Dear students;

The First-Year English faculty would like you to have a thorough understanding of the grammar points you need to know to write (and speak) well. Towards that goal we offer you a combination of instruction (PowerPoint presentations) and grammar quizzes. When you write, we will respond to your writing by marking your paper and by marking the rubric to indicate specific items that you need to work on. This document serves as an explanation of the items found on the rubric.

**LANGUAGE USE**:

When we consider your basic writing, we consider 35 specific items.

**Basic:**

**Fragments**. When a student writes an incomplete sentence, we call it a “fragment” or an “incomplete sentence.” Now, people *speak* in fragments all the time, so this doesn’t apply to dialogue or quotations. But we need to be careful about writing incomplete sentences. A complete sentence contains both a noun and a verb. The most common fragments that I see are sentences that begin with the word “Because.” Students cut compound sentences in half but fail to remove the conjunction. The result is a fragment as “because” designates a relationship between two ideas. If only one of those ideas is present, then the sentence is a fragment and should be revised.

**Run-ons**. A simple sentence consists of two essential ingredients: a noun and a verb. You and I know that it is possible to combine simple sentences into compound sentences using conjunctions. It is also possible to create complex sentences using dependent and independent clauses. But beginning writers – especially English Language Learners like our students, have difficulty with so many basics that they learn faster when restricted to simple sentences. In simple sentences, there are a million mistakes *they cannot make*. [I’m not going to list them all here!] One of the first problems we encounter as teachers is how to teach students what a sentence is and how to recognize (and designate) sentence boundaries. I teach students that a sentence is an idea, but the basic expression of that idea requires a noun (subject) and a verb. There may or may not be an object. There may or may not be other information related to that idea (adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases). Limiting word count in sentences is a helpful step towards teaching sentence boundaries, but not a final answer. So when students do not recognize sentence boundaries (and write a run-on sentence), we mark that sentence and mark this item in the rubric. This idea is related to sentence length but is not a one-to-one correlation.

**Sentence length**. Students are told not to write a sentence over 10 words in length. The longest grammatically correct sentence I have ever read is 200+ words in a short story by Vladimir Nabokov. But that doesn’t mean I want my students to write long sentences. This idea (sentence length) is closely – but not perfectly – related to run-on sentences. So we tell our students to keep their sentence length under control. But what if a student writes a grammatically correct 39-word sentence? What do we do then? Writers need to keep in mind, not only what they want to say, but *Who is going to read their writing*? *Who is their audience*? So even if a writer *can* write a long sentence, that doesn’t mean that they should. Is it effective communication?

I tell my students that every word in a sentence is like brick, and reading is like carrying those bricks up a flight of stairs. How many “bricks” do you want to carry? Every word in a sentence must be recognized, understood in form and context, and connected to all the words preceding and all the words following it (and those relationships further shaped by the punctuation separating groups of words into sentences and paragraphs). Here, in China, at this university, the fewer the words, the better. I tell myself (not just my students) to get rid of every extra word. This makes it easier for my students to read and understand what I write (and say). So just because a student *can* write a long sentence doesn’t make it “good” writing. In China, most people will read and understand short sentences better than long sentences. There are reasons why lawyers, insurance companies, and politicians use long, winding, twisted, complicated, verbose sentences. And the reason isn’t “good” communication. Just the opposite. People most often use long sentences to intimidate readers or to disguise their message. Finally, there may situations where complex ideas require long sentences. If this is the case, so be it. But I judge this very carefully. Even complex ideas are best understood expressed in their basic elements. Good writing makes complex ideas simple. It does not make simple ideas sound more complex.

**SVO**. English is linguistically classified as a fixed-word-order language. This means that English works best when communicated in subject / verb / object word order. In some languages, you can put any word in any place and the sentence will still make sense. But not English. True, there are exceptions. We use passive language to avoid conflict (it shows politeness or respect), to express questions, or for particular points of emphasis. If you wish to emphasize the object over the subject, then the passive voice might be preferable. For example: Fifty-one votes are required to pass a bill in the U.S. Senate. If the paragraph is concerned more with the votes than the actions of the senators, then this would be the correct use of passive (OVS) voice. For more information on this, consult <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/passive-voice/>. The problem with passive language is that students often use it to “sound academic.” [Note the following revision: The problem is that students often use passive voice to “sound academic.”) They often use language to disguise weak arguments, hoping that the sound of what they say will convince a reader (as opposed to the clarity and substance of what they way). For this reason, I strongly encourage students to write in the active (SVO) voice for now. First, they need to understand what active voice is. Then they can learn when to properly use passive voice.

**Word order/location**. This category covers at least three frequent writing errors: misplaced modifiers, misplaced phrases, and misplaced adverbs. Misplaced modifiers I believe you all understand.

1. “You can survive anything life throws at you with confidence.”

2. “You got a job with a university that develops English-language skills for non-native speakers.”

Reading the above examples, you can see how the prepositional phrases can be attached to different preceding nouns. Who has the confidence, you or life? Who develops the language skills, you, the job, or the university? Our students write these kinds of things all the time. They know what they mean to say, but they cannot yet see beyond what they meant to say to see how other people might take what they read. We identify this mistake to students.

The second kind of word order / location problem is a bit trickier. What if I had written, “*You can see how the prepositional phrases can be attached to different preceding nouns by reading the above examples*”? Technically, this sentence isn’t wrong. But English works best in time-sequential format. *First* you read the examples. *Then* you see how the misplaced modifiers work. While this example is quick and convenient for me to demonstrate this point, we run across this kind of thing often in student writing. This is not something we can teach students with a lecture, a PowerPoint, or even an exercise. We recognize these points and then *show our students when they make this kind of mistake*. Again, our students might have written, “We show our students when they make this kind of mistake when we recognize these points.” You see what I mean about the time-sequence makes the sentence sound odd? This is word order / location.

The final example is easy. Adverbs (when we have to use them) should be placed next to the verb they modify. Students love to tack adverbs on to the end of sentences ~~endlessly~~. When you do this, we’ll strike it out and show you where the adverb goes (if it needs to be used at all).

**Missing words**. *This should obvious*.

**Wordy**. See my comments about sentence length. Get rid of every extra word you can. Reading is work. Make it easy for the reader. If you can say something in 7 words, then say it in 7 words. Why make the reader read 20? Good writing makes complicated points simple. It does NOT make simple points complicated!

**Verb tense**. Using correct verb tenses should be obvious to all of you.

**SV agreement**. Subject/Verb agreement. Ditto. In English, the subject [singular] *matches* the verb. The verbs [plural] *match* the subject. There is a strong correlation between students who correctly pronounce the final “s” sound in words and students who struggle with subject / verb agreement. Good reason to pay attention to pronunciation, as well. We tend to write like we speak.

**Verb phrases**. Verb phrases can have precise meaning and use. But often students write verb phrases out of carelessness or a desire to impress readers with long, wordy sentences. Consider the following example: Towards the end of the semester, students began to understand what the teacher had been saying all along. The words “began to understand” constitute a verb phrase. Now, this use may be correct if the writer is emphasizing the *beginning* of understanding. But how many times do we read long sentences with pointless verb phrases? I teach students that if the idea can be expressed with a single, active verb, then use that single, active verb. For this reason, I check verb phrases very carefully and mark and eliminate every one that I can. The most common instances are the habitual use of “helper” verbs or “state of being” verbs like has and have. Ask yourself, What really is the difference between “I have worked very hard this semester” and “I worked very hard this semester”? If the modal is necessary to express necessity or possibility, then fine. If the auxiliary is necessary to express tense or some specific purpose, then fine. Otherwise, students write verb phrases more for how they sound than what they mean. When this happens, we mark the verb phrase and mark the rubric to help guide [see the verb phrase here?] their revision. Would this sentence work better as just “guide their revision”?

**Active verbs**. Writing is composed of more elements than just “grammar.” If you think about it, “grammar” is descriptive. It is an evolved set of rules and functions that work together to make writing more organized. The problem with grammar is that people (including – and sometimes especially – native speakers) often use language in “grammatically incorrect” ways. When a Member of Parliament famously criticized Winston Churchill as a man who ended sentences with prepositions, Churchill replied, “Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put.” In other words, we end sentences with prepositions all the time – even though such use would be “grammatically incorrect.” In this regard, we have “rules” that we actually use, and other “rules” that we use *when the situation permits them*. Alternately, we could also say that we know which situations permit us to *disregard* the rules. One of the differences between speakers with native fluency and English Language Learners is that native speakers know these “alternative” rules and break regular grammatical rules “correctly.” Non-native speakers do not know those alternative rules and break grammatical code at the wrong time, in the wrong places, and generally for the wrong reasons. So, that long explanation aside, words can also be chosen for other reasons than being a correct “grammatical” use. One of the most important of those reasons is psychological implication. Good writers know this and will choose words for their effectiveness. This may be cultural association, it may be to be tactful, or it may be to be persuasive. Active verbs are verbs that imply action, and this association with action may have value in a sentence. Nobody understands this better than people who work in advertising. Would you buy a detergent that “gets the dirt out” or “muscles dirt away”? Do you want a cola that “provides” hydration, or that “quenches” thirst? On your CV, do you tell potential employers that you “got” your degree, or that you “earned” your degree? Which is more persuasive? In every instance, *active verbs convince readers*. For this reason, when a student chooses a passive verb, or a passive verb construction, when an active verb makes the sentence more effective, I mark the verb (often noting the suggestion) and mark the rubric to help the student learn and remember.

**Singular / plural**. This, too, is obvious.

**Spelling**. ‘nuff said. OK? Didya unnastan me?

**Articles and Prepositions**. Articles and prepositions are two markers whose use practically defines native proficiency. There are a million exceptions and little rules about these things. What really is the difference between “the” United States and [no article] America? And what about on and in? We ride in a car, right? Then why do we ride “on” a bus? Article and preposition use have rules, but there are so many exceptions that their use becomes almost situational. This is very confusing to English language learners, and even speakers with many years’ experience in English will have the occasional difficulty with these items. So I note these in the paper and on the rubric, but I don’t weight them the same in the final grade as I would more definitive items like correct verb tense, spelling, subject / verb agreement, singular / plural, and so on.

**Pronouns**. The most common mistake with pronouns is not actually using the wrong pronoun (though that does happen). The most common mistake is pronoun *confusion*. This is when the writer uses a pronoun following multiple nouns. The student may know exactly to which noun the pronoun refers, but the reader may not know. The fact that the reader can stop, think, and figure it out is irrelevant. The writer’s job is to make his or her meaning precisely (and effortlessly) clear. The reader should NOT have to stop and figure out what the writer meant. When I find these situations, I mark the pronoun in the text and on the rubric. Often I will draw lines from the pronoun to each of the potential noun “mates.” This illustrates the confusion to the student and should help the student to be more clear in his or her future writing.

**Conjunctions**. Conjunctions are a bit like prepositions, but not quite as confusing. Still, if a student uses the wrong conjunction, or there is a better choice of conjunctions, we mark and correct the paper and mark the rubric.

**Adverbs and Adjectives**. At the beginning and intermediate level, students learn to use adjectives and adverbs because they need to know how to use adjectives and adverbs. But at a more advanced level – in professional and academic writing – students need to learn *when* and *where* (and *why*, and to a certain degree, *how*) to use adjectives and adverbs. Adjectives are primarily descriptive, but adverbs’ primary intent is to convey an emotional context to what is stated. “I worked *very* hard this semester.” “I *diligently* prepared for every exam.” If the writer was conveying factual information, then the writer would list the specific details of their work or preparation. In other words, adverbs (in particular) are short-cuts that describe information without actually relating information. In academic and professional writing, we need to teach students to convey facts and not rely on cheap, emotional persuasion. Let the facts do the talking. For this reason, I often (though not always) strike out adverbs. This is related to both good writing and to critical thinking. Ask yourself, Which is more persuasive? “I received many awards for my hard work” or a complete list of scholarships and awards that the student earned? The facts are more persuasive than the adjective or adverb. Use them only when necessary.

**Capitalization**. In English we capitalize the first word of every sentence. This is, in addition to the preceding punctuation, a way of marking the beginning of new sentence. This is more important than you might (at first) think. Remember that we use words to compose complex thoughts. A sentence – this organized group of words – is a thought. [Compound or complex sentences will express two, or possibly three, closely-related thoughts in a single sentence.] So the capitalization not only identifies the beginning of a sentence, it also signifies the beginning of a new thought. Without the initial capitalization, you make it more difficult for the reader to understand your thoughts.

That said, English also uses capitalization to identify certain important words. These are what we call “proper nouns.” These include peoples’ names; the names of cities, states, provinces, countries, and important places; important offices and positions; and the names of tribes, religions, teams, and holidays. In other words, if something is used as a formal name, then it is capitalized.

The most common mistakes that students make is to (a) forget to capitalize the first word in a sentence and (b) to capitalize words as proper nouns that are not, in fact, proper nouns. So remember to capitalize that first word, and be careful about *Capitalizing* random words in your sentences.

One additional point. As long as we are on the topic of how to begin sentences, remember that we do NOT begin sentences with numerals. For example, you would NOT write: “1929 was the beginning of the Great Depression.” Either you would spell out the numeral, or you would change the word order to begin the sentence with a word (eg: The Great Depression began in 1929”).

**Punctuation.** For example: use necessary question marks or do not use superfluous exclamation points. Place the punctuation next to the final word. It is difficult to make mistakes with punctuation in short sentences, so this is good reason to keep sentences short! Semi-colons are the biggest problem with punctuation. We only use semicolons in two situations. First, we use semi-colons to differentiate items in a list if we are writing a list of lists (EG: I went to the grocery story for eggs, milk, and butter; the hardware store for tape, nails, and glue; and the sporting goods store for jerseys, socks, and shorts. The second instance to use semi-colons is to attach a fully dependent clause to a complete sentence. If the clause cannot stand alone as a sentence, then use the semi-colon. If it can stand alone as a complete sentence, then write it as a complete sentence.

**Spacing**. I am told that Chinese punctuation resembles characters and, as such, there is no spacing after the word or after the punctuation. Our first-year students often have trouble with this – at least for the first half-semester. If they put the punctuation in the wrong place, or if they neglect to put spaces after the punctuation, correct it in the paper and note the rubric.

**Meaning unclear.** If we cannot easily understand what the student is saying, then we indicate that the meaning is not clear. Good writing does not require decoding, translation, or some kind of interpretation. The meaning should be easily understood.

**Awkward phrase**. Sometimes we read something and we can figure out what it means, but no native speaker would ever say it this way. Torturous. Twisted. Just plain odd. This is awkward phrasing.

**Repetitious.**  Avoid pointless repetition. ~~And don’t say the same thing over and over again~~. Eliminate every extra ~~and unnecessary~~ word. Repetitions are easy to see and spot. They are also simple and easy to ~~ignore and~~ disregard. Students get into the habit of repeating themselves ~~and writing the same things over and over~~ because it helps them fill up a page ~~and complete an assignment~~. So in the interest of writing efficiently, I suggest ~~and recommend~~ that we strike though ~~and mark~~ repetitions. HOWEVER. I have learned over the years that there is another reason that students repeat themselves. Students often repeat themselves because they are not sure of what they want to say. Rather than take the time to find the precise word or phrase to express their thoughts, they will throw words at the problem hoping that (a) they will get lucky and hit the target or (b) they sound academic enough to intimidate the reader into not asking questions. So when I find pointless repetitions, I not only mark them, but I pause and ask if the student knows what he or she really wants to say. IF I get the sense that they do not, I encourage them to slow down and find the precise words to express their thoughts.

**Fronted Adverbial Conjunctions**. I have taught English in the USA, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Singapore, Dubai, China, and Cambodia. I have taught students from literally all around the world. I have only encountered fronted adverbial constructions as a problem in China. For some reason, Chinese high schools encourage students to use them. For example, consider the sentence I just wrote. “For some reason” is a fronted adverbial (and so is “for example)”. So their use can be correct. However, Chinese students like to use these things all the time. Unless the words are used correctly, and their use is absolutely essential to the meaning of the sentence, get rid of the fronted adverbial. I am told that students are given long lists of these adverbials and told to memorize and use them. But they don’t learn the proper meaning of the words, or why to use them, or when to use them. These words and phrases have precise meanings and uses. They are not used for “decoration” or to sound “intellectual.” These words and expressions have purpose. Take the expression “on the other hand.” This is used to indicate a contradictory argument or opinion. It should NOT be used randomly to demonstrate mastery of complicated sentence structure. “Furthermore” indicates that what follows adds weight to an existing argument. “Moreover” indicates that you are adding weight to an existing argument. In my experience, about 80% of the time that Chinese students use these words and phrases, they use them incorrectly. Your high school teachers told you to use them, but they didn’t teach you how to use them. So if you don’t absolutely need one of these fronted adverbial conjunctions, get rid of it!

**Absolutes**. Absolutes are words like: all, none, every, always, never, must, only, each, no one, exact, identical, best, flawless, and final. In fact, much to my surprise, when I researched this point I found that there are 205 words listed as “absolutes.” Sometimes students carelessly write something like “everybody loves chocolate.” Well, chocolate may be popular, but the truth is that some people do NOT like chocolate. So be careful when you use words with an absolute meaning. If you say everybody – you must mean *everybody*. And if it is possible that the absolute word is not correct, then use a different adjective that conveys the meaning correctly. For example, “Most people like chocolate” or “Many people like chocolate.”

**Clichés**. If you’ve seen one you’ve seen ‘em all. However, there’s an important difference in the way that native speakers and language learners use clichés. Native speakers often (perhaps *most* often) use clichés as a kind of satire or for comic relief. Native speakers are taught NOT to use clichés to convey important information. But non-native speakers are taught to USE clichés (perhaps to demonstrate their understanding of English). The result is a real pickle. Sometimes our students produce almost hilarious strings of clichés, while native speakers avoid them like the plague. While it is true that clichés have a basic meaning, native speakers steer clear of clichés, while language-learners hang on to clichés for dear life. Why might they do this? Perhaps clichés provide a safe (and easy) way to convey complicated meanings in grammatically correct ways. Or their use may mask a deficiency in overall vocabulary. In any event, though there is no hard-and-fast-rule concerning clichés, my rule-of-thumb is to stamp them out and encourage our students to think and develop vocabulary rather than take the easy way out. Now, how many run-of-the-mill clichés did you find in this piece-of-work? (I count 11).

**Slang.** While we want our writing to be conversational, we do not want it to be so informal that it degenerates into “slang.” A typical dictionary defines slang as: “a type of language that consists of words and phrases that are regarded as very informal, are more common in speech than writing, and are typically restricted to a particular context or group of people. For example,

*grass* is slang for marijuana.” You can find long lists of slang words online. Another example of slang words are acronyms such as GOAT (when used to mean “greatest of all time.” In college-level and professional writing, keep your voice conversational, but please avoid slang.

**Hyperbole**. The Cambridge Dictionary defines hyperbole as “a way of speaking or writing that makes someone or something sound much bigger, better, smaller, worse, more unusual, etc., than they are.” It further offers the example: “Although he’s not given to hyperbole, Ron says we are *light-years ahead of our time*.” (this is also a cliché!) Please avoid hyperbole – and this includes being careful only to use “absolutes” such as always and never ONLY when you mean “always” or “never.”

**Profanity**. We may (or may not) use profanity in common, relaxed conversation with our friends, but unless someone has a very specific purpose in mind, we should NOT use profanity in academic or professional writing.

**ADVANCED LANGUAGE USE:**

**Qualifying Language**. The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) defines qualifying language as: “words or phrases that are added to another word to modify its meaning, either by limiting it (He was *somewhat* busy) or by enhancing it (The dog was *very* cute).” Qualifiers are important because they tell the reader how confident the writer feels about the information he or she presents. Remember that in college, writers need to clearly indicate whether their information is inevitable, certain, likely, unlikely, impossible, or false. Used correctly, qualifying language makes the *degree of certainty* clear to the reader. Common qualifiers include words like *appears*, *seems*, *suggests*, and *indicates*.

However, there is a problem with qualifying language. Used incorrectly it makes the reader sound uncertain about him or herself, his or her qualifications, or uncertain about the facts. It can also make the writing too casual. The UNC Writing Center points out that, “Writing that contains too many qualifiers can sound unclear and wordy. We often rely on qualifiers—especially intensifiers—because we either don’t know or don’t take the time to find the appropriate word. Instead we construct our meaning by employing a not-quite-right word with a qualifier added to strengthen or to tone down a noun or verb.” For example, a student might say, “Nuclear war is a really terrible thing.” A better way of stating this is, “Nuclear war is abominable.” So don’t use qualifying language to mask limitations in your vocabulary. Take the time to find the right word to express precisely what you mean.

For more information on this, you might read the following articles: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bonniemarcus/2011/12/09/do-you-sabotage-yourself-by-using-weak-language/> or <https://hbr.org/2011/12/replace-meaningless-words-with>.

**Possessive vs. prepositional phrases**. A good way to shorten sentences, and to develop a bit of sentence variety, is to end the dependence on prepositional phrases and use the possessive case to describe something. The “limousine of the rich man” becomes the “rich man’s limousine.” In some instances, the same kind of thinking can apply to the adjectival form (though we don’t note that on our rubric). Thus, “a house with a view of the lake” can become a “lake-view house.” Students need to learn how to manipulate word forms like this, but this is fairly advanced for language learners. Mastery of this helps students progress from competent to proficient in a new language.

**Style and voice**. This item covers a lot of ground and is perhaps the most difficult (and advanced) of all of these points. First of all, register is the “class” of words that a writer chooses to compose his or her work. Our “language register” is an important part of our writing style. If, for example, I was giving a talk about writing to a group of university professors, I would be less anxious about academic language. In fact, academic language might make my argument *more* convincing to this audience. But I would not use the same “register” of words if I gave a similar talk to a group of Chinese high school students? I would have to be much more careful to make my meaning clear using common words and perhaps more practical examples.

This second point – the practical examples – is a good example also of choosing the right *style* of language. While style and register are closely related, the style also must fit the topic and the audience. How many examples are necessary to make abstract or theoretical points more precise to the reader? What kind of examples would the writer choose? What is the tone of the writing? Is it lighthearted? Is it serious? This concept of style could be an entire semester’s writing course all by itself. And in this way, style and voice become quite entangled. I might identify style more closely with structural points, and voice with the language itself. But the two must work together. The list of possibilities is seemingly limitless. It involves point-of-view, the kind of introduction, the type of conclusion, the very attitude that the writer brings to the conversation. Is he or she being pedantic? Preachy? Is the writer angry? Sad? Reflective? Persuasive? Condemnatory? Sarcastic? We will teach our students hundreds of “rules” for writing, but the truth is that great writing will break those rules. Good writing will abide by them, but great writing knows how and when and where to break the rules, and for what specific purpose. This does not happen by accident. But writers cannot break the rules unless they first know the rules.

At the end of the day, I cannot tell you (or anyone) that one style is better than another. But as a reader I will form an opinion as to whether the writer’s overall stylistic choices work, or the degree of success (or failure) of those choices. If I am aware of the choices, I may be able to mitigate the subjectivity of my opinion. I should be able to express to the writer why I think his or her choices work (or do not work). If the choices do not work, then I should be able to offer a suggestion for revision as to what would work, and why. This item is not something that I will commonly use when marking. But when I use it, it is most often when a student brings a clearly inappropriate or unworkable style to an essay. An example of this might be a student writing a sarcastic essay opposing initiatives to mitigate global warming. I’m not concerned with the student’s opinion about the validity of global warming – but rather – the tone with which the student treats what is certainly a “hot-button” issue. I would probably note that the student has the right to express his or her opinion, but the style has to match the gravity of the issue and recognize that other people may be quite emotionally invested in that issue. The good writer would allow for those emotional concerns.

**VOCABULARY:**

**Limited Vocabulary.** Does the student have adequate vocabulary to express his or her ideas? Or do limitations in vocabulary force the writer to use wrong words, awkward sentence structures, or resort to other means to express his or her ideas?

**Incorrect Word Form**. This is a very common problem for our students. They may know the root word they want to use but will not use the correct form of the word. Or they may use the correct form, but in an awkward way when a more natural, or simpler way of putting things, is a better choice. In these instances, show the student the recommended language and mark word form on the rubric.

**Incorrect Word Use**. The difference between “word form,” “word use,” and “word choice” may seem confusing, or even insignificant, but actually, there is a significant difference. I mark word use when a student uses a word incorrectly. For example, how many times do we read, “After I knew trigonometry, I decided that engineering would be a fun career.” (Or something to this effect.) The student means “learned” but writes “knew.” There is a big difference between the words teach, learn, and know. “He *learned* me good English.” No. He *taught* me. So when a student uses the wrong word to express his or her meaning, I show them the correct word and mark word use in the rubric.

**Poor Word Choice**. This is a fairly sophisticated point. English is a huge language – approaching 250,000 words (most languages are around 50,000 words). One of the reasons for this is that old English is a Germanic language, but French-speaking kings ruled England for several hundred years. They made French the “official” language of government and trade. Thus, English incorporated French words for almost everything. So we have Germanic and Latinate words side-by-side. But these words gave rise to “shades of meaning.” In general, even today, Latinate words have prestige while the Germanic words are common (if not “low class”). And with the rise of the British Empire, English absorbed words from all over the world. So there are many word choices in English. Beginning students will use a dictionary or thesaurus to find words. But beginning students will not know the ways that context or shades-of-meaning affect word choice. For example, what is the difference in meaning between *rebel* and *revolt*? If we described a teenager as rebellious, we would all understand. But if we described a teenager as revolting, it would mean something different. So the word choice is influenced by the context in which we use certain words, as well as shades of meaning between words. Again, for example, what is the difference in meaning between a *catastrophic* loss and a *serious* loss? So when students choose a word that is not the best choice, note that, and perhaps offer a substitute word or an explanation.

A second type of word choice error involves homonyms. Have you read a paper in which a student names the “air to the thrown”? What’s the difference between *great* cheese and *grate* cheese? Have any or your students flown on a plain? Microsoft won’t always pick these mistakes up. In fact, in some cases, word processing programs might even create these mistakes. Students may approximate the spelling of a word and let autocorrect make changes. When this happens, mark word choice in the rubric and on the paper.

**ORGANIZATION:**

When we consider your paper’s organization, we consider 13 basic points.

**Paper level**:

**Precise thesis**. The thesis statement tells the reader what your paper is going to say. In theory, the thesis statement explains the reasons for your position. For example, you might write that, “Victoria, Canada, is my favorite city because of its mild climate, friendly people, reasonable prices, and eco-friendly environment.” The key word here is “because.” You explain the reasons for your opinion. We DO NOT want to read statements like “This essay will explore my favorite city.” A good thesis statement is precise. It clearly states the writer’s position.

Does this apply to a summary? Yes, it does. A thesis statement for a summary would identify the material being summarized and the main points detailed in the summary. A good thesis tells the reader what is important and helps the reader to quickly recognize your main ideas.

We will certainly use thesis statements when we write argumentative papers, but we also use them in expressive essays. The thesis statement makes clear the reasons for our preference.

**Strong introductory statement and conclusion**. We use the term “introductory statement” because not all essays will begin with a formulaic thesis statement in the first line. However, an essay might begin, “Have you ever wondered what a world without music would be like?” This kind of introductory question generates interest. It directly addresses the reader and it raises an interesting topic. Of course, there are many ways to generate interest in an essay. Recent news, statistics, historical facts, worst-case scenarios, the list is almost endless. This is a point at which students have to balance their creativity and good judgement. The introduction has to fit the topic, the audience, and the purpose of the essay. There is no absolute right-or-wrong way to begin an essay. But some ways work better than others. One word of advice: Do NOT use cliché quotations! The following links will take you to recent articles that discuss generating interest.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2019/05/08/the-art-of-the-pitch-five-tips-to-generate-mainstream-media-interest-in-your-stories/>

<https://ubiquity.acm.org/article.cfm?id=1569802>

So how do we evaluate your introduction? The answer is: *Is the introduction effective*?

The same kind of approach works for the conclusion. The simplest, easiest way to write a conclusion is to restate the thesis. This is the best approach for students struggling with English. But more advanced students will understand that an effective conclusion doesn’t have to be formulaic. There are other possibilities. The question we must answer is, “Does the conclusion work? If not, why not?”

One problem our students have is that they have been taught to end their essays on a positive note. We will read horrendous doom-and-gloom essays about global warming, nuclear war, AIDS, overpopulation, and so forth, but the final lines will essentially say, “But we can solve this problem and live happily ever after.” This is not good writing – it is wishful thinking! It also undercuts the very serious points the writer has just made. The ending can restate the main points. It might offer suggestions about future courses of action. The ending might ask a question. There are many ways to end the essay. The point is that the ending has to be appropriate to the essay including the audience, the message itself, and the tone and voice and style of the essay. But do not give your essay the “happily ever after” treatment.

**Convincing and logical progression of ideas**. This point is in a gray area involving both the intellectual content of the essay and the organization of the essay. But if you think about it, a writer can have good points, but not present them in a logical, convincing way. If this is the case, we would note this as an organizational problem more than one of the intellectual content.

**Consistent and appropriate point-of-view**. While writing this I realized that the rubric should ask if the point-of-view is appropriate, as well as consistent. This is primarily a first-semester issue, as many (most?) of our students have no idea what point-of-view is or how it works. First, they must learn to control their point-of-view. If there is a shift in point-of-view, this needs to be purposeful. Once students can control their point-of-view, then we can ask if the point-of-view is appropriate to the essay. For example, the first (expressive) essay is generally going to be in first-person point-of-view. I or my. Mexican food is my favorite kind of food. Paris is my favorite city. My favorite movie is *The Big Lebowski*. This is first-person point-of-view. Over time we will push our students to write in the more “academic” third-person point-of-view.

The possibilities for point-of-view include: first person singular (I, me) , first person plural (us, we), second person singular and plural (you), third person singular (he, she, it, or named) , third person plural (they or named), and third person rotating point-of-view (this latter POV follows different characters in sequence). If you really want to get deep into this, we could also consider an aspect of point-of-view called “psychic closeness.” This means how much access we have to the thoughts of any characters we reference in our writing. But that’s not a big concern in a first-year writing class.

Our main concern is whether the point-of-view is appropriate to the essay and carried out consistently in the essay. If not, then mark the inconsistencies and/or explain.

**Paragraph level**:

**Paragraphs have clear topic sentences**. This is pretty basic writing and should be obvious to all of us. The topic sentence is the main idea of your paragraph. While it does not have to be the first sentence in your paragraph, it will usually be the first or second sentence. You may have a transition as the first sentence in the paragraph. This is all right.

**Effective transitions connect paragraphs**. I would hope that this point is obvious to all of us. And yet, am I guilty of the same mistake as many of our young writers? Do I feel that my point is so obvious that no connection needs to be made between this point and the one preceding (or following)? Transitions function a bit like prepositions. They make the relationship between ideas very clear to the reader. What is clear in my mind might not be clear to a less-experienced writer. So I have to be careful to make these “transitions” clear. If our students have two ideas, but the relationship between those ideas, or the application of those ideas, isn’t clear, then we mark that place in the paper and mark it on the rubric. In our comments, we try to ask questions that will lead the student to compose the proper transition. I should acknowledge here a question that some of you will likely ask: Is there a preferred location for a transition? The answer is, What works, works. Transitions can go at the end of one paragraph, or the beginning of the next. In some cases, they may even be a sentence or two removed from the beginning (or end) of a paragraph. But in general, they will be the first or last sentence of one of the two paragraphs. The questions we have to ask are: Is the transition necessary? Does it work?

One of our teachers pointed out that there are two kinds of transitions in essays. There are structural transitions that connect big ideas (think paragraphs) and there are transitions within paragraphs that connect more specific points. They function about the same, but in different places. If we find a place within a paragraph that needs an internal transition, then we mark those sentences and note this in the margin. We mark this in the rubric as well.

**Paragraph boundaries**. Paragraphs by definition, are a group of closely related sentences organized around a single, tightly focused topic sentence. Remember that a paragraph can be a “run-on” just like a sentence! When the topic changes, indent and begin a new paragraph!

Do not be confused about the word “topic.” For example, “ice cream” can be a topic, but you would likely write in detail about chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry in separate paragraphs. This depends upon the amount of detail that you go into on each of these “sub-topics.”

As a reader and grader, I am distrustful of “paragraphs” that go on for more than half a page. In general, if a “paragraph” has more than seven or eight sentences in it, it has probably become a “run-on.” Check carefully to see if the topic has changed. If it has, indent at the appropriate place and begin a new paragraph.

**Paragraph internal coherence**. Ditto. If the writer drifts off-topic, we mark the errant sentence (sentences) and identify this in the margins and in the rubric.

**Other organizational points**:

**Format**. Our formatting instructions are very clear. They are detailed in your course syllabus. Please follow those instructions to the letter. This is fair to all students.

**Indents**. The indent is a kind of punctuation just as important as a period, comma, or question mark. The indent makes the paragraph boundary easily visible to the reader. Please indent your paragraphs by 1.25 cm.

**Alignment**. Again, please left-align your writing. DO NOT JUSTIFY ALIGN.

**Header information**. The header should contain **four items**: your full name in pinyin, your section number, the assignment title, and the page number in page x of y format (just as in this document).

**INTELLECTUAL CONTENT / THINKING**:

Intellectual content may show up first on the rubric, but at this stage of your writing careers, it is NOT the most important component of your grade. While our primary concern this semester is your sentence-level writing, your thinking constitutes 25% of your paper’s grade. We consider 11 basic points about your thinking.

**Basic thinking**:

**Quality of thinking**. This is very simple. Does your writing give evidence of good, average, or weak thought? How much effort have you put into *thinking* about the topic?

**Understands the topic**. Closely related to the first point, do you understand the topic? If you do not understand the topic, then before you write about it, you need to ask questions, talk with your teacher or classmates, or do some quality research to understand the topic.

**Main points support the topic**. This is also related to thinking and understanding. If you understand the topic, do the main points that you talk about demonstrate that you understand the topic? Do they support your ideas or your position? You may understand the “big picture,” but do you understand the smaller parts, as well?

**Good summary**. Your summary has to restate the main ideas of the article or talk in your own words. Do you do this well? Is your summary accurate and in your own words?

**Response explained**. The other half of your writing assignment is a “response.” While your response is your own, you must still give reasons or details for your response. Do you do this? Is the response reasonable? Do you make your reasons clear?

**No main points missing**. This point should be obvious. You should not miss important information from either the summary or your response.

**No factual errors**. This point is also obvious. You want to be factually correct in what you write.

**Good examples and specific details**. Do you explain the summary or your position using good examples and specific details (as opposed to vague or general descriptions)?

**Advanced thinking**:

**Abstract ideas explained**. If you express more difficult, “abstract” thoughts, do you make your meaning clear with good examples and specific details?

**Considers multiple positions**. Do you note that the main topic may be viewed differently by different people? For example, men and women might not see an issue from the same perspective? People from different cultural, religious, economic, or even educational backgrounds might see things differently. Do you take note of these differences? The operative phrase here is “some people say...” How might others feel about this issue? This is an important part of critical thinking.

**Cites sources for support**. Good research is always a good thing! While we are not writing research papers this semester, we would like to introduce the basic concepts of research and in-text citation. Can you find some outside support for your ideas? This is especially useful for those students who struggle to understand a particular issue. If you have researched to learn more about the topic, then mention your research in your writing. Cite or name the source and either quote or paraphrase to show what you learned.