

For Writing Consultants: Guidelines to Working with Non-Native Speakers

The original version of this handbook was adapted by Renata Fitzpatrick from work that was part of her Teaching English as a Second Language degree and used in the General College/College of Education and Human Development writing center consultant handbooks. The first Student Writing Support edition was adapted from the CEHD version in August 2007 by Kit Hansen with additional editing by Debra Hartley, Kirsten Jansen, and Katie Levin. Katie further edited and updated the handbook in July 2013.

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Introduction

To a large extent, an SWS writing consultation follows many of the same basic principles and goals, no matter the language background of either the consultant or the student; the material in our consultant handbook is relevant for both native and non-native speakers of English. This non-native-speaker (NNS) handbook is intended to help you expand your consulting repertoire to be more attentive to multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds, both your own and your students'.

Overall, working with a multilingual writer can make your job even more enjoyable! Obviously, a client or a consultant's being a "non-native speaker" does not indicate a deficit; rather, it is a bonus. Working with interesting and talented multilingual people builds your own intercultural competence. No matter who you work with in SWS, your biggest challenge as a consultant is to understand what the people sitting next to you really want to say, and to decide what feedback you can give that will help them to put their message across in the most effective way. Essentially, you need to be an active listener and to communicate well.

Each of the following sections addresses an area of NNS writing, containing both quick, easy-reference tips and a more in-depth discussion. While based on the experience and training of NNS specialists, this handbook is not a "bible." Rather, it is a general guide that should be augmented by your own experience and travails—which should be shared with the Center as a whole in order to continue to improve this handbook.

Non-native speaker: What's in a name?

There are many names used to delineate categories of people for whom English is not a first or primary language: EFL (English as a Foreign Language), ELL (English Language Learners), ESL (English as a Second Language), NNS (non-native speaker), and multilingual are just a few. At Student Writing Support, our preferred term is "multilingual," both because it is inclusive and because it does not connote deficit or a hierarchy of languages. However, many students and instructors are familiar with the labels "ESL" and "NNS"; because the University of Minnesota uses both these terms, and because earlier versions of this handbook opted for "NNS," that's the main term you'll see in this text. We encourage all consultants to be reflective about the terms they use, and to be attentive to how all people in this community (consultants and writers) identify themselves, linguistically and otherwise.

NNS profile

It goes without saying that not all NNSs are the same, but nonetheless, there are commonalities within groups of this population. The table on the next page identifies three broad groups of NNS students and the characteristics that often differentiate them. The table is followed by tips that translate these characteristics into tutoring considerations.

A general profile of NNS students at the University of Minnesota

	international students	US high school grads or near-grads	adult non-native speakers
citizenship status & associated considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> usually on a student visa may be experiencing culture shock & homesickness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> immigrant or refugee, or US-born son/daughter of immigrant or refugee may have experienced trauma, family & education disruption due to civil strife in home country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> immigrant or refugee spouse of international student or international student on a research fellowship
purpose at University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> study abroad will probably return home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> continuation of US education may be a high school student in PSEO program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University employee taking advantage of free class benefit research fellowship student or spouse furthering English proficiency
prior education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12-15 years in native country may have studied a year or more in a US high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> US education ranges from 12 years to just a few years, depending on how recently immigration occurred native country education could be age-appropriate or non-existent, depending on circumstances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> native country education could range from nothing to PhD, depending on individual circumstances (with licensing in US preventing practice in native-country profession)
English learning experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English learned formally in home country, as a foreign language (EFL) schooling in home country may have been in English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> often English learned by immersion (by living and going to school here) some students, depending on country of origin, may have had formal EFL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> learning may be occurring on the job or in ESL classes adult international students or their spouses may have formal EFL (English as a foreign language) training
English proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English may be more “textbook” (less idiomatic); initial difficulty with comprehension until fluency grows formal knowledge of grammar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> spoken English usually fluent unless arrival in US was quite recent intuitive knowledge of grammar, if educated in the US 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> could range from high fluency to low as an adult learner, language acquisition is often more difficult
native language literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strong native language literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> may have little or no native language literacy or may be learning it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ranges from full literacy to illiteracy, depending on circumstances
issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> level of oral fluency may not be the critical factor; could be difficulties with formal, written English & rhetorical style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> oral fluency may mask difficulties with formal, written English may prefer US identity (not ESL or foreign) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> depending on circumstances, issues such as low literacy level or living in communities where little English is spoken may be a factor

Translating the NNS profile(s) into tutoring tips

Identity

- Remember that “NNS” can mean many *different* things; each student is a unique individual.
- Don’t assume that NNS writers want to talk about their culture or home language. They may be pleased by your interest, but on the other hand, they could resent the implication that they are “outsiders.” Be attentive for signals about this.
- The term “ESL” (English as a Second Language) has a negative connotation for many writers. They may feel it denigrates their competence, or they may have felt unjustly assigned to ESL classes in the past, which may have interfered with other educational objectives they had.

Fluency, education, literacy

- Remember that language learning (especially to the level required to function in college) takes a long time and is very complex; it can depend, for example, on a student’s literacy in her first language, the age she was when she started learning, and many other factors.
- A writer who speaks English fluently is not necessarily in a position to read and write academic English—conversational English can be learned quickly, but academic English takes 5-7 years more to acquire (imagine reading a textbook or writing a paper in your second language).
- Try not to make assumptions about what the student knows or “should” know; he may have had long gaps in his formal education if he is a refugee, or he may have received a very different kind of education from you. NNSs have other knowledge that you do not have.
- Non-native speakers are also non-native listeners, and the student may not understand what you are saying even if she is nodding and smiling. It is also possible to “understand” a string of words but still have difficulty knitting the whole meaning together. Give the student time to respond, but then, if she seems confused by your question/comment, find another way to phrase it. Take special care to avoid slang.

Your assumptions and encouragement

- Realize that writing styles and conventions are also culturally determined. Don’t tell the student his way is “wrong.” Instead, tell him that in US academic writing, it is generally expected that he “do x, rather than y.” Indeed, you and the writer may want think critically together about the implications of these expectations.
- Never assume that a person who speaks or writes with an accent has nothing important to say. Read or listen for what lies beyond the linguistic error; negotiate meaning.
- Because of language difficulties or experiences of having been shut down in the past, writers might feel frustrated, defensive, anxious or overwhelmed; don’t focus only on error and don’t try to fix everything.
- A little encouragement might go a long way; but be specific in your praise—like criticism, praise can be constructive.
- Don’t assume you have to address everything in NNS writing any more than you would in native-speaker writing.

How might NNS writing be different from NS writing?

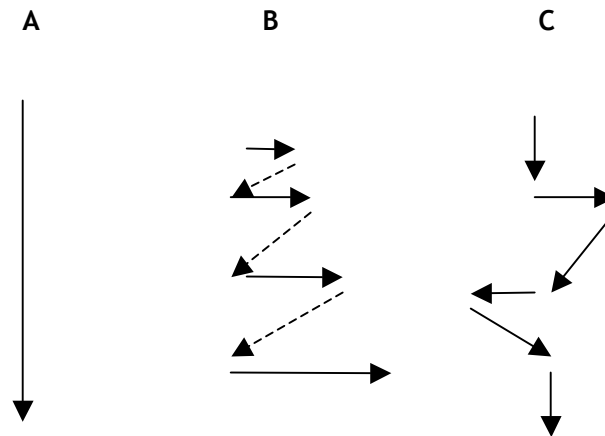
Many people automatically assume that NNS writing is going to suffer mostly from grammar errors. Indeed, there may be grammar mistakes, but these may not be the most important issue

the client is facing in her writing. As with any writer consulting us, we must be judicious in what we address, applying many of the same session start-up strategies that we use with a native speaker student. That said, NNS writing can look very different from native speaker writing due to culturally influenced differences in rhetorical style, grammar errors, vocabulary choices, and paraphrase and plagiarism issues.

Impact of culture on rhetorical style

Given the huge variety of individuals who may be labeled “NNS,” it’s important to note that the impact of culture on rhetorical style is something very difficult to generalize. Much NNS writing might not be all that different from a native speaker’s work; furthermore, because learning to write in any language and for any purpose is personal and contextual, each writer’s style can vary widely depending on a variety of factors. Still, it’s useful to look at a theory about second language writing and think about how it might be applicable in SWS work.

Contrastive rhetoric is a field of study that focuses on how patterns of communication are culturally based. In the 1960s Robert Kaplan published what has since become a much-criticized article in which he compared different cultures’ styles of organization in writing through graphical representations something like the following:



Adapted from Kaplan (1966)¹

The straight line in ‘A’ represented, according to Kaplan, the traditional linear pattern of topic development in English writing. ‘B’ represented what Kaplan called the “Oriental” style of discussion around a topic without a direct statement of focus, and in ‘C’ he demonstrated how he supposed writers of Romance languages might have a direct statement of thesis, occasional divergence, and eventual return to focus. (This is just a sample: Kaplan also examined patterns in “Semitic” and “Slavic” languages.) Although the details of Kaplan’s work have been condemned as ethnocentric and simplistic, his “Doodles article” did demonstrate that writing conventions, like all rhetorical patterns, are influenced by cultural background.

In other words, when you read a paper that has a style or organizational pattern you consider to be strange or inappropriate, it is likely that you and the writer have simply learned to value different ways of writing. In some cultures, for example, students have learned that it could be insulting to their readers to state their purpose at the beginning of a piece of writing, because to

¹ From: Connor, U. (1996) *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second language writing*. Cambridge Applied Linguistic Series. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

do so implies that the reader is not intelligent enough to infer the purpose for herself. In the US, however, most experienced academic writers say that an introduction to an academic paper ought to contain a thesis statement, perhaps because Americans value directness. Writers from some cultures might value beauty or richness of language more than directness, so preferences in vocabulary and sentence structure may also vary from one writer to another. There are many interesting examples of rhetorical variety based on cultural difference, too many—given the range of cultural backgrounds of students here at the U of M—for it to be practical for us to discuss all of those possibilities, but it is helpful at least to be aware that such variations exist and to be open to conversations with our students about different cultural expectations.

Having this basic awareness of cultural differences in writing styles helps to diminish our natural tendency to be ethnocentric or to assume that there is only one “correct” way to write a good paper. Examining our own assumptions and comparing them to other people’s, in other words, makes us less likely to voice simplistic negative judgments when we come across styles of writing that don’t immediately make sense to us. The less simplistically judgmental we are as consultants, the more likely we are to be capable of tactful communication and authentic learning. (Imagine how you might feel if you had spent ages perfecting a well-constructed and polished thesis statement in your second or third language, only to have your reader shake his head in disapproval and tell you it’s a bad way to start a paper.)

If you think the rhetorical patterns a writer has used are not likely to succeed because they are too far from typical US academic style, try to bear in mind that they may be what the student has learned as best practice and hearing that this practice is “not right” can be difficult. A tour-guide approach to what is likely to succeed in the US context is more tactful and easier for a writer to accept. Instead of saying “this is wrong” or “this doesn’t work,” try saying something like: “most professors I’ve known here at the university seem to prefer” Using this kind of comment as a prelude to explaining such things as the need for a clear statement of the main idea, use of authoritative evidence, and so on, can help writers learn about American academic rhetoric without being made to feel that their own style is being dismissed or undervalued. Also, consider asking the writer how she’s been taught to organize an academic paper, which may help you both understand these kinds of differences.

Impact of native language on NNS English grammar

As with contrastive rhetoric, it is useful as consultants to know a little bit about some of the theoretical work that has been done concerning the linguistic challenges faced by non-native writers of English. Again, some NNS writing may have very few grammar issues or may include problems that are no different from those of native English speakers, such as spelling or punctuation errors. On the other hand, just as the structure of a paper may be influenced by a student’s cultural and educational background, so their English language skills are also likely to reflect features of their first language. The errors we see may be a result of unconsciously following the rules of the first language. For example, there may be an absence of articles (“a,” “the”) in the writing of Russians and Koreans, whose first languages contain no articles. Some languages have much freer word order for sentences than the subject-verb-object structure English speakers tend to take for granted, and many languages have completely different systems when it comes to verbs. It can be helpful for us as writing consultants to bear this in mind: errors that look so obviously wrong to us may look every bit as “obviously” correct to the student whose language background has rules that call for that very usage.

Researchers have shown that during acquisition of a second language, students tend to combine features both from their first language and from what they have learned of the second, resulting in something that might not be considered correct in either language. But this “interlanguage” is actually systematic and accounts for some of the patterns of error in NNS writing. What may appear to be carelessness can be evidence of the writer attempting to follow what he/she perceives as the appropriate linguistic rules.

To compound the problem of having to use patterns or rules of language that are unfamiliar or even counterintuitive, there is the fact that English constructions tend to be so unpredictable. At the start of his book *Mother Tongue*, Bill Bryson (1991) puts it this way:

Any language where the unassuming word *fly* signifies an annoying insect, a means of travel, and a critical part of a gentleman's apparel is clearly asking to be mangled. Imagine . . . having to learn that in English one tells *a* lie but *the* truth, that an American who says 'I could care less' means the same thing as someone who says 'I couldn't care less' . . . that when a person says to you 'How do you do?' he will be taken aback if you reply, with impeccable logic, 'How do I do what?'

For every rule a learner of English conquers, there are multiple exceptions that don't really make sense. That's why small children who are learning to talk will say things like "He runned away." They have learned that to make verbs past tense, they are supposed to add an "ed" ending, so actually the error is more logical than the correct version! The NNS student has to cope not only with that illogicality but also with the influence of the rules from other languages he or she has already learned.

One last piece of theory about language learning that is worth keeping in mind: language learning takes a very long time, especially the acquisition of the kind of academic language needed at the university level. Researchers discovered that while oral fluency in English is learned relatively quickly by immigrant students, academic English can take seven years to acquire.²

How is this theory relevant in Student Writing Support?

Help build confidence

Cultivating some awareness about what NNS students are up against linguistically can help us as writing consultants to see second language writing sympathetically and approach consultations with a little more tact than we might otherwise do. We can reassure students by reminding them that language learning is *supposed* to take a long time, or by talking about the fact that native speakers *also* make many grammar errors. Many NNS students have repeatedly had their writing covered in red ink by well-meaning friends and tired high school teachers. It seldom helps, and often results in them assuming that they are just "bad writers." One of the things we can do in SWS is to help writers like this to build confidence, starting with the realization that making language errors is normal and something they can work on with our support. If we know, for example, how overgeneralization of a newly acquired rule in English can occur, such as the use of final "s" for plurals as in "we need advices," then rather than *only* pointing out the error as a negative thing, we can encourage the writer to realize that although that specific case wasn't right, they were actually on the right track in general.

Realize that performance is different from competence

Another way of helping a writer build confidence is to be alert for what they already know and to encourage them to use it. Some apparent errors are things the writer actually knows to be wrong. There is a difference, in language learning, between *competence*, or what we know and understand about a language, and *performance*, or how we actually speak or write it. In working with NNS writers, then, it will be important to realize that they don't necessarily need help with every single mistake; they will be able to correct many of their own grammar slips, and it is worth checking that the writer has actually proofread his or her own writing before beginning a session. Actually this goes for all writers—everyone makes mistakes; that's why proofreaders have jobs. This brings up an important clarification we often have to make with students about proofreading—see below.

² Collier, V.P and Thomas, W.P. (1991) *Academic achievement in a second language*. ERIC Digest.

We don't proofread for writers, but we do want to work with all of them.

Many writers come to the Center asking for "proofreading." The majority of students and professors are aware of the writing process and know that they need to reread and revise their papers at a variety of levels, but they don't know our writing center jargon for talking about these things. Consequently, "proofreading" may mean anything from "I want to check my sentence structure for clarity and grace" to "I want to see if I am following the assignment." When a writer asks for "proofreading," it's a good idea to ask, "OK, and what does that mean to you? What specifically do you want to look at?," listen to his or her concerns, then affirm what we can do from there.

If the student says that he or she wants someone to find and correct the errors in his or her paper, you can explain that while we do teach writers techniques for editing and proofreading their own work, we cannot proofread papers for writers (and you can show them the distinction between "proofreading" and "teaching you to proofread" in the "Our consultants will / Our consultants will not" section of the "getting the most from Student Writing Support" sheet). Pedagogically, proofreading (i.e. "fixing" someone else's paper) contradicts our philosophy (also spelled out on the "getting the most" sheets) of helping students become better and more confident writers through collaboration. While specific techniques vary, all of our consultants focus on helping students identify and correct their own mistakes.

If the student would rather use an editing service than learn to edit and proofread in a Student Writing Support consultation, then you should make a referral by giving them this card (at the Attendant desk in Nicholson, in the basket on the supply table in Appleby, and in the file cabinet at the MAC):

If you would like to hire an editor or proofreader, you can send a "want ad" with your name and contact information to the following addresses:

- to send to the Writing Studies Editing Listserv, email Barb Horvath (horva003@umn.edu). She will forward your request.
- to send to English graduate students, email your request directly to ENGRAD-L@lists.umn.edu

You and the editor will negotiate prices and process. The Center for Writing is not affiliated in any way with private editing/proofreading services, including those provided by Writing Studies or English.

Translating Theory into Tips

Rhetorical style

- Style of writing is culturally influenced. What may seem circuitous writing to you may be appropriate writing in the student's native culture. Be tactful and avoid value judgments. Couch suggestions in terms of what American academic writing expects.
- Keep in mind that rules for written English can be enormously different than those for spoken English. Even students who speak fluent English may have problems applying the rules for written English. Note that this applies to native speakers as well.

Source of Grammar Errors

- Particular types of errors go hand-in-hand with the writer's native language—you can use this knowledge to help you decide what to focus on or watch for (or what to ignore).
- NNS errors are not necessarily due to carelessness or ignorance—they may actually reflect sincere effort to apply a grammar rule or their interpretation of it. Keep this in mind when giving feedback; perhaps ask the student why she chose the particular construction in order to find out what her understanding of the rule is.
- If you are a native speaker, remember that you have enormous intuitive knowledge of English, which is widely considered a difficult language. Things that are obvious to you, however, may be anything but to the NNS.

Prioritizing what to work on

It's important to prioritize when working with any writer (NNS or not), as what you can work on in one conference is necessarily limited (both by time and energy). Many of the writers you see will come from two main sources: the Writing Studies "freshman composition" classes, and the College English Transitions (CET) program, which provides one year of academic and language support for students who are immigrants or refugees as they start their college years. For both of these groups of writers, it should be relatively easy to establish what stage of the writing process the writer is at, because the instructors generally demand different drafts for different purposes. You are most likely to see CET students at the Appleby site. The grid on the following page may help you make decisions about what to focus on, depending on what the writer has done so far.

If the writer has:	. . . you may want to begin with:	. . . which could mean talking about:
no draft a very short draft a first draft a self-declared problem with the ideas a paper that appears to have nothing to do with the assignment	<i>content</i> <i>ideas</i>	the assignment/ requirements the ideas he or she has written down so far the ideas still inside the student's head connections between ideas evidence or support for the ideas word choice (if necessary for clarity)
a first or second draft many ideas presented in an apparently random order a self-declared problem with organization	<i>structure</i> <i>organization</i>	thesis statement/ main idea introduction/ conclusion paragraphs/ transitions connections between ideas use of evidence or support for ideas
a final draft a paper they will hand in today* something the student specifically wants to work on for grammar or style	<i>grammar</i> <i>sentence level concerns</i>	sentence structure (word order, run-ons etc.) verbs (tenses, subject agreement) "s" endings on third person singular verbs, plural nouns, possessives. punctuation, prepositions, articles editing strategies

*Also explain how to use SWS most effectively and what we would work on if the writer had visited us earlier in the writing process.

Strategies and tips for working on these aspects are discussed in more detail in the following pages.

When English comprehension or pronunciation seems to be an issue...

Difficulty in understanding one another can be a serious impediment when working across languages. Remember that communication problems can cut both ways and can come from several sources.

- If you have trouble understanding accented speech, ask the writer to slow down and/or write down occasional words you can't catch.
- Remember that the writer may be embarrassed about pronunciation problems: try to be encouraging!
- Ask questions to check that you have understood correctly.
- Ask the writer for an example, if you are unsure of meaning.
- Be patient. Give the writer extra time to answer your questions if necessary.
- Be specific—e.g. instead of "give details," say "talk about the three most important things that happened on that day."
- Beware of using idiomatic language such as "kitty corner," "in the same boat," or "against the grain."
- Explain the vocabulary you use to talk about writing. When employing terms such as "supporting evidence" and "thesis statement," check to verify that the writer understands their meaning and provide clear explanations if needed.
- Use analogies and abstract comparisons with caution; check that you are not using imagery or examples that depend on familiarity with American cultural background.
- Use examples and be as specific and focused as possible.
- Supplement your speaking with writing. Always have paper and pencil at hand.
- Check for comprehension by inviting the writer to speak often.

Content/Ideas

It's worth remembering that NNS writers often receive a disproportionate amount of feedback (most of it negative) on their grammatical errors. Don't overlook the importance of the content/ideas in their work. Negotiate for meaning: find out what they really want to say and help them say it in a way that ensures their meaning will be clear. Ask many questions to get the writer talking.

- What is your paper about?
- What is the most important idea or message in your paper?
- Do you think your paper does what the assignment asks?
- Should we talk about your ideas?
- Now that I've read through the paper quickly, let me tell you what I think the main ideas of it are, and you tell me which parts I have right or wrong, okay?
- Is there something you could add / take out here?
- So by this part you mean that "x" is really similar to "y" or really different?
- How does this fit with the idea in the introduction?
- I'm confused by this part; I thought you were saying "x" but maybe you were actually saying "y"?
- Try to explain this another way. I just want to make sure I understand you.
- Can you give me an example of "x"? I think I know what you mean, but I just want to be sure.

Grammar/Editing/Vocabulary

Recognizing which errors to work on

After ideas and organization have been dealt with, if language is the issue, and if there are many grammar errors and you know that the writer has already carefully proofread the paper him/herself, it's important to identify which patterns of error are repeated, and begin with one pattern. Here, a linguistic theory known as *Error Gravity* may also come into play. Errors are rated according to whether they interfere with comprehension, and the degree of irritation they cause to the reader. Research has shown that typically professors are irritated less by errors that are also made by native English speakers (e.g. spelling, comma splices). Grammar problems that are more often made by NNS writers tend to be tolerated less by faculty; they have been found to be irritated by errors in word order, word choice, verb tense, and missing articles and relative clauses. If there are multiple types of error, decide which ones interfere with comprehension, and after that, which ones are likely to be most irritating.

Ways of tackling grammar error—find the pattern, collaborate to find correction rules

Once an error pattern is identified, there are various approaches for working on it. Sometimes writers will be able to identify errors themselves, but others will have to be pointed out. Reading the paper aloud (either by the writer or the consultant) is often a good strategy for finding errors, and if the writer doesn't see or hear them, pausing and pointing with a pen or finger may be enough. In general it's better for the writer to circle or underline his or her own errors; the writer should be actively participating in the process and keeping ownership of the paper throughout. (If the consultant is the only one with a pen, it is all too easy to take over and correct grammar *for* the writer rather than work collaboratively *with* the writer.) Consultants who want to write examples or rule reminders for students can do it on the margins on the paper, on sticky notes, or on a separate sheet.

As consultants we may or may not be familiar with the rule the writer needs to use. If we do know the grammar, we can discuss it with the writer, working through examples to check comprehension. Another possibility is to look up the relevant point together using SWS texts,

handouts, or online resources. Sometimes it can be helpful to have a writer work on a section of text alone and then see whether there are questions or problems.

Vocabulary or word choice

In many cases, international NNSs know more about English grammar than native speakers do—they have learned it more formally and sometimes more recently than Americans. In contrast, international NNSs in particular may have more limited vocabulary and may not have yet developed the sense for which words are best in which situations. For writers who want an explanation, there are vocabulary-building books on SWS shelves, such as Zwier's *Building Academic Vocabulary*. You could also show the writer how to use a thesaurus and cross-reference it with the *Longman Contemporary Dictionary* or the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary Online* (both available on our "especially for multilingual writers" page at writing.umn.edu/sws/multilingual/index.html). But because words have many connotations in addition to their dictionary meanings, and particularly because of the many illogical and unpredictable aspects of English, there are just times when it makes more sense for a consultant to *tell* a writer how to use certain phrases and words, or to give the answer without trying to elaborate on the explanation. Sometimes clients appreciate a written note of the correct version. In particular, language that consultants might "share" rather than trying to find rules for include:

Phrasal verbs. English is fairly unique in its extensive use of verb-preposition and verb-adverb combinations. Examples are *drop off*, *get away with*, *break into*, *concerned about*. Moreover, some of these phrasals can be separated as in *I'll drop off the books tomorrow* and *I'll drop the books off tomorrow*, but others must remain together, as in *They broke into the house*. This is very complicated for many NNS students, but is totally intuitive for the NS. Feel free to just tell the student what is correct. For the student (or consultant) wanting more detailed explanations, refer to chapter 6, "Prepositions and Particles" in Yule's *Explaining English Grammar*. Lists of phrasal verbs can also be found on the web; two well-known sites are the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* and Dave's ESL Café at eslcafe.com/pv/.

Idiomatic phrases. You will often see partially correct idioms or expressions, such as "on another hand," "so far so fine," "oppositely" (instead of "in contrast"). In such cases, there is no grammatical reason for the exact choice of words that makes the idiom sound correct, so just give the student the correct version of it.

Prepositions (at, by, for, from, in, of, on, off, to, with, under, before, etc.). Use of prepositions in English is not consistent and is therefore very hard to explain. Why, for example, do we say we are getting *on* a bike or a bus, but use *in* when it comes to a car or a canoe? If the writer has many other types of grammar errors, it might be better just to tolerate incorrect prepositions rather than overwhelming the student with information. If the writer is more proficient, and there is time to deal with prepositions, provide the corrections and encourage the student to keep a list for memorization. A detailed explanation of preposition usage, appropriate for more advanced NNS students and for consultants, is in George Yule's *Explaining English Grammar*, chapter 6, starting on page 158.

Articles (the, a, an). It's much more difficult than you might think to explain English uses of "the" and "a." You might be successful in explaining that "a" can never be used with a plural—it would be fairly easy to say why "a three dogs" is incorrect, for example. Another typical native-speaker explanation of the different uses of "a" and "the" goes something like this:

Well, if it was just any bus, you'd say "a bus," but if you were talking about a specific or particular bus, you would have to use the before the noun.

This sounds good, but may encourage the learner to produce a sentence like

“She goes to the school by the bus”

(inserting the article “the” where it is not necessary), and it is much harder to explain why this is not correct, especially if the student is protesting “but it is a specific bus!”

Again, it may be more effective simply to correct inappropriate articles or supply missing ones, but the student could probably find a native-speaker friend to proofread for something like this. If the student has fairly sophisticated English skills, and wishes to work on article use, you might recommend that they ask an NNS instructor for help.

We’ve developed a detailed self-paced tutorial on choosing articles for use with common nouns, available online at writing.umn.edu/sws/articles/index.html. The tutorial relies on our quicktips handouts on articles (available on paper in Nicholson, Appleby, and the MAC, and online at writing.umn.edu/sws/quickhelp/grammar.html).

Give positive feedback, too!

Besides focusing on errors when working on grammar editing, remember to give some positive feedback. If the writer’s paper contains a well-written sentence or a well-edited paragraph, or even just a well-chosen word, it’s a good idea to comment on that too. If we point out some examples of good form, the student can sometimes use his own work as a model. Aside from that, it can help build confidence to realize that some things have been well done, and this is important especially for NNS writers who often feel daunted by the thought of having to write and edit as much as they do.

If the writing has very few grammar errors

Some writers ask for help with grammar even when you can tell at a glance that their work looks relatively well edited. They may be perfectionists, or may be writing for professors they know to be perfectionists about language (a frequent problem for graduate students). When there are very few errors it is obviously harder to select a pattern, and easier to fall into the trap of proofreading for the writer. It is possible, however, to work productively on language with writers like this. In addition, there are often issues of style (rather than correctness) and precise meaning or connotation where consultants can be helpful.

Strategies for grammar/ editing work / vocabulary:

- Check that the writer has already self-edited the paper.
- Ask the writer to identify parts of writing he/she is not confident about.
- Try to identify a pattern of error and go through the entire paper focusing only on that one pattern.
- If there appear to be many errors of the same type, work with the writer on the first couple of paragraphs and then encourage the writer to do the rest independently. (Let the writer know you will help her check it over afterwards).
- Try just pointing to an incorrect word or sentence and waiting a couple of seconds; sometimes the writer will see her own mistake.
- Write down examples of errors and corrections on a separate sheet.
- Demonstrate (and explain, if you feel comfortable with it) the correct usage, or find a grammar book and help the student look it up
- If a writer is struggling to find appropriate words, and you are sure you know what they want to say, offer a couple of possible word / phrase choices. If you give choices, the new words are more likely to feel authentic to the writer.
- If the vocabulary or usage the writer needs is a special connotation or idiomatic English, just tell the writer how a native speaker would say it.
- Discuss editing strategies (slowed-down, line-by-line reading; reading aloud; editing for one kind of error at a time; etc.).
- If word choice is problematic, explain meaning and connotations, or show the writer how to use the *Longman Contemporary Dictionary* to decide between possible words.
- Give some positive feedback to help build confidence.

Verb Tenses

English has six verb tenses: simple present, simple past, simple future, present perfect, past perfect and future perfect. Each of these has a continuous (also called “progressive”) form. It is a good idea for consultants to become familiar with the various tenses and the vocabulary for discussing them. The verb tense system in English is complicated; many languages use the same verb for all tenses, showing the time through adverbs. NNS writing often features inappropriate and inconsistent verb tense usage.

The “ed” ending has many uses (for past tense, e.g. *talked*), for past participle form in present perfect (e.g. *has rented*); past perfect (e.g. *had hated*) and passive voice (e.g. *was created*), and also for adjectives (e.g. *worried*). It may help writers to be reminded that the “ed” ending does not always show past time.

The chart on the next page shows all the tenses with examples. On this chart, time, from past (on the left) to future (on the right) is presented on the horizontal axis, and “now” is represented by the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes. The X’s are the “events” being referred to. It may be helpful to work together with the writer, using this chart, to identify what type of event / time situation the writer wants to represent.

Verb Tense Chart based on Azar

On this chart, time, from past (on the left) to future (on the right) is presented on the horizontal axis, and “now” is represented by the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes. The X’s are the “events” being referred to.

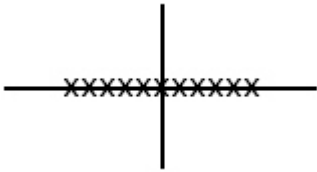
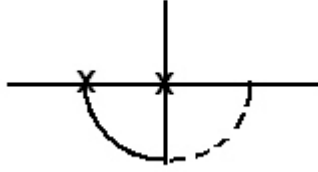
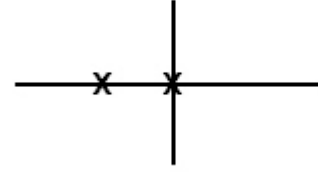
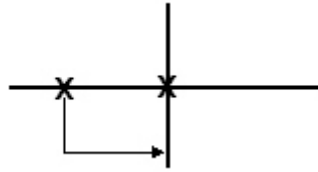
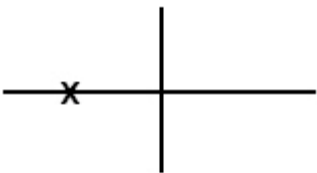
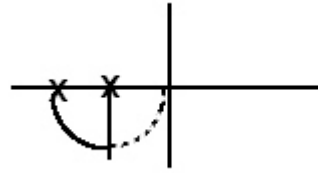
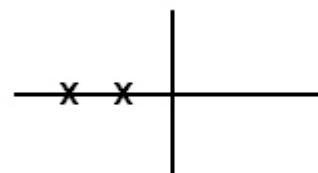
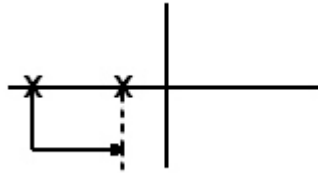
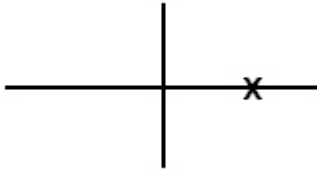
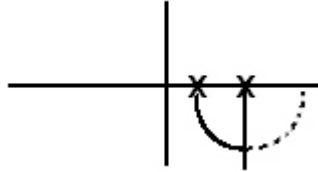
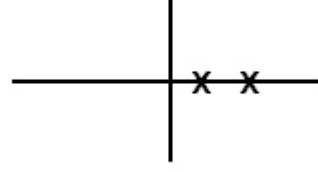
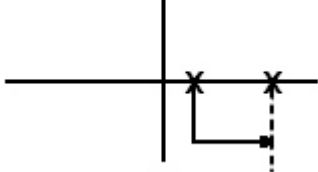
<p>simple present I study every day. <i>(habitual action—past to present to future)</i></p> 	<p>present continuous I am studying right now. <i>(action began in past, may continue into future)</i></p> 	<p>present perfect I have studied Chapter 1. <i>(past action with indefinite time span)</i></p> 	<p>present perfect continuous I have been studying for two hours. <i>(action began in past and continues until now)</i></p> 
<p>simple past I studied last night. <i>(action completed in the past)</i></p> 	<p>past continuous I was studying when you called. <i>(action begun in past, implies possible continuation after second past event)</i></p> 	<p>past perfect I had studied drawing before I began to study painting. <i>(past action completed before second past action)</i></p> 	<p>past perfect continuous I had been studying for two hours when my friends came over. <i>(past continuous action occurring when second past action occurred)</i></p> 
<p>simple future I will study tomorrow. <i>(action will occur in the future)</i></p> 	<p>future continuous I will be studying when you arrive. <i>(continuous future action will continue to happen when another future action occurs)</i></p> 	<p>future perfect He will have finished reading by the time you arrive. <i>(future action will be completed by time another future action occurs)</i></p> 	<p>future perfect continuous I will have been studying for two hours by the time you arrive. <i>(future continuous action will happen when another future action occurs)</i></p> 

Chart adapted from Betty S. Azar, *Understanding & Using English Grammar*, Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1981, pages 74-77.