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INTERACTIVE CLASS EDITING

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Legal writing is a process. Writing, however, is not a process that occurs in a straight line. An important part of the writing process is editing. Editing during different stages of the writing process can reveal organizational as well as analytical problems, in addition to grammatical and spelling mistakes. As Justice Brandeis said, “[t]here is no such thing as good writing. There is only good rewriting.” The time and extent spent on editing skills conveys the importance of editing. Devoting class time to editing and making it interactive allows students to focus on editing and practice their editing skills.

In my experience, students sometimes overlook the importance of editing and the critical role it plays in producing quality writing. Students often do not spend enough time editing or view it as merely proofreading. Perhaps one explanation is students’ past educational experiences. For example, in college some students may have written a paper the night before a deadline and received a satisfactory grade. Another explanation could be students’ view of editing as a tedious and unproductive process. Finally, students may be confused regarding the nature of editing. Students cannot effectively self-edit their own papers if they do not understand what they are looking for when editing. Students must learn the skill of editing.

In addition to requiring students to edit when they rewrite their papers, I devote ninety minutes of class time to the topic of

editing. First, I discuss common writing problems, such as weak thesis sentences, lack of transitions, conclusory analysis, and passive voice, just to name a few. By discussing common problems, students have a better understanding of what to look for when editing. Then I give editing tips regarding how to identify writing that needs improvement. Some of these tips include the following: copying the thesis sentences of each paragraph on a separate page to check if they are an outline of the points in the memo; circling transitions in your memo; underlining “to be” verbs to check for passive voice; and identifying the organizational components of the memo in the margin.

To reinforce and apply the material covered in class, I assign the students an editing exercise, due in the next class. This assignment requires students to edit a part of the discussion section of an office memo. Students must identify positive aspects of the memo and areas that need improvement. They comment on overall organization and analysis, as well as provide line-by-line critiques. They also include their reasons for each editing comment. Completing the exercise outside of class has several benefits: it saves class time, and students have the time and motivation to complete a thorough edit of the document. In addition, giving written feedback on their assignment is not necessary because my feedback occurs when we discuss the completed assignment during class.

After completing the assignment, students are more able to identify their own mistakes after “editing” another’s work. Students can critique with an objective eye when the writing is not their own. Some students begin to experience some of a reader’s frustrations when trying to comprehend a document that is unclear, conclusory, or riddled with mistakes. Also, after realizing the amount of time and energy required to do a thorough edit and give thoughtful feedback, students seem to appreciate the extent and amount of feedback I provide on their papers.

During the next class, students bring in their edited version of the discussion

section and the interactive editing begins. Making the editing class interactive allows students to become personally involved in the editing process. The class is collaborative because I edit the memo during class, based on students’ editing comments and their responses to other classmates’ suggestions. We discuss the process of editing and how editing improved the document. Students see a memo that at first glance may have seemed satisfactory transformed into stronger writing as a result of editing. When discussing the class editing exercise, I use technology in several ways to edit “live,” in class. By using a color ELMO document camera, I make editing technologically interactive. I display the original unedited discussion section on the document camera that projects the document onto a screen. Then, line by line, as well as viewing the displayed document as a whole, students volunteer editing suggestions. Students view the editing process as it occurs, as I mark the “edits” on the original document. I make the editing marks in color or black and white. Using the document camera saves time I would have to spend making copies or creating transparencies.

Another method of using technology for interactive editing is projecting an unedited discussion section of a word processing document onto a screen. Displaying the document requires a computer and an LCD projector. As students contribute their editing remarks, I edit the original document on the computer by using techniques such as cut and paste, highlighting text, underlining, and changing colors and fonts to emphasize edits. Again, the students are part of the live interactive editing process.

Finally, using Power Point is another way to use technology to illustrate editing. The technology requirements are the same as the second method described above. I display pieces of the unedited, original document on a Power Point slide. After eliciting students’ editing suggestions, I display slides with samples of edited versions of the document. Although using Power Point may not have the same live

editing effect, because I prepare the slides beforehand, it is a useful way to emphasize and display editing points.

Using technology to enhance the interactive class editing exercise has several benefits. It appeals to visual learners who

can see the editing process occur. Editing, a topic some students may perceive as a necessary evil, becomes lively and interesting. The class is collaborative and interactive because everyone participates with suggestions and responds to others'

remarks. By participating in the editing process and watching it unfold, students enhance their editing skills. Students then apply what they have learned when they self-edit their papers.
