in the “Replace” cell and your comment in the “With” cell
* Click “Add” then “OK”
* Now test out your code by typing it in a Word document.

When I grade an assignment, I create one Word document with a page for each student in the class, so if I have 19 students, I have a 19-page document. At the top of each page I type the student’s name (alphabetically by last name) and the topic of his/her paper. Within each page I type feedback for that student. Using the autocorrect function, I am able to quickly address common grammar, structure, and other writing style issues. The time saved using this technique allows me to spend more time giving each student substantive individualized feedback on the content of his/her paper.

In this session I will demonstrate how to create a customized list in Word. The participants will then engage in a discussion of common comments they might use to create their own customized lists. If time permits, well share other time-saving techniques that might be used in giving students feedback on their writing.

References

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