

Minimal Marking

Many students seek support from a writing tutor to identify and correct errors in their writing. How do you address this concern without falling into the proofreading trap, creating dependence on your support? Minimal marking is a strategy for helping tutees learn to more accurately identify and correct their own writing errors. It is especially useful for patterns of grammar errors that follow a predictable pattern, but can also be used for word choice errors.

What is minimal marking?

Minimal marking is a technique of making tutees aware of errors in their writing by showing in the margin that errors exist in that section of writing, without telling the tutee exactly where.

Procedures for minimal marking

1. **Select the error that you are focusing on in the session.** Minimal marking is effective when used to address only one type of error at a time (e.g. subject-verb agreement, article use, fragments). You may wish to use an error log with tutees to collaboratively identify the pattern of error that would be most productive to address in the session.
2. **With the tutee, name the error pattern you will address.** Use questions to explore the tutee's knowledge of the issue (e.g. *How do you decide whether to use the singular or plural form of the verb?*). If the tutee is unclear about the concept, step back and take a few minutes to explain, and perhaps assign some exercises to the tutee. When the tutee understands the concept, move on to the next step.
3. **Ask the tutee to identify the errors in a paragraph or short section of text** (e.g. *There are several subject-verb agreement errors in this paragraph? Can you find and edit them?*). If the tutee is not able to correct their error, continue through the process.
4. **Ask the tutee for permission to make checkmarks on their paper.** Remember that the tutee should "hold the pen" and make any changes to their writing themselves.
5. **Place a checkmark beside each line where the error occurs** (there may be more than one checkmark beside some lines). Explain to the tutee that each checkmark represents one error (*There is one subject-verb agreement error everywhere you see a checkmark. Can you find and correct them?*)
6. **Provide positive feedback to the student as they correct their errors,** and encourage them as you observe their growth in self-editing. If the student missed some errors, help them to make connections with the errors that they did successfully fix in order to correct the remaining problems.

The minimal marking strategy can be an excellent way to help tutees gain confidence in their ability to use self-editing skills. After using the minimal marking strategy, you may wish to share an additional self-editing technique with the student, or encourage them to follow up with another session to continue refining their self-editing skills.

Additional self-editing techniques such as using error logs, developing a personalized editing resource, and using dictionaries to improve your writing are further explained in An Editing Guide for ESL Students:

https://community.moodle.kpu.ca/pluginfile.php/4446/mod_resource/content/1/LC%20-%20Guide%20to%20ESL%20Editing%20-%202015.pdf

Activity: Use Minimal Marking with Tutees

Use Minimal Marking in the Untitled paper below to practice making tutees aware of errors in their writing.

Untitled

“Jack” or “Jacqueline”

The activity that I find myself doing to relax & unwind is a slow walk. I usually perform this action when I am upset, either at myself or someone I am acquainted with. I sometimes walk for a couple of hours, just thinking about my problems, and alot of the time I do find myself having a pretty good conversation with myself. When I'm walking I notice alot of things about people. I see flowers, trees and alot of other natural sights. Such as the wildlife. I think my biggest focusing point when I'm walking and thinking it the sky. It is so beautiful no matter what sate it is in. On a bright sunny day it is a fascinating light blue, but on a windy, stormy day it is a very fluffy, gray, low hanging bunch of billows. As I walk I feel the wind zip through me, the rough pavement beneath my fee, and the unraveled strings in my pockets. I hear an occasional sigh from deep within myself as my voice echoes off the seasonal air and reflects my verbal thoughts back to me. My sense of smell is usually focused on the clean freshness of the country air, but it is tampered with sometimes by the sweet smell of a patch of wild flowers. My walks really make me understand my self and most of the time I feel relieved upon returning home again.