

## RED INK AND CORRECTION MARKS (PODCAST 32 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about red ink and correction marks, and while most of my podcasts are geared for students, this podcast is especially geared to teachers, as well as to students who have had experiences like what I am about to chronicle.

In the twenty years that I have dutifully taught some version of freshman composition, one of my standard first-day get-to-know-each-other icebreaker questions has been: What do you remember most about high school English? I asked, at least early in my teaching career, because my own high school English experience had been so miserable that I had concluded it must be an anomaly, and I wanted my students to set me straight. What I discovered, though, was that my experience was not at all atypical, that my students and I had had similar experiences and that they expected that I would be like every English teacher they had ever had. Sadly, what students remembered most about high school English was red ink and correction marks.

Most of my high school years are more a haze now than they were then, and the only high school English teacher I have any concrete memory of was a man dubbed Sleepy Willets for his propensity to fall asleep during class. While other teachers were notorious for nodding off showing movies in dimmed rooms or during prep periods, Sleepy Willets could nod off standing in front of the class, chalk in hand. He looked like a caricature of Edgar Allan Poe, his forehead too big for his narrow jaw, eyes enormous black orbs beneath heavy eyelids. These facts alone did not account for my miserable experience.

As it turned out, Sleepy Willets also had a fondness for the red pen, and he would use it indiscriminately on my papers, slashing words, phrases, sentences, even entire paragraphs. He'd scratch comments between lines and in the margins and sometimes draw arrows and shapes to more comments squeezed in at the top or bottom of the page. His favorite mark of punctuation was the question mark, and when he wasn't filling my paper with comments, he left thick red question marks in the margins.

Once, my writing got the better of him, and Sleepy Willets could muster only heavy red upper case letters like A-W-K and D-E-V, which, at the time, meant nothing to me. In Sleepy Willets's class, I learned to fear writing papers much the way I feared all bodies of water the summer I was eleven when, without my parents' permission, Danny Leonas and I snuck into the Empire Theater and watched *Jaws* on the big screen. That entire summer, whenever I saw water, I heard the *Jaws* theme music in my head and was sure something terrible lurked beneath the surface, just waiting to get me.

The irony of my experience in Sleepy Willets' English class is that I loved words, and I loved to write. I wrote all the time – amusing little anecdotes about teachers (some habits die hard), movie reviews for



the school newspaper (though I can't prove it, I originated the "thumbs up" approval for movies well before Siskel and Ebert), and my proudest accomplishment at the time, an unauthorized mimeographed serialization of the heroics of a group of hobbit-inspired beings who lived deep in the woods behind my high school. In the yearbook my senior year, my "Personal Quote" was "Better a word man than a bird man." I loved to write, and I had always loved English classes, always, yet Sleepy Willets's red ink and correction marks were unintentionally driving me away. I say "unintentionally" because I believe in his heart, Sleepy Willets was trying to help just as I imagine teachers today who use red and mark every error are trying to help.

In fact, over the years, I've heard many well-meaning teachers of all levels explain and sometimes defend their use of red and the frequency and aggressiveness of their correction marks and comments, usually in some incarnation of this:

1. I use red because it provides the best contrast.
2. If I don't point out every error, how will students know what to work on?
3. My teachers used red, and it never bothered me.
4. It is my job.

To all of those responses, I say, respectfully, Phooey!

First off, it's not about what the teacher thinks is best; rather, it is about how best to help students. Put another way, it is the difference between teacher-directed learning and student-centered learning. Students learn best by doing, and if the color red and pointing out every error discourage students from doing, how will they learn? Let's face it: Quite often the majority of comments point out grammar, usage, and mechanics errors. If composition study has taught us anything in the last thirty or forty years, it is that pointing out grammatical errors does not help students become better writers, nor does such feedback help students not make those errors in the future.

What, then, should a teacher do? For starters, stop using red. Use purple or green or pink or blue. Use any color except red. Stop pointing out every little error and, instead, focus on holistic issues that concern content and meaning. If errors must be marked, look for patterns of errors that hamper meaning. After all, is there any difference in meaning between the following?

1. The sky is falling. I should go inside.
2. The sky is falling, I should go inside.

In both examples, the sky is falling, and someone has the wherewithal to think about going inside. Whether we like it or not, the comma splice in the second sentence does not interfere with the meaning. I am not saying go out and create comma splices, but I am questioning how necessary it is to mark such an error, especially at the expense of comments that could actually help a student become a better writer or think more deeply about a concept. I'd rather have a piece of substantive writing with a few comma splices than a "Dick and Jane" piece of writing without any comma splices.

Another step teachers can take is to limit the number of overall comments to two maybe three content-driven comments per page at most: Less is more. Think about the global, big-picture matters,



not the picayune. While we may think we are offering great feedback – and the comments may, indeed, be excellent—the reality is that too many comments will overwhelm a student. Instead of reading and thinking about the remarks, they are ignored. Imagine the right-hand margin of a paper with one bubble comment after another: You should think about . . . What do you mean by . . .? The sentence structure here is . . . The marked sentence is an example of . . . How does this content connect with . . .? Some students, upon seeing comments jammed one right after the other, will, like Sleepy Willets, be reduced to communicating in big capital letters like OMG!

Teachers should not forget to accentuate the positive. Students learn better when they are encouraged and feel as if they have the support of others, especially their teachers. Whatever happened to, you can do it! You're getting the hang of it! Way to go! You've got it! All right!? Cheerleading gets results. Students want to improve, but they want to feel the teacher is rooting for them, so teachers need to embrace the it's-not-what-you-say-but-how-you-say-it philosophy. Listen to the difference between A and B:

A: Your discussion here is not developed thoroughly enough for your audience. Readers will not understand the good point you are trying to make unless you take the time to sustain your writing. You are on the right track, but you need to think about what you are trying to say and what your audience needs to understand that message.

B: The discussion here raises a good point! The evidence is compelling—nice job! I wonder, though, if the development is thorough enough considering the audience. Would they need more specific information? Give this some thought and revise accordingly.

Which comment would you rather read on a paper you worked hard on? The second response, right? Of course! While both comments express the same basic idea, the second one does so in a way that encourages and challenges the student. The comment is a reaction to the content, not a top-down directive. The first comment points out the student's shortcomings by using the second person (you, your); the tone sounds accusatory. And how sincere is the "You are on the right track, BUT" remark? You are qualified for the job, BUT I am hiring someone else. I don't want to give you a speeding ticket, BUT I have to. It's my job. Please! In the end, we can all learn from Sleepy Willets.

As educators we have to think about our students' reactions to our best intentions, and we have to respond accordingly. While I strive for a pedagogy that matches my practice, I sometimes have to pinch myself to remember that I don't want to be another Sleepy Willets.

Thanks for listening, everyone. Happy writing.

