

Preserving Student Voice

As tutors, we support young authors as they share their stories. But giving feedback that honors their choices can be daunting. The following tips may be leveraged independently, but they will often be used together at different stages of the writing process, from the first idea to the final period.

Tip #1:

Focus on voice above all.

Editing is often mistaken for proofreading. While proofreading focuses on spelling, grammar, and punctuation, editing is content-based and focuses on things like structure and narrative voice. Proofreading is important, but starting too early in the writing process can be demoralizing and shift the focus away from what matters most: the ideas. Talk with the student about their ideas and what they want to work on next.

Do:

- Balance praise and critique: Start with what works well before suggesting improvements.
- Give specific and actionable feedback.
- Encourage creativity and experimentation in students to develop a unique voice.
- Consider the audience and purpose of the piece. Is it a poem for a friend or an essay for a teacher? For academic work, check if there's a rubric.
- Share your own background knowledge sparingly: Ask what the student knows first.

Tip #2:

Act as a neutral reader.

Students are the experts on their own writing, and you are a fresh set of eyes to interpret their work. Writing can be very personal, but what makes sense to the writer does not always make sense to the reader. Talk to students about how certain audiences may have different expectations which may change the way we write: If they're writing an assignment for class, is the student aware of the teacher's goals, and can they clearly articulate how they are meeting that goal? If it's a creative piece, what do they want the reader to know and feel after reading, and how are they eliciting that response?

Tip #3:

Honor student choices.

A piece of writing may not always be clear to the reader, but it often comes from deliberate choices, not mistakes. This can sometimes look like an inaccurate word choice or unfamiliar idiom. When you ask for clarity, assume that students did something on purpose, rather than by accident. Treating it as an intentional choice gives them more respect as a writer, and framing our feedback as a difference of language or understanding.

Say:

- "As the writer, you know what you're talking about, but it's unclear to me. Can you help me understand?"
- "I don't think I've seen this phrase before! Can you tell me what it means?"
- "To me, this word means _____, but it seems like you're using it in a different way. What does it mean to you?"
- "Your audience might not understand this reference. Do you think you should add some context?"
- "Can you tell me what inspired you to use these words?"

Tip #4:

Celebrate a variety of language resources.

Language resources are the types of language we acquire in our lifetime, which vary based on our culture, community, education, hobbies, and life experiences. When editing student writing, it's important to remember that each person uses language resources that make their voice distinct.

You may have been taught that there is a “Standard English,” or one that is deemed more appropriate than others. We want to challenge this idea. Language is a tool we use to express ourselves, and validating a person’s language resources is key to preserving their voice. We are here to support students as they write and communicate in a way that is authentic to them.

Language resources may be characterized and influenced by:

- Other languages such as Spanish, Vietnamese or Cape Verdean Creole
- Social dialects (or “sociolects”) such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE)
- Geography or region (Slang in New England vs. California vs. the South; English dialects in the United States vs. Jamaica, Nigeria, or India)
- Occupations, hobbies, or interests which include niche jargon, terminology, or idioms

Tip #5:

View editing as an opportunity to grow.

Like any skill, editing takes practice. When we work with students to edit their writing, we can help them decode their underlying message and tell a story they feel confident about. Encourage students to spend time with their writing. Remind them that each draft is an opportunity to say something new and experiment with using their voice. Reiterate that there is always room to grow.

Additional Resources:

- [Black English and “Proper” English: The impact of language-based racism](#), Reading Partners
- [“3 ways to speak English,”](#) Jamila Lyiscott
- [What’s Good English](#), a TikTok account by EK Powell dissecting the nuances of language and African American Vernacular English (AAVE)