OBSERVING STUDENTS' SYNTACTIC ERRORS AND THE PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS WRITING IN THE COMPOSITION COURSE LM-1235

Observando los errores sintácticos y la percepción hacia la escritura de los estudiantes de un curso de composición LM-1235

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to observe the improvement reached by two groups of English majors in order to identify and correct syntactic errors in a series of six academic paragraphs during two semesters in the second-year course LM-1235 English Composition I at the University of Costa Rica. In addition, it presents a sample lesson with the integration of different language skills so that learners will benefit from cooperative learning, authentic input, and a sequence of interactive tasks to improve their outcome, being this the case of an academic paragraph and its outline. Finally, the writer analyzes the resul ts of a survey questionnaire that assesses the learners' perception towards the challenges of writing.

Key Words: English composition, writing activities, error correction, feedback, paragraph editing, syntactic errors.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es observar el avance logrado por parte de dos grupos de estudiantes de la Carrera del Bachillerato en Inglés con el fin de identificar y corregir errores sintácticos en una serie de seis párrafos académicos durante dos semestres en el curso de segundo año LM-1235 Composición I de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Además, se incluye una lección la cual integra diferentes destrezas con el fin de que la población estudiantil se beneficie del aprendizaje cooperativo, de materiales auténticos, y de una serie de actividades interactivas para mejorar su escritura final, siendo este el caso de un párrafo académico y su esquema. Por último, el autor analiza los resultados de un cuestionario el cual evalúa la percepción de los(as) estudiantes hacia la destreza de expresión escrita.

Palabras clave: Composición inglesa, actividades de escritura, corrección de errores, retroalimentación, edición de párrafos, errores sintácticos.

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Introduction

Some rhetoric instructors agree on the fact that teaching academic writing at a college level is intricate, time consuming, and above all, challenging. Most professors and students commonly struggle with recurrent variables in their writing classrooms such as differences in learners' proficiency level, students' negative attitude towards their professor's feedback, students' lack of varied and academic lexicon, insufficient time to practice before an evaluated composition, inadequate pre-writing activities, difficulty in finding academic topics to write about, and a sense of boredom towards a course that, in some cases, does not generally pursue interaction. In addition, Harmer (2004, p.31) mentions that "partly because of the nature of the writing process and also because of the need for accuracy in writing, the mental processes that a student goes through when writing differ significantly from the way they approach discussion or other kinds of spoken communication." To finish a piece of writing demands more preparation and analysis of the conventions, language, and style of a target genre (i.e., a comparison-contrast paragraph or a cause-effect composition); this might be one of the reasons why some low-proficient learners deal with frustration while carrying out an academic paragraph with specific requirements. Regarding error correction, some students focus on their final grade and fail to remember the most significant benefits of receiving teacher feedback: analyzing, editing, and reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses as writers. As a result, all the job, effort, and time invested by instructors and students throughout the writing process are hindered by the emphasis of obtaining just a passing grade. When asked ten experienced composition instructors at the School of Modern Languages (see Appendix 1) about the most challenging aspects of teaching academic writing, the following seven elements were gathered:

- The lack of sufficient and formal vocabulary to develop content

- L1 interference (there is a recurrent need to translate from Spanish into English)

- Some students think in Spanish as they write

- Difficulty to develop self-correction techniques regarding structure

- Organization of accurate ideas

- A tendency to use slang, formulaic expressions, and vague words

- Learners' lack of knowledge on current issues and other academic topics

There is a wide variety of lexical and grammatical mistakes that composition instructors encounter at the moment of grading a given paragraph, so the main purpose of this exploratory study is to monitor and observe how two groups of students might decrease the recurrence of the number of syntactic errors (fragments, comma splices, and fused or run-on sentences) in a series of six compositions throughout the semester. This has been done in two groups of the second-year course LM-1235 English Composition I at the School of Modern Languages at the University of Costa Rica. Another objective of this study is to review some key concepts related to academic writing, error correction, teacher feedback, and sentence errors. A third objective is to present a sample lesson based on an authentic reading text to help learners have access to comprehensible input and strengthen the interaction and collaboration among students before it is their turn to write.

1.1.   A Definition of Academic Writing

Academic writing differs from standard, non-academic writing since the former requires a thorough development and organization of content combined with an appropriate use of linguistic features such as vocabulary usage, mechanics, structure, and the like. In their study, Rosenfeld, Leung, and Oltman (as cited in Hinkel, 2004:18) listed and ranked the most important features of academic writing expected from NNS (non-native speakers) writing

students; this list includes the following five characteristics:

1. "Organize writing to convey major and supporting ideas.

2. Use relevant reasons and examples to support a position.

3. Demonstrate a command of standard written English, including grammar, phrasing, effective sentence structure, spelling and punctuation.

4. Demonstrate facility with a range of vocabulary appropriate to the topic.

5. Show awareness of audience needs and write to a particular audience or reader" (p. 18).

It is important to point out that while first-year writing tasks deal with general themes (i.e., describing and interpreting a piece of art), second-year writing courses demand from students to develop more academic rhetorical modes in their compositions (i.e., comparing the lives and legacy of two world leaders, explaining the effects of pollution on campus, or evaluating the causes of longevity in blue zones). Thus, second-year writing courses focus on challenging topics which, in most cases, are revised and approved by the instructor before students develop an in-class or an out-of-class paragraph and its corresponding outline. Furthermore, Sokolic (as cited in Nunan, 2003, p.87) pinpoints that writing includes three contrasts:

• **"It is both a *physical* and a *mental* act."** This means that after a given message has been thought about or created, it is transmitted to a physical medium.

• **"Its purpose is both to *impress* and *express*."** In other words, once the writer has expressed a given thought, it is conveyed by means of selecting an appropriate genre (a poem or short story) to be read by an audience and, at the same time, make an impact on the readers.

• **"It is both a *process* and a *product*."** This means that writers use a sequence of steps (*process*) before finishing a final outcome (*product*).

Teaching academic writing is complex. Ironically, although this process has a sequence of logical steps (brainstorming, preliminary writing, revising, editing, and so on), instructors and students should keep in mind that "this process of writing is cyclical, and sometimes disorderly" (Sokolic, as cited in Nunan, 2003, p.87). One of the hardest tasks is for learners to assimilate the notion that writing is a *process* that involves constant interaction through a series of steps that lead to an evaluative outcome. In relation to this, White and Arndt (1991, as cited in Nunan, 1999, p.142) said that writing asks for a higher mental ability, and six "nonlinear" procedures intermingle constantly in the construction of a text. These steps are represented in Figure 1 (Nunan, 1999, p.274). Another aspect of the process to be considered by writing students is their target audience. This goes beyond the presence of the writing instructor. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p.142) indicate that "becoming aware of the composition process, learning about oneself as a writer, and relating to written texts and potential audiences of such texts is, in fact, what novice writers need to experience in either their first or second language."
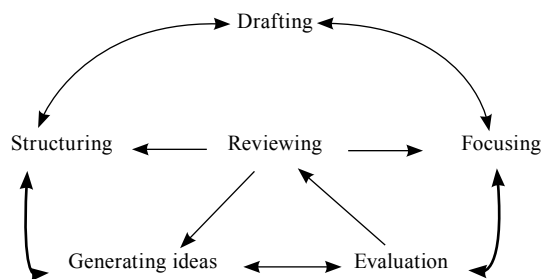

FIGURE 1.

The nonlinear writing process

If novice writers understand that a larger audience (i.e., classmates, other faculty members, and even blog readers) will learn and interpret their outcomes, they will become more active participants in the writing process at the moment of conveying meaning and editing their texts. In regard to this process, Córdoba (2005, p.4) wrote that "since writing represents a means to learn and reinforce skills, ESL students must know and realize that the ability to write is crucial in their process of language learning, and that they will be more effective writers once they comprehend that writing is a process, and as a process it has stages that can be identified and elements that can be learned." Thus, for a student writer to succeed in the process aforementioned, the instructor has an active role as a facilitator and designer of a series of motivating tasks. As such, Harmer (2004, p.41-42) explains that there are five predominant tasks that writing teachers carry out throughout the writing process:

- "**Demonstrating**": in this case student writers have to raise awareness towards the different types of genres and the useful language that each type requires.

- "**Motivating and provoking**": the instructor has to succeed in attracting, guiding, and keeping his or her students' attention and interest towards a particular writing task. This must be done through pre-writing activities. Students should not improvise or start writing on the spot without having appropriate introductory tasks.

- "**Supporting**": instructors have to be willing to offer assistance in case students struggle with their writing task; obviously, formal evaluation is not included.

- "**Responding**": before the student product is assessed or evaluated, instructors should read and respond to its content; recommendations and feedback are generated as well. Thus, Harmer (2004, p.42) suggests that "when we respond to a student's work at various draft stages, we will not be grading the work or judging it

as a finished product. We will, instead, be telling the student how well it is going so far." By doing so, students will pursue an improvement in their drafts.

- "**Evaluating**": although students as well as the educational setting do require and expect a grade, the evaluation of student product will give useful insights regarding the specific mistakes made and *how* to correct them successfully.

In relation to the teaching of academic writing and the search for a specific teaching methodology, Reid (as cited in Nunan and Carter, 2001, p.32) indicates that "eclecticism (the use of a variety of approaches that permits teachers to extend their repertoires), once frowned upon, has become essential for effective teaching." An example of this takes place in the Composition I course; the content follows a methodology in which instructors and learners use a wide variety of materials to reach the objectives of the syllabus. This is why, apart from the use of one specific textbook, the course packet includes exercises and practice taken from various academic sources, Internet activities, sample paragraphs, and a few short reading texts. It is worth noting that students are urged to bring additional readings as well as their sample paragraphs to enrich content.

1.2.   Writing and Error Correction

Composition instructors and students sometimes react differently towards errors. On the other hand, some novice instructors may see errors as obstacles that hinder or obscure meaning and, as a consequence, lower the student's grade according to the scoring rubric. On the contrary, experienced instructors are aware of the fact that errors serve as an authentic source of learning as teachers reflect on the causes of those mistakes and how their students can progressively correct them. Kroll and Schafer (as cited in McKuy, 1984:135) explained that

> Although there have been several influential approaches to error in the ESL field, there has been a general movement from approaches emphasizing

the *product* (the error itself) to approaches focusing on the underlying *process* (why the error was made). At the product end of the spectrum, many teachers simply corrected individual errors as they occurred, with little attempt to see patterns of errors or to seek causes in anything other than learner ignorance. […] The most recent approach to error in ESL, error analysis, has moved even further toward the process side of the spectrum. (p.135)

As the definition of writing can be seen from the notions of *product* versus *product* writing, the concept of errors involves the mere identification and penalization of a certain mistake (*product*); on the other extreme of the continuum, a more cognitive approach (*process*) looks for the causes and the strategies to recognize and correct mistakes. Kroll and Schafer present the table below (as cited in McKuy, 1984, p.135), and it clearly summarizes how errors are seen from both approaches.

TABLE 1.

Two approaches towards students' errors and L2 writing

PRODUCT AND PROCESS APPROACH TO LEARNERS' ERRORS		
Issue	**Product Approach**	**Process Approach**
1. Why should one study errors?	To produce a linguistic taxonomy of *what* errors learners make.	To produce a psycholinguistic explanation of *why* a learner makes an error.
2. What is the attitude towards error?	Errors are "bad." (Interesting only to the linguistic theorist).	Errors are "good." (Interesting to the theorist and teacher, and useful to the learner as active tests of his hypotheses).
3. What can we hope to discover from learners' errors?	Those items on which the learner or the program failed.	The strategies which led the learner into the error.
4. How can we account for the fact that a learner makes an error?	It is primarily a failure to learn the correct form (perhaps a case of language interference).	Errors are a natural part of learning a language; they arise from learners' active strategies; overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete rule application, hypothesizing false concepts.
5. What are the emphases and goals of instruction?	A teaching perspective: eliminate all errors by establishing correct, automatic habits; mastery of the target language is the goal.	A learning perspective: assist the learner in approximating the target language; support his active learning strategies and recognize that not all errors will disappear.

Regarding the first issue, writing instructors should foresee and analyze the possible causes of students' mistakes such as their native language (L1), their illiteracy rate in their L1, and the learners' current proficiency level in their target language (L2). In relation to the second issue, composition students may react positively or negatively towards the errors marked by their instructors. Hopefully, mistakes should be seen as a valid source of improvement. In fact, they should be perceived as part of the writing process overall, and students should accept the fact that errors will not be eradicated. In the questionnaire

given to composition instructors (Appendix 1), they listed the following six reasons why it is difficult for students to correct sentence errors in their writing:

- Some students focus on the grade instead of seeing their strengths or weaknesses

- There is a lack of proofreading

- For those who do not like to read, writing becomes a difficult task

- Students do not like to memorize specific rules

- L1 or Spanish interference is a key factor

- They can identify sentence errors in isolation but not in a paragraph

How can teachers confront and mark errors while correcting a composition? Undoubtedly, everybody has a particular style to do so. While there are novice teachers who merely underline where the mistake is or simply write its correct form to simplify feedback, other skilled teachers take more risks and let their students focus on what the mistake consists of and how it can be corrected. They might, for instance, use different colors that correlate with one particular category in the evaluation rubric (i.e., structure, mechanics, content, and so on). The same color code is used throughout the course to avoid confusion. Kroll (as cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991:90) says that teachers can mark errors by implementing several techniques:

> Teachers can choose to (1) point out specific errors using a mark in the margin or an arrow or other symbolic system; (2) correct (or model) specific errors by writing in the corrected form; (3) label specific errors according to the features they violate (e.g., subject-verb agreement), using either the complete term or a symbol system; (4) indicate the presence of error but not the precise location (e.g., noting that there are problems with word forms); or (5) ignore specific errors. Most teachers use a combination of two or more of the methods mentioned above, depending on what they perceive to be the needs of the student, and studies of teacher feedback are inconclusive as to what the best methodology might be. (p.90)

At an intermediate or advanced composition course, instructors implement the third aspect mentioned above and give a series of symbols to provide feedback, and it is the learners' responsibility to read their texts and look for the interpretation and analysis of each mistake. The information in Table 2, which was taken from the anthology of the LM-1235 Composition I course, is an example of how Composition I students read about the explanation of an *awkward form* as well as *choppiness* and the tip to correct them:

TABLE 2.

Understanding teacher feedback: AWK form and choppiness

Type of Mistake	Explanation of the Problem	Tips for Improvement
AWK (Awkward) Non-idiom	The style is not natural, or the way you worded a sentence is not common in English. We don't say this is English (non-idiomatic). Also see "Wrong Word."	Check the sample sentences in a learner's dictionary to see how to use a particular word.
Choppy choppiness chop	Too many sentences in a row all begin the same way: too many "it" subjects, the same Subj.+V structure, or too many short sentences.	Use *FANBOYS* and subordi-nators, combine short and long sentences, or invert sentence structure.

Excerpts taken from the adaptation prepared by M.A. Xinia Rodríguez and based on Byrd and Benson (1994).

To some extent, some writing instructors decide not to correct *all* the mistakes. Instead, they focus on the ones that either hinder meaning or slightly correct the ones that do not alter the writer's idea or the reader's interpretation of content. At this point, it is essential to mention the difference between *global* versus *local* errors. Ferris (2002, p.57) explained that "SLA and error-correction researchers have made a distinction between global errors—those that interfere with the overall message of the text—and local errors, which do not inhibit a reader's comprehension." To illustrate, an example of global errors may deal with word choice or awkward forms, and local errors might include problems with subject-verb agreement or verb form.

1.3.   The importance of Teacher Feedback

Perhaps, correcting an academic composition is as complicated as providing comprehensible feedback to students. This can be accomplished through *direct* and *indirect* feedback; being the latter the one that calls for students' cognitive analysis towards error correction. Ferris (2002, p.63) indicated that "researchers have argued for the superiority of indirect feedback: indicating an error through circling, underlining, highlighting, or otherwise making it at its location in a sentence, with or without a verbal reminder or an error code, and asking students to make corrections themselves." Once again, composition instructors can provide indirect feedback in different ways, and sometimes technology plays an important role to facilitate learning.

There are some composition instructors who present feedback in various forms in the English Major at the University of Costa Rica. After correcting a composition, one faculty member, for example, has used a computer program called *Screencast* to digitally record students' text on a computer screen along with his verbal feedback so that students see their text and listen to what they need to correct. W. Charpentier (personal communication, May 15, 2014) explains that once the video has been made, his students have access to it since they receive the link via e-mail or through a Moodle platform. Also, another composition instructor used electronic mail to interact with her students and clarify doubts regarding error correction. In her study, Solis (2011) concluded that "electronic feedback can change student attitude toward revising compositions, build student confidence and increase motivation. The students felt that they had easy access to the instructor and that she was listening to them all the time" (p.279). In this particular case, she found out that her sixteen writing students showed a systematic improvement.

Another similar example of giving feedback deals with the implementation of conferencing to raise awareness towards error correction. By using this technique, Zúñiga (2010) worked with a group of ESL students to carry out a series of conferencing exchanges in order to give feedback on their texts. In regard to conferencing via e-mail, Zúñiga (2010, p.17) concluded that "conferencing via e-mail is a convenient method to give students personalized instruction. By working with students' papers individually, the instructor could see what his students' writing strengths and weaknesses were." As has been seen, there are various ways in which feedback can be given. It all depends, to some extent, on the teacher's willingness to help student writers and their accessibility to technological media. In sum, regardless the communication channel, what matters is that students receive indirect feedback in a way that they reflect on their own learning and, as a consequence, become autonomous composition learners. Overall, in the survey questionnaire (Appendix 1) composition instructors indicated that they regularly implement different strategies or activities to help their students raise awareness towards sentence errors, and these are some techniques used:

- To use and analyze excerpts taken from published articles written by faculty members

- To implement error logs for students to classify, copy, analyze, and correct their own mistakes

- To use faulty samples from students' texts
- To have peer correction in class by using assessment forms
- To analyze L1 or Spanish interference in the compositions
- To prepare worksheets with exercises regarding error correction

2.   The Identification of Sentence Errors

To identify and correct sentence errors are crucial steps to write clear texts. Student writers have difficulty to identify and correct these problems in their own compositions, and constant practice to raise awareness throughout the course is essential. Sentence errors, in short, occur when the writer makes a wrong syntactic structure in which the overall idea is hindered or obscured in a way that the reader lacks comprehensibility. They are also called stylistic errors. This exploratory study will basically observe three types of sentence errors: fragments, comma splices, and fused or run-on sentences.

2.1.   Fragments

A fragment takes place when a piece of a sentence (i.e., dependent or independent clause) attempts to function as a complete thought. That is, it stands alone as a complete sentence. In some cases, a punctuation mark separates a fragment or phrase as if it were a complete idea. Watkins and Dillingham (1986, p.30) categorize the three most common forms in which a fragment is made into a complete sentence: (1) the fragmented phrase (i.e., *Essay writing, one of the most difficult tasks for college students.*), (2) the fragmented dependent clause (i.e., *Even though first-year students take a campus tour.*), and (3) the fragmented noun and phrase without the main verb (i.e., *The students taking an in-class essay.*). To expand further on the study of this syntactic error, Henry (2014, p.140-150) lists the following seven types of fragments:

TABLE 3.

Seven types of fragments commonly found in academic writing

Type of Fragment	Description	Example
1. Prepositional phrase	This fragment begins with a preposition and ends with its object	*About college dropout statistics.*
2. Appositive phrase	Instead of having an appositive phrase that qualifies a noun within the same sentence, it stands separately.	*Amazingly accurate.*
3. Infinitive phrase	This fragment starts with a verb and its object of the infinitive. This has been separated from the sentence.	*In order to stay healthy.*
4. Gerund phrase	The –ing form of a verb and the object of this gerund.	*Walking five kilometers twice a week.*
5. Participle phrase	A participle and its object works as an adjectival in order to qualify a noun.	*Trying to succeed in school.*
6. Dependent clause	A subordinate clause stands without its independent clause.	While the college students were listening to the lecture.
7. Relative clause	A relative clause, which is introduced by a relative pronoun, has been cut off from the rest of the sentence.	*Who revises the documents.*

2.2. Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are separated with a comma without having a coordinating conjunction.

Comma splice (two independent clauses without proper punctuation):

Example: College students take a campus tour before their classes start, they know the main facilities on campus.

There are different strategies that writers should use in order to correct comma splices. The same source (Watkins and Dillingham, 1986, p.31) lists the main solutions:

a. *Writers can use a period to separate the two ideas.*

    Example: College students take a campus tour before their classes start. They know the main facilities on campus.

b. *Writers can use a semicolon to avoid the faulty form.*

    Example: College students take a campus tour before their classes start; they know the main facilities on campus.

c. *If there are two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb, a semicolon should be used to connect both clauses.*

    Example: College students take a campus tour before their classes start; therefore, they know the main facilities on campus.

d. *Writers should use a comma before a coordinating conjunction.*

    Example: College students take a campus tour before their classes start, so they know the main facilities on campus.

e. *Writers can also use a subordinating conjunction in a dependent clause. Correct punctuation should also be used.*

Example: Because college students take a campus tour before their classes start, they know the main facilities on campus.

2.3. Run-on Sentences

They occur when two independent clauses are joined together without proper punctuation. In addition, the writer omits the use of coordinating or subordinating conjunctions. They are also called fused sentences (F.S.).

Example: *College students take a campus tour before their classes start they know the main facilities on campus.*

In order to correct a run-on sentence, writers can put into practice some basic corrections. First, they can use a period to separate the two independent ideas. Also, they can use appropriate coordinating or subordinating conjunctions and punctuation. Finally, a semicolon can be written to separate the two independent ideas.

3. Methodology

3.1. Course description

LM-1235 Composition I is the first writing course that belongs to the B.A. in English and the B.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the University of Costa Rica. This course is a combination of theory related to writing principles and practical activities. The Course Outline indicates that in this course "the emphasis will be on the essential elements of a formal paragraph to provide a solid basis for the progressive introduction of different genres in future composition and literature courses." The general objective stated in the Course Outline is "to write coherent and logical paragraphs through the gradual process of pre-writing, writing, and revising, applying different discourse principles and organizational techniques." Similarly, Table 4 describes the specific objectives of this course.

TABLE 4.

List of specific objectives

During this course, the students will:			
A. identify the rhetorical mode of a given reading selection,	**B.** define the audience, purpose, and topic of their compositions,	**C.** use pre-writing strategies such as brainstorming, listing, clustering, and free writing to generate ideas,	**D.** organize their ideas through a formal outline,
E. write syntactically correct sentences using a variety of grammatical patterns,	**F.** apply grammatical principles related to verb forms, verb tenses, agreement, and word formation to their writing,	**G.** connect ideas in their compositions using appropriate transition words and phrases,	**H.** use vocabulary appropriate to the topic, audience and type of writing task,
I. write well-structured one-paragraph compositions using cause/effect and comparison/ contrast rhetorical patterns,	**J.** apply the principles of mechanics (MLA format, spelling, punctuation, capitalization) in their compositions, and	**K.** develop proofreading and editing skills.	

Source: LM-1235 Course Outline

3.2.   Content and Rhetorical Patterns

LM-1235 Composition I follows the process approach, and learners are expected to develop the necessary skills to create cause-effect and comparison-contrast paragraphs according to the Modern Language Association (MLA) format in terms of heading, margins, title, and type of font, and paper. In addition, there are more topics that are covered in the semester: (1) strategies to generate ideas (brainstorming, clustering, free writing, quick writing, and making lists), (2) organizing principles (outlining, writing a title, topic sentence, and concluding sentence, revising ideas, and editing), (3) grammar (syntactic errors), (4) vocabulary (conciseness and wordiness), (5) punctuation marks (commas, colons, and semicolons), and (6) capitalization. Finally, developing critical thinking skills is another topic in the course program, and it encloses seven aspects:

- Analyzing topics critically
- Identifying personal bias while expressing ideas

- Using logical supporting ideas
- Using logical examples to support opinions
- Analyzing causes and effects accurately
- Avoiding generalizations
- Drawing logical conclusions

3.3.   Participants

In this study, a number of 14 students that belonged to the first group participated (Group A). During the following semester, the second group had 16 students (Group B). It is relevant to clarify that each group originally had 20 students; however, some students decided to drop out during the first 3 weeks for various reasons. In both groups, most participants pursued their B.A. in English; others take the program in English teaching. Students received instruction once a week for a period of sixteen weeks.

3.4.   Procedure

This part consisted of two sections. As Composition I includes six evaluated

compositions throughout the semester according to the evaluation stated in the Course Outline, the instructor revised each series of paragraphs to determine the number of fragments, comma splices, and run-on sentences. The objective was to observe and monitor students' improvement in regard to the total number of syntactic errors and see which area requires additional practice and feedback. Also, students filled out a questionnaire (see Appendix 2) at the end of

the course to analyze the learners' perceptions towards the challenges of developing academic writing skills. This was carried out at the end of the course with the purpose of eliciting more appropriate responses.

3.5. Analysis of the findings

Table 5 summarizes the results obtained during the first semester in relation to Group A.

TABLE 5.

Number of syntactic errors identified in Group A's Six Paragraphs

GROUP A	Fragments	Comma Splices	Fused Sentences	Syntactic errors
Out-of-class 1	3	11	2	16
In-class 1	2	7	1	10
Exam 1	3	6	0	9
Out-of-class 2	3	4	1	8
In-class 2	2	5	0	7
Exam 2	3(*2)	6 (*5)	1(*1)	10(*8)
Overall # of errors	16 Frag.	39 C.S.	5 F. S.	--

In this case, there are four interesting facts. The second type of syntactic errors in the chart, comma splices, showed the highest number of occurrences (39). This may happen since using appropriate punctuation is not an easy component of writing courses, especially in the first course. During the feedback sessions, those students that had to rewrite their paragraphs expressed that identifying comma splices was a troublesome area due to the difficulty of punctuation. Then, comma splices were followed by sentence fragments (16) and fused sentences (5). Secondly, there is a decreasing number of overall syntactic errors throughout the six academic compositions during the sixteen weeks of formal instruction, except for the second exam

because there was a slight increase. Regarding the second or final composition exam, one student made 8 out of 10 sentence errors in one single paragraph. This detail, which is represented in parentheses (*), explains this increase in the number of errors at the end of the course. In sum, these numbers seem to indicate that there is an improvement in how students identified, monitored, and self-corrected sentence errors in their compositions. Finally, it is worth noting that even though students had sufficient time to revise and edit their out-of-class compositions, the first paragraph of this category contained 16 sentence errors.

Table 6 shows, on the other hand, shows the results obtained during the successive semester with Group B.

TABLE 6.

Number of syntactic errors identified in Group B's Six Paragraphs

GROUP B	Fragments	Comma Splices	Fused Sentences	Syntactic errors
Out-of-class 1	4	6	3	13
In-class 1	2	3	2	7
Exam 1	2	4	2	8
Out-of-class 2	3	5	2	10
In-class 2	4	5	3	12
Exam 2	3	4	1	8
Overall # of errors	18 Frag.	27 C.S.	13 F.S.	--

Similar to the first group of students, in this population there were more comma splices (27 mistakes) than sentence fragments (18) and fused or run-on sentences (13). There was not a clear decreasing number of overall syntactic errors throughout the course, but there was an improvement from the first out-of-class composition to the partial exam. Interestingly, even though students had the opportunity to carefully revise their out-of-class compositions, this type of assignment seemed to contain the highest number of mistakes. Students, on the other hand, tried to monitor this type of mistakes in their exams more thoroughly.

In relation to the survey questionnaire (see Appendix 2), twenty two composition learners filled it out. Regarding the first question, 18 students took the course for the first time during the year this study was conducted; 3 students took the course for their second time, and only 1 for his third time. On the other hand, when asked about the biggest challenge in taking this writing course, they highlighted and ranked four aspects as their primary challenge: (a) the use of correct grammar structures, (b) the organization of thoughts, (c) the use of appropriate punctuation, and (d) a better administration of time. The following table summarizes the answers reported as well as their numbers.

TABLE 7.

The opinions of students regarding the biggest challenge of writing

Summary of students' comments
Priority #1
Remembering all grammar rules (7)
Following the structure given (4)
Learning to organize ideas (3)
Improving my grammar (2)
Monitoring time (2)
Using commas (1)
Developing ideas in a good and long way (1)
Punctuation (1)
Brainstorming (1)

Continúa ...

Priority #2
Sentence variety (or writing longer and more varied ideas) (5)
Using different or new words - vocabulary (4)
Applying the correct vocabulary (4)
Organizing my ideas to start the paragraph (3)
Having enough information about the topics (3)
Knowing the difference between various types of paragraphs (1)
Organizing the paragraph (1)
Correct use of subject-verb agreement (1)

Priority #3
Making new and more complex sentences (4)
Following structures and parallelism (4)
Writing an academic composition (3)
The organization of the composition (outline) (3)
Contents of the topics (2)
The use of correct punctuation (2)
Understanding my professor's feedback (2)
Taking into account the target audience (2)

As can be observed in the table, students are aware of the importance of monitoring grammatical structures, improving the complexity of their sentences based on the level of a second-year course, and using a higher level of lexicon in their writing. Interestingly, they expressed that they need to know more information about the topics or current issues to be developed in their compositions. In terms of the question on teacher's feedback and how clear it is for students, 15 students expressed that it was clear and pertinent to know exactly the corrections they should implement in further paragraphs; 6 students indicated that receiving immediate and oral feedback in-class or during the instructor's office hours had a higher impact to clarify doubts. Finally, one autonomous student expressed that he consulted the chapter entitled "Understanding Teacher Feedback" in case he or she had questions on any symbol.

What do composition students do with their paragraphs once they have received their grade? This is a relevant aspect that worries writing instructors. The following table summarizes the answers collected with these two groups of students. It is important to indicate that students were always encouraged to rewrite their compositions and send them via e-mail to the instructor for additional feedback; although they did not receive additional points for this, many students decided to correct them and reflect on their mistakes.

TABLE 8.

What students do with their graded compositions

Students' comments
"I rewrite them to remember what I did wrong."
"I keep them safe and read them again."
"I revised them, and in the next composition, I try not to make the same mistakes again."
"I usually correct them in order to know how to develop my composition and writing skills."
"I read it again; then I rewrite them and show the new version to the professor."
"I rewrite the composition at home and try to study the mistakes."

When these two groups were asked to rank and list the techniques or activities they carry out to improve their writing outside the classroom context, they indicated that they had a clear idea that the more they read in the target language, the better they will write in this type of course. Thus, reading played a primary role in the answers. The following figure summarizes the top techniques according to priority 1, 2, and 3.

List of strategies and Techniques to improve my writing

1. Reading novels, short stories, and newspapers.
2. Reading to see grammar & punctuation in real contexts.
3. Writing for pleasure.

1. Reading novels, short stories, and newspapers.
2. Reading to see grammar & punctuation in real contexts.
3. Writing for pleasure.

1. Reading novels, short stories, and newspapers.
2. Reading to see grammar & punctuation in real contexts.
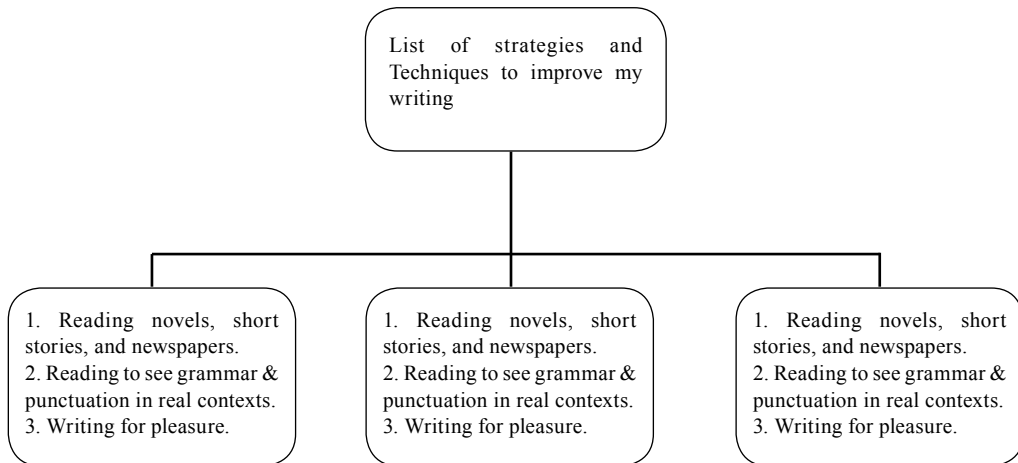3. Writing for pleasure.

FIGURE 2.

Techniques students use to improve their outcomes

Then, these two groups were asked to list the most significant and meaningful aspects that they have learned in the course and ranked them in order of importance. In this case, they pointed out six aspects that were crucial throughout the course: the organization of ideas from general to specific, the writing of an academic paragraph, the use of the MLA format, the identification and correction of sentence errors, the use of correct punctuation, and the production of longer and more complex sentences. These elements are particularly pertinent since in first-year courses students are expected to develop more anecdotic texts in which they express their thoughts in a less formal way. Finally, question 7 tried to see the level of difficulty at the moment of identifying and correcting sentence errors. Regarding sentence fragments, 10 students found them troublesome due to Spanish interference; 9 learners pointed out that comma splices are somewhat difficult due to the complexity of punctuation in English;

finally, 3 students expressed that fused or run-on sentences are difficult to identify and correct since they tend to write very long ideas. In the last question of the survey questionnaire, the 22 composition students expressed that their writing has improved regardless of their grades. Undoubtedly, this is a positive aspect to highlight.

3.6.   Limitations

There are four main obstacles that increased the difficulty of implementing this type of small-scaled study. First, absenteeism took place with Group B very frequently, and this had an impact on the quality of students' compositions. On the other hand, Group A's dropout rate was important; 14 students out of 20 finished the course. In Group B, 4 students decided to drop out Composition I during the first month due to various reasons. The third problem occurs when a few students do not

assimilate a given rhetorical pattern for an exam and end up writing a composition that cannot be evaluated because the writing technique or patterns is different; for example, a problem-solution paragraph may be written instead of cause-effect. Finally, no one can deny that time is a major constraint as instructors and students feel the necessity of having more hours to practice and benefit from feedback. For these reasons, attending the instructor's office hours is crucial in order to clarify doubts before writing and expand on clarification.

## 3.7. Designing Authentic Materials to Enhance Process Writing: A Sample Lesson

One of the challenges of teaching composition or rhetoric is for students to internalize that writing is a process; hence, it is the instructor's job to prepare materials to guide students throughout this writing continuum. The sample lesson below is an alternative series of activities to eventually develop a cause-effect paragraph. The warm-up activity attempts to trigger students' schema and elicit what they already know about online education. This is followed by a vocabulary-building exercise that contains key words taken from an authentic video segment to be seen later. In relation to the use of authentic videos, Sherman (as cited in Ur, 2003:2) explains that "print may be powerful but many people spend more time with audio-visual media; video techniques, discourses and clichés are more familiar to them than the world of books and papers" (p.2). For this reason, including authentic video segments is always appealing and motivating to students as they sometimes do not expect to watch videos in writing courses. In this case, students have to listen and complete a series of statements based on the lecture. Once this task is revised, students get together in groups of three to carry out an information-gap activity; it is preceded by a vocabulary-building exercise with new words. Each student receives a segment of a short and authentic reading text about online education. After reading the text, each member explains its main ideas. As they listen, they take notes to answer some questions about each text. This activity is followed by the writing task as well a peer editing activity in which they use a checklist (see Appendix 3) to revise someone else's composition and its outline. This is the sample lesson for such a course:

Online Education: A Sample Lesson

Pre-reading activities
Warming-up. Get in groups of three and discuss the answers to the following questions. Based on your answers, follow the corresponding arrows to finish the diagram. Do not take notes. Get ready to share your ideas with the rest of the class.
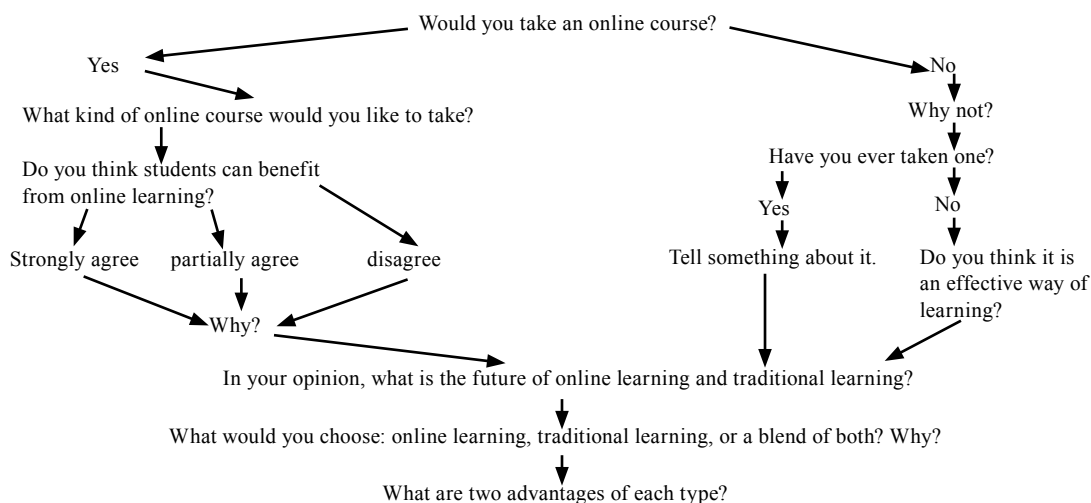
Pre-listening activity

Vocabulary-building exercise. Group work. You will hear the words below in a video segment. Before watching, read each sentence and write a short definition for each new word. Then, write its part of speech on the space given.

1.   Education authorities are working hard to minimize the **inequities** of scholarship programs so that low-income students will have better opportunities.

   Inequity: _____
   Part of speech: _____

2.   It is a must for educators to motivate their students and encourage learning, not to **stifle** it.

   To stifle: _____
   Part of speech: _____

3.   **Crowdsourcing** a rapid technique to obtain information and feedback. When Susan has a doubt on her project, she asks for help online and gets immediate assistance from users who are knowledgeable on that field of expertise.

   Crowdsourcing: _____

   Part of speech: _____

4.   As soon as the blog was available, lots of users worldwide **flocked** to register and participate.

   To flock: _____
   Part of speech: _____

Pre-reading activity

Listening and sentence completion. You will now watch a video segment taken from *YouTube*. **A.** Then, complete the statements below.

Setting the Context: You will listen to an academic lecture taken from the **TEDˣStanford** and retrieved from *YouTube*. The lecture is given by Amy Collier, who is an expert on education and points out some good experiences on online education at Stanford. The video segment is entitled **The Brave New World of Online Learning: Amy Collier at TEDˣStanford.**

1.   There are problems in education related to _____.

2.   A rhetoric of brokenness is misleading because _____.

3.   However, a rhetoric of opportunity helps to bring _____.

4.   Open online learning is important in order to _____.

5.   A networked learner is a person who can _____.

6.   Two examples of successful online courses are _____ and _____.

7.   Openness has obstacles related to _____ _____.

8.   The speaker concludes her speech by saying that _____.

B. In pairs, check your answers and expand on their content.

Pre-reading exercise: Vocabulary

A. Match the words/phrases in italics with their corresponding definitions or synonyms. Write the number next to each definition.

1. *asynchronous*	_____ to develop or promote the progress of something
2. *cutting-edge* technology	_____ eased and negotiated
3. *threaded* discussions	_____ something that affects the reputation of an individual
4. *to boost*	_____ to represent or to depict
5. *to portray*	_____ forefront or the leading position of something
6. *foster* one's success	_____ to increase or to advance
7. *derogatory*	_____ not taking place at the same time

B. Check the answers with your team members.

Reading Task: Jigsaw Reading

Instructions

A. Your instructor has divided a reading text into three segments (A-B-C), and you will receive a card with one part. Individually, read its content carefully and underline any unknown word.

STUDENT A
What is Online Learning?

Before we can discuss successful strategies for students participating in online education, we need to understand what online learning is, and how to use this new medium. Online learning has various definitions, but an essential component for all is the use of computing and telecommunication technologies to deliver and receive course materials. Online education utilizes the Internet or videoconferencing to create learning communities. Course materials are provided on a Web site and are occasionally found on CD-ROM; email, bulletin boards, forums, and chat rooms are used to interact with other students and teachers.

Online learning can enhance traditional forms of education. It may take place in the classroom or workplace; it may be performed at home, at online access centers, or at a public library. Online learning provides hands-on experience using information technologies and makes it easier for students to access learning and customized lessons. Online learning may refer to a range of approaches, from making resources available electronically to the creation of rich, interactive, online experiences involving synchronous and asynchronous conferencing. The former emphasizes the content, the latter focuses on the relationships that underpin teaching and learning.

The use of integrated technology environments provided by courseware such as WebCT or appropriate videoconferencing facilities. Online teaching and learning is increasingly portrayed as a new paradigm with many believing that, unless online courses involve rich, instructional and social interaction, they are not part of this prototype. To quote a publication widely reported in online instructional design forums: "Without the support and participation of a learning community, there is no online course."

Adapted from: http://www.excelsior.edu/web/student-online-success-guide/online-learning

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STUDENT B
How Does Online Learning Work?

Course materials may include Web resources, multimedia software, videotaped lectures and seminars, and audiotaped lectures. Class discussions with classmates and one-on-one interactions with faculty occur online via e-mail and chat rooms as well as through teleconferences. These interactive online courses are taught by the same world-renowned faculty who teach on-campus and receive the same college credit as the comparable on-campus courses. Whether you aim to update your skills, build your résumé, or explore a new career direction, this cutting-edge technology can help you achieve your goals. These are some online learning benefits:

- Update your skills with virtually no interruption to your career or personal commitments
- Take advantage of the flexible format and tailor a program to your individual needs and schedule
- Put your new knowledge to work at your company while you learn
- Study where you're most comfortable and when you're most productive
- Interactive technology offers threaded discussions and real-time chat to boost learning
- Extensive technical support and academic advising foster your success
- Your certificate, diploma or degree has the same value as if you had completed the program on campus

Adapted from: http://www.excelsior.edu/web/student-online-success-guide/online-learning

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STUDENT C
Tips for Online Learners

Most of the courses you will find here are based on the idea that people learn best in a community. The instructor plays an important, but different role from the classroom environment. You'll notice changes in the way your group operates, but the usual practices of courtesy are very important in online learning environments. Here are some tips:

- Participate. It's not enough just to show up; you must contribute your ideas and share your knowledge and information with others to help develop a sense of community.
- Be persistent. We are all moving into a new environment and everyone is learning together. If you have a problem, don't wait; send an email or contact your instructor immediately.
- Share tips, help, and ask questions. Most of us are doing this for the first time, so there are no silly questions. If you have a solution, share it with others.
- Think before you click the send button. Did you really mean what you said? Will others understand your comments? Will someone be offended? You cannot predict reactions to your comments, but you can review what you have written before you send.
- Remember the person at the other end. Ask for feedback if you are not sure how you are doing. If you disagree with someone, use your skills to communicate your feelings clearly, but with sensitivity.
- Derogatory comments. Inappropriate comments which relate to race, gender, age, religion or sexual orientation are not acceptable and are subject to the same disciplinary action as in a regular classroom.
- Plagiarism, copyright and intellectual property issues are the same as in the standard classroom. You may not use others' work without their permission.

Adapted from: http://www.excelsior.edu/web/student-online-success-guide/online-learning

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B. Once you have finished reading your segment, work with your team members and briefly explain the content you have just read. Each card corresponds to every classmate.

C. In groups, answer the questions below about the three parts of the article (A, B and C). Do so in a way that, for example, Students B and C ask Student A those two questions.

Questions for Student A:

According to this segment, what is the definition of online learning?
_____.
How can online learning enhance traditional forms of education?
_____.

Questions for Student B:

Who is commonly in charge of teaching online courses?
_____.

Mention and explain two advantages of online learning.
_____
_____.

Questions for Student C:

What is the meaning of "*having a sense of community*"? Why is it crucial in online learning?
_____.
How is plagiarism treated in online learning?
_____.

D. Be ready to share your answers with the rest of the class.

Individual work. Writing Activity

Instructions:

Write a cause-effect paragraph and its formal outline about **online higher education**.

The body of the composition should have from 14 to 16 sentences. Use the pattern you feel more comfortable with; that is, you may write about effects (results) **OR** causes (reasons). Use your preferred pre-writing technique to generate initial ideas. Begin drafting and write a clear, well-focused topic sentence with a good controlling idea. Look for comma splices, fused (RUN-ON) sentences, and fragments.

Pair work. Revising and Giving Feedback

Revise your classmate's composition and its outline with the checklist prepared by your instructor (see Appendix 3).

4.   Conclusion

Teaching or taking Composition I is not an easy task for both parts: instructors and learners. Learners have to adjust to the requirements and format of an academic composition and its outline that greatly differs from the informal writing genres studied in first-year courses. Similarly, instructors have to plan appealing lessons with motivating pre-writing tasks for learners to produce coherent and cohesive paragraphs using the MLA format. Although correcting compositions is time-consuming and difficult, it is highly rewarding to see the improvement reached throughout the course. It is crucial to remember that instructors' feedback should always be comprehensible, intelligible, objective, and above all, clear for students. By doing so, students will become autonomous writers who will carefully analyze, revise, and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as writers. By means of combining cooperation, appealing materials, and a feeling of learning from mistakes, the most important task is to make writing an engaging and more enjoyable process for students.

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University of Costa Rica
School of Modern Languages
LM-1235 Composition I

Appendix 1

Questionnaire for Composition Instructors

Name: _____.

Please answer the questions below.

Which writing courses have you taught in the English major at UCR?

_____.

How many times have you taught LM-1235 Composition I?

_____.

In your opinion, what is the biggest challenge in teaching LM-1235 Composition I, being this the first writing course of the English major?

_____.

Once you have corrected your learners' composition, how do you give feedback?

_____.

How many lessons do you approximately spend in presenting and reviewing Sentence Errors (fragments / comma splices / run-ons) in your course?

_____.

What specific techniques or activities do you implement in your writing course to help your students raise awareness towards Sentence Errors?

_____.

Why is it difficult for students to self-correct sentence errors in their own compositions?

_____.

University of Costa Rica
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LM-1235 Composition I

Appendix 2

Questionnaire for Composition Learners

Please answer the questions below.

1. Are you taking Composition I for the first time? If not, how many times have you taken this course? _____.

2. In your opinion, what are the three biggest challenges in taking Composition I, being this the first writing course of the English major? Rank them according to their importance.

      1._____.
      2._____.
      3._____.

3.   In relation to your compositions, do you understand your instructor's feedback? Is it clear?
      _____.

4.   After your instructor gave you back your compositions, what did you do with them?
      _____.

5.   What are three specific strategies or techniques that you implement in order to improve your writing? Rank them according to their importance.
      1._____.
      2._____.
      3._____.

6. What are three of the most significant and meaningful aspects that you have learned in this course? Rank them according to their importance.
      1._____.
      2._____.
      3._____.

7.   Which is the most difficult sentence errors for you to identify and correct: Frag., C.S. or F.S.?

      Explain your answer. _____.

8.   Finally, do you feel that, regardless of your grades, your writing has improved throughout this course? Explain your answer.

      _____.

LM-1235 Composition I
Student's name: _____
Date: _____

Appendix 3

Revising my composition: self-assessment checklist

Sentence errors

Does my composition contain any Comma Splices?

Does it have any Fragments?

Does my composition contain any RUN-ON Sentences or F.S.?

Structure

      Use this chart to look for grammar mistakes. Write a check mark for each item.

	YES	NO
Does my paragraph have problems with SVA?		
Are all verb forms correctly used?		
Do all pronouns have a clear antecedent?		
Are the articles *the-a-an* properly used?		
Did I write modal forms correctly?		
Are prepositions correct?		
Are word forms correct (parts of speech)?		
Did I write dependent and independent clauses in a correct way?		

Vocabulary

Use this chart to look for vocabulary mistakes. Write a check mark for each item.

	YES	NO
Does my composition include varied words?		
Instead of repeating words, does my composition include synonyms?		
Does my composition contain the word "thing"? If so, I have to think of a precise word.		
Is word choice appropriate?		

Mechanics

Does my paragraph begin with an appropriate MLA heading?
Did I indent the first sentence of my composition?
Does my composition have correct punctuation?
Is spelling correct?
Is the outline correctly designed? Check its format.

Content & organization

Is my title interesting? Are content words capitalized?
Does my topic sentence contain a clear CONTROLLING IDEA?
Does my composition contain an appropriate number of sentences?
How many sentences does it have? Count them!
Are my ideas interesting, accurate and relevant?
Did I introduce, explain, and exemplify my causes OR effects?
Does my concluding sentence re-state my topic sentence?