

## EDU 455/C&I 555 Writing Improvement: Sharpen Prose with Focused Revision

(2 credits)  
Spring 2020



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**Dates:** spring semester

**Course delivery:** Online, Moodle learning platform; course is self-paced

### Required Texts:

1. *The Classroom Teacher's Guide to Struggling Writers*

Author: Dudley-Marling

ISBN: 9780325007656

### Course Description:

This 2-credit self-paced course is designed to develop participants' knowledge of writing improvement through an inquiry approach that involves reflective decision-making and critical thinking. We will explore specific strategies that start at the sentence level and transition to paragraph improvement. Knowing how to make improvements with paragraphs (internal text structure) lays the foundation to target the overall cohesion of the piece, or its external text structure—whether it is a personal narrative or critical essay.



### Grading summary:

A 90-100

B 80-89

C 70-79

D 60-69

### Summary of Requirements and Points:

**Submit all written work as Microsoft Word docx file.**

Requirement	Points
Writing resource critique	25
Reading responses	20
Writing portfolio	35
Reflection paper	20

### Learning Outcomes:

Upon successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

1. Describe the elements of effective written.
2. Compare and contrast *editing* and *revision*.
3. Describe and practice strategies that foster improvement at the sentence, paragraph, and paper level.
4. Describe how beginnings and endings can be targeted for improvement.
5. Conduct effective revision in personal and professional (classroom) writing.



→**Preparation and Feedback:** It is your responsibility to read all documents related to this course, including emails and news announcements on the course home page. In addition, be sure to proofread *out loud* all your work before you submit it to catch careless errors or oversights. If any questions arise, contact me: [ann.ellsworth@montana.edu](mailto:ann.ellsworth@montana.edu)



→**APA format:** In the education profession, citation protocol is governed the requirements outlined by the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual. A helpful resource follows: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

## DESCRIPTION OF ASSIGNMENTS

### **WRITING RESOURCE CRITIQUE (25 points)**

Read one of the following texts—all can be ordered from Amazon or your local bookstore. No substitutions, please, for these books have been selected because they complement the course learning outcomes.

Critique the author’s ideas, discussing how they support struggling readers and writers. In your 4-5 page paper plus reference page (double-space text), discuss what changes you’ll make based on the ideas you learned.

- *Writers are Readers: Flipping Reading Instruction into Writing Opportunities*. (2015). Lester Laminack, Reba Wadsworth. (Heinemann)
- *Write This Way: How Modeling Transforms the Writing Classroom*. (2016). Kelly Boswell (Heinemann)
- *Creating Writers: 6 Traits, Process, Workshop and Literature* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition) (2013). Vicki Spandel (Pearson)
- *The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing*. (2014) Ruth Culham (Stenhouse)
- *Supporting struggling readers and writers: Strategies for classroom intervention 3-6* (2002). Dorothy Strickland, Kathy Ganske, Joanne Monroe.

### **READING RESPONSES (20 points)**

Write a 2-3 page (double-spaced) reflection essay for each on the following four short readings. Title each reading but submit the final assignment as one word.docx file.

- 9 Qualities of Good Writing (Ann Handley)
- Why Students Can’t Write (Chronicle of Higher Education)
- Several Short Sentences About Writing (Tara Gray)
- What Research Says About Writing (instructor pdf. file)

### **WRITING PORTFOLIO (35 points)**

This series of assignments is designed to heighten your awareness of words and language, and to upgrade your written expression. It contains six sub-parts. You have a choice—select any five to complete.

#### **ASSIGNMENT # 1:**

#### **Specificity in Writing**

**Directions:** Competent writers know the value of specificity. As a preliminary exercise, let’s take a general category and peel back the layers, making the words more specific. See the following examples.

*Example #1:*

Topic: Transportation

Brainstorming: Transportation—land transportation—motor vehicle—4-door passenger vehicle—Subaru—Legacy—my navy blue Subaru Legacy

*Example 1: From brainstorming to writing:*

Uninspired: The vehicle turned left at the street.

Better: The motorcycle turned left at the corner.

Best: Andy's 900cc Harley-Davidson turned left into the busy traffic of West Main Street.

*Example 2: From brainstorming to writing Example #2:*

Uninspired: Sara said that she had seen an accident on I-90.

Better: Sarah mumbled that she had witnessed a most horrific accident on I-90.

Best: Sara mumbled with a trembling voice and shaky hands that she was the sole witness of a most horrific accident on I-90 that resulted from icy road conditions.

**Now it's your turn.** Write an uninspired, ordinary sentence. Then elevate the verbs, nouns, and other words to transform the sentence.

### **ASSIGNMENT #2:**

#### **Sentence Combining: 10 into 1**

**Directions:** Read the following 10 insipid, ordinary sentences, locating the kernel (key idea) of each sentence. Think of ways to reduce redundancy and create one well-built sentence.

*Professor Ellsworth's example:*

School uniforms are controversial.

School uniforms reduce decisions.

The decisions are about what to wear,

The decisions are faced every morning.

School uniforms reduce costs.

The costs involve brand-name clothing.

The costs involve wearing different outfits each day.

Many students hate school uniforms.

They say school uniforms are boring.

They say school uniforms reduce individuality.



Professor Ellsworth's revision:

Although school uniforms reduce decisions about what to wear in the morning and are cheaper, eliminating the competition of brand-name clothing, many students hate them because they are boring and reduce individuality.

Note: I didn't have to restate the first idea—that uniforms are controversial—for it is implied in how I structured my sentence. Good writers are mindful of how they can eliminate wordiness by paying attention to what's implied and what is stated explicitly.

**Now it's your turn.** Choose a topic and list 10 factual statements. Locate the kernel of critical information in each and eliminate all redundant or obvious (implied) information. Then work some magic and transform these 10 unremarkable sentences into one tightly-worded sentence.

ASSIGNMENT #3**Sentence combining at the paragraph level.**

**Directions:** Read the following paragraphs about tennis and teaching. What is your reaction? Such stilted, boring prose! All the sentences are in Subject + Predicate/Verb presentation. Oh dear! But you can fix this. Vary how your sentences begin so they are NOT Subject + Predicate/Verb.

Paragraph 1:

Wimbledon is one of the premier tennis competitions. Others are the French Open and the U.S. Open. Both men and women play at Wimbledon. There are singles and doubles categories. The playing surface is grass, not clay. There are 24 courts to accommodate the many players. ESPN is the network that broadcasts this event. Wimbledon lasts approximately two weeks. Tennis is the only sport where men and women earn the same purse for their athletic prowess. Tennis does not award male players more than women players. Billie Jean King was relentless in helping to secure equal treatment for female players. The overall winner of each category of Wimbledon earns over one million pounds. Players who make it to the first round only walk away with 14 thousand pounds. It pays to be a strong player who qualifies to compete at Wimbledon. (14 sentences)

Paragraph 2:

Teachers work with children. They also work with parents and other professionals. Teachers are expected to be competent with the material they teach. They are also expected to communicate that subject matter to students. Some students learn the material quickly. Other students struggle. They need multiple exposures to a concept before they fully learn it. Quality teachers know how to work with both kinds of learners. They can help struggling students but not bore the talented ones. Teaching may look easy. It is a career that requires problem solving

almost on a minute by minute basis. Those individuals who can meet the standards set by the profession should become certified teachers. Many would say that teaching is like other professions. In other professions, the professional is held accountable by members of that professional group and by the public. Teachers must demonstrate professionalism at many levels. (15 sentences)

**Now it's your turn.** Select one of the above paragraphs and take the 14 or 15 sentences and rewrite, eliminating all redundancy and using sentence combining skills. Your goal is to reduce the total number of sentences by half, or better.

#### **ASSIGNMENT #4**

##### **Introductory paragraphs—how to “hook” your reader**

**Directions:** Read the following four examples of opening paragraphs, which all deal with the same topic: The importance of effective early literacy instruction. Think about how I've modeled different “hooks” and other writer's techniques to create four very different introductory paragraphs. In a short reflection, write what you've observed. Also identify which example is your favorite and tell me why.



##### **Example 1**

Every year, fresh-faced youngsters face the Herculean task of learning to read and write. The responsibility of providing each student with the strength and armor necessary to slay the multi-headed Hydra must rest on the broad should of primary teachers. Teaching the alphabetic principle and laying the foundation for reading basics provides students with the sturdy stance and strong sinews to tackle text and conquer it. Reading readiness, a key indicator, can be measured by children's interest in words, book, and print in their environment. At school, formal instruction in language begins, usually with study of alphabetic principles. Once able to read independently, youngsters are more likely to apply these literacy understandings in in-school and out-of-school settings. Learning to read, a complex and multi-layered process, results from language readiness, cognitive engagement, and motivation.

##### **Example 2**

Long the epicenter of debate, how to teach children to read has been a perennial subject discussed at dinner parties, legislative sessions, and faculty meetings. While reading programs come and go, one variable is constant—the knowledgeable teacher. The wise instructor knows

that learning to read is a process, *not* an event. By focusing on the smallest parts of language and then combining these to create larger units, the groundwork is laid for more complex understandings. While English is an alphabetic language, the study of sound-symbol relationships alone is insufficient. Readers need to have and use a repertoire of skills. Focused and systematic instruction in word knowledge, practice with fluency, and understanding that reading is having an inner-dialogue with the author serve as foundational elements to a solid reading program. But it is the teacher who is pivotal. Without his/her overall sense of moving learners forward and toward the eventual goal of reading independence, the class would stall as if trapped in a quagmire.

### **Example 3**

Christopher Morley once penned, “When you sell a man a book, you don’t sell him just 12 ounces of paper and ink and glue—you sell him a whole new life” (Readfaster, 2012, p. 2). Indeed, between the cover lies adventure, romance, horror, and mystery. But to access these worlds, basic literacy is requisite. Over the years, researchers, laypersons, educators, and pundits have debated the most expeditious way to accomplish the task of “teaching a child to read.” Generation after generation of readers has helped point the way to a comprehensive approach, which is inclusive of several components that work together to prepare a new crop of readers.

### **Example 4**

What is the best approach? What program will yield success? What is the role of phonics? These are just some of the many questions which have puzzled researchers and teachers alike. Nowadays, the question is not so much “what” but “how?” Learning to read, a process facilitated by abundant quality children’s literature and an enthusiastic, knowledgeable guide, can be joyful journey for many, but for others, it can be one of the most difficult tasks ever, to be accomplished at the tender age of six, seven, or eight. An adept reader expects to discover the pleasure of words and language from the marks on a page, whereas a struggling child sees sentences as chaos made up of troublesome, illogical words. What’s a teacher to do to get Johnny on the fast-track to literacy?

### **ASSIGNMENT #5:**

#### **Writing from a Photo**

**Directions:** Use one of these pictures or find a picture (recognized artwork, calendar, magazine advertisement, or internet source) and write “the story behind the picture” in two different ways, varying speaker/perspective, form, audience. As the writer, you’re in the driver’s seat and will make determinations about length and format. Have fun with this creative assignment.



## **ASSIGNMENT #6**

### **Showing, Not telling**

**Directions:** Skilled writers understand that their words need to show, not tell. Many a teacher will exhort students that their writing needs to be descriptive. Pay attention to the changes made from Draft A to Draft B. Analyze why one draft is superior to the other. Importantly, this assignment builds from sentence-level rewrites (Assignment #1 of this Writing Portfolio) to more extensive revision.

- Analyze the two paragraphs below and observe how the “showing” paragraph differs from its “telling” counterpart. List at least 5 writer’s strategies that you see being used effectively, which upgrade the second version from the initial draft.
- Identify what you consider to be the Top-10 “powerhouse” words from the revised paragraph that help make this rewrite memorable. Explain why you selected these particular word choices.

*Professor Ellsworth’s two drafts*

#### **Draft A: Telling**

The new guy was a big man. His credentials were impeccable, but he was still untested. A rising star at a start-up tech company, he found himself working with colleagues who were slackers. They had negative attitudes. But he had a vision and was willing to take on the establishment. He made changes. In six short months the operation was better.

#### **Draft B: Showing**

Mission impossible. That’s what everyone said. With the bulk of an NFL player and rugged good looks more suited for landing a role for cigarette ads, Dean surveyed the haphazard workplace, noting the landscape: unfocused, unstructured, and uninspired. It reminded him of the careless manner of many a wanna-be rookie’s kit before the military drilled out such

sloppiness. Attempting to disabuse his dispirited team of their woebegone, it-can't-be-done attitudes, the interim director, warned the staff about the corrosive effects of discouragement. Boldly, he framed his ambitious plan with an impassioned pep-talk to counter pessimism and dissuade his listeners from their pattern of cataloguing blunders and assigning blame. "It *can* be done," he declared. Revitalized, the crew now embraced their leader's relentless pursuit of excellence. In six short months, Dean had marshalled his team's efforts and transformed a bedraggled operation into a unit that bustled like an ant hill. Project XT was manifestly different from its former status. And Dean not only earned the respect of his colleagues and supervisors but enjoyed a bonus that served as a down payment for his fire-engine red BMW coup.

**Now it's your turn.** Compose a simple paragraph that will serve as your Draft A. Use what you've learned from Ralph Fletcher's *What A Writer Needs* and other course readings and transform it into a riveting Draft B.

### **REFLECTION PAPER (20 points)**

For students taking the course for graduate credit:

Drawing from *What a Writer Needs* text, prepare a 3-4 page plus reference page (d.s.) reflection that discusses what you've learned about writing and effective revision techniques. Discuss the changes you plan to make in your instruction and explain why you have been inspired to make these pedagogical and curricular adjustments. In your essay, provide evidence that you've carefully read this text by referencing Fletcher. Use APA formatting.