

---

# Three-Step Editing

From *Improving Student Performance Through Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*  
by Dr. John J. Collins

Beyond resistance due to laziness and carelessness, I find that most students do not edit or revise because they lack clarity about what to look for, and how to fix the problem when it is found. The three-step process described here will help. I've used it countless times and find students respond really well.

After the students have completed a Type Three assignment, ask for three student volunteers to hand in the first drafts of their assignments. These three papers become the samples for the class period. The students who volunteer have the benefit of having their papers critiqued before they are “officially” evaluated by the teacher so that they can incorporate suggestions into the final draft. I tell students that volunteering their papers almost always assures a high grade. Further, when students know their papers will be displayed for the class, they tend to do their best work. These papers then serve as positive models for the rest of the class. Then, at the beginning of the class, check to see if everyone has a first draft and penalize those who do not. This is an important step because some students will not write a draft until they see the student models. This can become a major problem if student papers become plagiarized versions of the models on the overhead rather than original works.

## **Step One: Lead class through evaluation of first paper.**

Display the first of the three student papers on an interactive whiteboard or document camera and read it out loud to the class. Discuss the strengths of the paper and, being sure to involve the students, evaluate it based on the focus correction areas (FCAs). I find that the process works best and is most efficient if I lead the discussion and explain the evaluation to the students.

Consider numbering the lines on the student's paper as soon as you display it. That way everyone can quickly find the place on the paper during class discussion, for example, “On line five, I think *friends* should be a possessive” or “I think you could eliminate the phrase on line ten that begins the sentence.”

If the assignments are long—two full pages or more—consider evaluating only the first page or sections of the paper, not the complete paper. It is important for students to see how you—the evaluator—react to different students' writing. It is equally important for you to explain your reactions and *to teach how to solve writing problems* right then and there, not just identify them.

If you discover that students are having a difficult time writing papers that meet the requirements set by the FCAs, consider stopping the process and having students practice the skill on a paper that was written previously. If students save their work in writing folders that are kept in the classroom, they are immediately available so students can evaluate and edit for the skill on a real paper, not on a worksheet.

When I use this process, I have students take out a specific past paper and review it for the FCA in question. If the student feels the composition needs to be revised for the FCA, the revision is done right on the actual composition. If the student feels the composition meets the requirements set by the FCA, the student does not have to change the paper but must write a short explanation about why the paper has the required skill. It has been my experience that many students demonstrate writing skills in some papers but not in others. Their application is either sloppy or random. This exercise helps students diagnose their

---

own skill levels in a relatively painless way. It also makes every writing assignment more valuable because students never know when their papers will be used again as an editing activity. It helps if these editing exercises are collected and counted as a quiz grade.

**Step Two: Have pairs of students evaluate a second paper.**

Put the second paper on the interactive whiteboard or document camera and read it out loud. Ask students to pair up and co-author a paragraph evaluating the paper on the overhead using the FCAs you have just modeled. As students are evaluating the paper, sit at the back of the classroom and evaluate the paper yourself. After a few minutes, ask if anyone would like to share his or her evaluation. This step can be made more interesting by offering extra credit to any student who comes within ten points of your grade. When I do this activity, I push it further by adding that I will take points off team members' compositions if they are off by more than ten points. This approach has a game-show aspect, but I feel that it energizes the class and keeps students from offering poorly thought-out evaluations.

**Step Three: Have individual students evaluate third paper.**

This step involves displaying the third paper, reading it out loud, and having individual students write a short evaluation based on the FCAs. You and your students compare the evaluations and offer suggestions.

By the time the class has reviewed these three papers, there is a basic understanding of the assignment and what is required by the FCAs. By the end of this process, I have clarified the assignment and the statement of the FCAs, or I have made some adjustments in the scoring system. Students have had a chance both to watch me evaluate three papers and to influence the evaluation process. Students who volunteer their papers get an early evaluation and direct instruction on how to improve their papers, and I get practice time to evaluate papers and to clarify what I meant by the FCAs. Unless the three papers are quite short or the class periods long, the review of three papers can usually take a full class period. For homework, students can then revise their papers based on the insight gained from the review of the papers in class. The class's papers can be collected the next class, Type Three writing, or the students can do peer review, which would turn the assignment into Type Four. Although no activity is perfect, this process rarely misses because it involves *all* students and helps hone their evaluation and analysis skills for an immediate task, a paper they will be handing in tomorrow.

When I explain or model this process, teachers and students usually enjoy it, but I always get comments about how time consuming it is. I would not do the Three-Step Editing process for every paper. I would do it when I was introducing a new form of writing (say, the business letter or the research paper) or new FCAs. Also, I would use the process when the assignments the students were reviewing were content rich. If students are responding to well-developed assignments about the content that is being taught, the three-step process not only teaches your assessment system and how to revise and edit, but it also helps students review content. For example, if students are writing a detailed explanation about how to solve a complex math problem or a science lab report, the three-step process helps students remember how to solve the problem or how to structure a lab report because it was reviewed three times.