

Self-Assessment of Editing Skills

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This handout explains how to use self-assessment to demonstrate your mastery of writing principles. No matter what the principle, demonstration of mastery always goes through the same stages:

1. You choose a short text *that you have written yourself*, preferably one that you have remembered to include in your class portfolio. You number each sentence of the text, and using the principle you are trying to demonstrate, you diagnose any problems you find. Please limit your attention to problems that relate to your chosen principle.

If a sentence in your original text does not have any problems worth diagnosing, you need not mention that sentence.
2. Based on your diagnoses, you revise the text.
3. Then you analyze your revision: you explain, in writing, how you applied the principle. The structure of the explanation depends on what principle you're trying to demonstrate mastery of, as discussed below.
4. You review your work, saying what you think you've accomplished and to what degree.
5. To help your peer reviewer, you summarize the context in which the text is intended to appear. What kind of paper or other document is it intended to be part of? Who is the audience? What does the audience know or care about? If the text is not the opening part of your paper, where does it appear in the paper, and what precedes it?
6. Once you have your revised text and the context, you send this information to a peer reviewer, who will analyze your work and return feedback. You organize your packet so that your peer reviewer can see your revised text and parts of your self-review first, *without* seeing your original text or your analysis.

The peer reviewer should be someone who is taking this class but who is not in your research group.

7. Based on the feedback from your peer reviewer, you may revise the text, the explanation, or both. You also will acknowledge the reviewer by name, explaining in what ways, if any, he or she helped with the process.
8. You may, if you choose, send the revised packet to another reviewer for a second round of peer review.

9. Finally, after one or two rounds of peer review, you will send me your initial text, your final revision, your analysis and explanation, and your self-review. I will analyze your work, using the same criteria your peers did, and giving you the same kind of feedback. In addition, I'll give you one of these summative assessments:

- You've demonstrated beginning mastery.
- You've demonstrated partial mastery.
- You've demonstrated full mastery.
- The evidence isn't there yet.

If you've not yet demonstrated at least partial mastery, I'll encourage you to repeat the process with a new text and a new peer. You keep going until you get the results you are capable of.

Analyses and explanations for different principles

The steps of the review process are the same for every principle. What's different for each principle is your explanation of how you have applied it.

Subjects, verbs, and objects (Principle 3)

Principle 3 says, *Put your important characters in subjects, and join each subject to a verb that expresses a significant action. Understand what object, if any, is acted upon.* To explain how you have mastered this principle,

- (a) Provide a table listing the *primary* agents, actions, and objects in your work. Show who does what to whom. You may also provide another table listing *secondary* agents, actions, and objects. To organize your tables, group together actions of the same agent.

The tables should *not* be broken down by sentence. In almost any technical text, the number of *primary* agents and actions is much smaller than the number of sentences.

- (b) Explain where you are focusing your reader's attention and why. In other words, explain what effect your text is intended to have on the minds of your readers, and in the context of your intentions, explain why the stated agents, actions, and objects are the primary or most important ones.

- (c) From the original text, extract a numbered list of grammatical subjects, each paired with its main verb, and each corresponding to the sentence in the text with the same number, as in this example:¹

1. Channels provide
2. Channels operate
3. the single data path is shared
4. This channel is called
5. Channels can operate
6. The amount of data is
7. All channels operate

- (d) In the context of your table and your intentions (parts (a) and (b)), diagnose any problems you see with your choices of subjects and verbs in part (c). You may also choose to explain how each problem is addressed in your revision.

This part is optional, but many students choose to do it. If you like, it can be very brief.

- (e) From the *revised* text, extract another numbered list of grammatical subjects, each paired with its main verb, and each corresponding to the sentence in the text with the same number, as in part (c).
- (f) By comparing the numbered list from part (e) with your table from part (a), show how your choice of subjects and verbs respects (or doesn't respect) the principle.

Information flow (Principle 5)

Principle 5 says, *In each sentence, move your reader from familiar information to new information.* It is also closely connected with Principle 6: *For material you want to carry weight or be remembered, use the end of a sentence.* To explain how you have mastered these principles,

- (a) Referring to the sentence by number, say what you judge to be the old information and the new information in each sentence.
- (b) Comment briefly on the amount of new information per sentence in the text over all. How much is it, and is there too much new information, too little new information, or about the right amount?
- (c) Diagnose the problems in your original text. You may also choose to explain how each problem is addressed in your revision.
- (d) Say how well your revised text succeeds in moving your reader from old information to new information. Mention each sentence. If there are sentences that don't work or that gave you trouble, identify them by number. Conclude with your judgment of each paragraph overall.

- (e) If there are any sentences in which you have used the end of the sentence to place important material that should be emphasized, identify those sentences by number.

Coherent subjects (Principle 7)

Principle 7 says, *In a coherent passage, choose subjects that refer to a consistent set of related concepts* (and put them in the first six or seven words of each sentence). To explain how you have mastered this principle, for each paragraph in your text, both original and revised,

- (a) Identify the single topic that is the subject or the first few words of each sentence, *or* (more likely),
- (b) Present a bulleted list of topics. For each topic, identify the numbered sentences which have that topic in the initial few words (or as grammatical subject).
- (c) Analyze the coherence of the topic strings in your original text. Using the section on diagnosing problems below, enumerate any problems you see in the original text.
- (d) Finally, considering the topic strings in your revised text, explain what effect you intend for this topic or sequence of topics to have on your reader, or for what other reason this topic or sequence of topics make for a coherent paragraph.

Parallel structure (Principle 10)

Principle 10 says, *Order your text so your reader can easily see how related concepts are different and how they are similar.* The associated exercise, Exercise I, explains how to establish parallel structure by instantiating a template. To explain how you have mastered this principle:

- (a) Show the template you have designed to carry the information.
- (b) Explain your design goals for the template. What effect do you hope to have on the mind of your reader? When your reader is reading this sequence of instances, what do you expect him or her to be doing cognitively?
- (c) If your text does not follow your template exactly, explain the deviations and where they come from. Is the parallel structure in the world imperfect? Are some deviations motivated by your goals for the reader?
- (d) Good parallel structure is dense with comparative information. Identify the comparative questions you expect your reader to be able to answer.

Other principles

You are welcome to demonstrate mastery of other writing principles, including some that have been or will be discussed in

¹The example is from the IBM/360 *Principles of Operation* (the section on input/output).

class (parallel structure, the scientific abstract) and some that may appear only in the class handbook (mathematical definitions). For guidance on how to demonstrate mastery of other principles, please consult your instructor.

How to review your own work

Once you have your text and your explanation, you have two more steps to finish your self-review:

- Using the section on diagnosing problems below, identify any problems that remain in the text. Make a list.
- Write a short statement that says what principle you’re working on and what level of mastery your text demonstrates. To characterize a level of mastery, try this scale:
 - Every part of the text respects the principle.
 - Most parts of the text respect the principle, but for reasons that seem strong to me, there are some parts of the text in which I have chosen to disregard the principle. (In this case, please identify the parts and explain why you have chosen to disregard the principle.)
 - Most parts of the text respect the principle, but there are some parts in which I was not able to make things work. (In this case, please identify the parts in which you were not able to make things work.)
 - Most parts of the text respect the principle, and I might be able to make the other parts work, but I’m out of time.

If you can’t get your text to the point where most parts of it respect the principle, don’t continue on to peer review—instead, get help, or start over.

- Render your summary judgement of your work overall. Here are some example summary judgments:
 - The text says exactly what I want it to say.
 - The text says almost exactly what I want it to say.
 - The text says mostly what I want it to say, but I can’t seem to get it any better.
 - The text doesn’t yet say what I want it to say, but I’m stuck.
 - The text doesn’t yet say what I want it to say, but I’m out of time.

If none of these statements captures your summary judgment of your work, make up your own.

At this point you’re ready to pass on a packet to your peer reviewer. Divide your packet into two parts:

- The main part should include your *revised, numbered text*, your *mastery statement*, and your *summary judgment*. The

mastery statement and summary judgement will inform reviewers’ reading of the text.

- The supplemental part should include your *original text* (if any), your *explanation*, and your *diagnosis of problems*. These parts need to be separate. Separation enables your peer reviewer to evaluate your revised text without being tainted by your explanation, and it enables your peer reviewer to diagnose problems independently of your own diagnosis.

How to review someone else’s work

You should receive a packet in which the main part includes a revised text with numbered sentences, a short statement about level of mastery, and a summary judgement. Set the other parts aside.

1. Read the statement and the judgment, then—*without* looking at the original—analyze the revised text. Characterize, as briefly as you can, how well the text respects the principle or principles we’re learning in class. Even if the author is going for an advanced principle, earlier principles are still in play. Especially the choice of subjects and verbs.

Here are some example brief characterizations:

- The text follows the principles we’re learning in class, and the right things are important. I feel good about this text.
 - The text follows the principles we’re learning in class, but the author’s choices about what things are important feel off to me somehow.
 - The text sometimes follows the principles we’re learning in class, but not always.
 - The text doesn’t follow, or barely follows, the principles we’re learning in class.
 - I can’t tell if the text follows the principles we’re learning in class.
2. Use the section on diagnosing problems below to diagnose any problems you find in the revised text. This is the place to identify in what sentences the text doesn’t follow the principles we’re learning in class, and what the issue seems to be.

Please make your diagnoses *actionable*, and try to limit them to the principles we are learning in class. Please refer to the course handbook (the section “Commenting on a text”). For example, “the text isn’t clear” is *not* an actionable diagnosis.
 3. Now turn to the author’s analysis and explanation. Compare the author’s explanation of what he or she is trying to accomplish with your own reading of the text. Write a brief response something like one of these:

- I'm convinced by the explanation, and it's consistent with what I got reading the text on my own.
 - I'm convinced by the explanation, but when reading the text on my own, I got something else. (Please say what you got.)
 - I'm convinced by the explanation, but I had trouble following the text, so I didn't get much from the text itself.
 - I'm not convinced by the explanation; what the text says, and what I got from it, is something different from what the author describes. (Again, please say what you got.)
 - I'm not convinced by the explanation; I just couldn't understand the text.
4. Have a look at the original text, as well as the revision, and enumerate any strengths you see in the text. This is the place to comment on any good properties you see in the work, even if they are not actionable or specific to the editing principles. If you liked the revision, please say so! It can be quite helpful for a writer to hear that the revised text "seems clearer" or is "easier to understand" than the original—it is valuable data that summarizes one reader's reaction to the text.
5. Write down any other feedback you think will help the author. This might include suggestions about word choice, restructuring, other principles besides the main one in play, and so on.

When you're finished, return to the author your *brief characterization*, your *diagnoses*, your *response to the explanation*, your *list of strengths*, and your *other feedback*.

Diagnosing problems

This section lists some problems that you might identify in a text; the problems' descriptions can be cut and pasted. When you identify a problem, please associate it with a numbered sentence or a named paragraph.

- A single thing or action is called by two or more different names. For example, a paragraph refers to a "stack frame" and an "activation record." Or a paragraph refers to one idea as a "measure," a "method," and an "analysis." Or researchers are said to both "study" and "analyze" data.
- One noun or verb is used to refer to two or more things or actions that are different. For example, a chapter uses the word "system" to talk about a model, and an algorithm, and some software. Or a section uses the two different verbs "disperse data" and "reveal secrets" to refer to the same action.

- Two related things or actions are referred to in the text as if they are the same thing, even though they are different things with different names. For example, a paragraph refers to both "genes" and "gene sequences" as if they are the same thing.
 - Main verbs don't match important actions.²
- A special case: the main verb is a form of "is," and an action verb could be used instead.
- Main verbs match actions the author thinks are important, but I think other actions are more important.
 - Grammatical subjects don't match important agents or objects.
 - Grammatical subjects match agents or objects the author thinks are important, but I think other agents or objects are more important.
 - I disagree with the author about what words constitute the grammatical subject or main verb of one or more sentences.
 - The text contains definitions that are not illustrated with examples.
 - A sentence contains more new information than I could handle in a single sentence.
 - There is new information too early in a sentence, perhaps even at the beginning.
 - The most important new information in a sentence is not at or close to the end of the sentence.
 - A sentence begins with words that represent neither old information from the previous sentence nor a topic string drawn from a sequence of coherent subjects.
 - Ends of sentences are not used effectively to convey novelty or emphasis.
 - Subjects or topic strings in a paragraph change too quickly from sentence to sentence, or in a pattern I don't understand.
 - A paragraph feels as if it jumps from topic to topic, or it feels "disjointed" or "choppy."
 - I can't tell the purpose of a particular paragraph.
 - I feel like I know the purpose of a paragraph, but the paragraph is not getting the job done.
 - I feel that one paragraph is trying to do two or more different things.

²Please keep in mind that definitions, especially mathematical definitions, don't have any actions, and they will often use the verb "is." The standard for clarity in definitions is that they be illustrated with examples.

Template: What to submit for a self-assessment

Whether you are sending it to a peer or to me, please organize your self-assessment with these headings in this order:

- **Title**, giving your name and the date, saying it is a self-assessment of writing principles, and identifying the principle by name and number
- **Original text**, with numbered sentences, and with a brief introduction that says where the text is from
- **Revised text**, with numbered sentences, including only your *final* revision, and not any intermediate revisions
- **Analysis and explanation**, containing each of the elements listed in this handout, identified as (a), (b), and so on, for the relevant principle
- **Self-review**, including the three bulleted elements in the section above entitled “How to review your own work”: diagnosis of problems, level of mastery, and summary judgement
- **Acknowledgement of peer reviewers**, naming your peer reviewers and explaining in what ways they helped with the process.
- An optional **Peer-review Appendix**, containing material you received from your peer reviewers, if you wish to include it (and if you wish also to include an intermediate revision that you sent to a peer reviewer, this is the place to put it)

Also, please submit your self-assessment as a PDF document *with numbered pages*. If you cannot easily produce numbered pages natively, you can find tools online that will add page numbers to an unnumbered PDF.