

Introduction

Introduction for the Instructor

This text is intended for students who need to hone their English writing and reading skills in order to meet future academic demands. It was developed in a non-credit college course for students who had not achieved the required reading and writing skills for the credit English course. The students in this course were of different backgrounds and mixed abilities: some were native speakers of English who were reluctant readers, some were newly arrived international students who had university degrees from their native countries, some were mature students looking for a change in career, and some were immigrants who had spent many years in the Canadian school system and spoke English fluently. These students were taking regular college courses in their own discipline at the same time that they were studying English. In addition, some of the material was tested in English as a Second Language (ESL) academic preparation classes.

Although some institutions have separate streams for ESL students and native speakers, at this level the two groups have enough in common that they can be taught together. Even some of the grammatical errors are similar. Instructors see incorrect verb forms, article and preposition errors, difficulty with complex sentence structures, and misuse of vocabulary. Reluctant readers struggle with the more complex vocabulary and structures of academic English.

Skill Set is very much a product of the classroom. It focuses on the problems generally seen in the writing of students in the developmental English course. The exercises address problems these students have, such as distinguishing general and specific points in order to write supporting statements in paragraphs. Some of the sample paragraphs and essays were generated from student writing assignments. In addition, many of the sentences used for error correction in Unit 7 were taken from student writing samples.

Native Speakers and ESL Students

This book has been designed to meet the needs of both native speakers and ESL students. It is therefore important to start with a few definitions because of the confusion with such terms as *first language*, *second language*, and *mother tongue*.

Native speakers of English speak English as their first language—their strongest and dominant language. Native speakers use English fluently and idiomatically. They speak without a noticeable foreign accent. In Canada, second-generation

immigrants (those born or raised in Canada) generally become native speakers even if they speak another language at home. Once they start using English at school, their English gets much stronger than their mother tongue, and English gradually becomes their dominant language. The Canadian census defines mother tongue as “language first spoken and still understood.”

ESL students are those whose dominant language is not English. *First language* and *second language* do not refer to the order the languages are acquired—the terms refer to the relative strength of the language. ESL students are more comfortable in another language. Some speak several languages, and English may be the language they learned third or fourth, but they are referred to as English as a second language students because English is not their first language. ESL students may have studied English for many years in their native country. Their fluency depends on the type of instruction they received and whether they actually used the language instead of just doing language exercises, such as filling in blanks in sentences.

Note that these definitions focus on the spoken language. Writing is an entirely different matter. Written English should be considered a separate language. Native speakers of English who do not read much could be called “WESL students” because for them written English is a second language, an unfamiliar one. This explains why students in developmental English classes make similar errors whether they are native speakers or ESL students. Native speakers often write by ear and thus drop verb endings that are not pronounced clearly. For example, they may write “he use to” and “I’m sposta.” Both ESL and WESL students have weak vocabularies and struggle with complex sentence structures and the conventions of academic English.

Organization of the Text

This book is designed to let instructors move around from section to section as needed. It is organized so that smaller units (vocabulary and sentences) are discussed before larger units (paragraphs and essays), but that does not mean units have to be tackled in that order. The material is organized by skill areas, such as constructing complex sentences and writing topic sentences, so you can focus on the weaknesses your students have.

It is important to remember that students do not come to a course like this as a blank slate. They have been introduced to the writing process and essay structure. They do not have to master sentence structure before they move on to paragraphs, and they may even chafe at working on paragraph structure when they want to write essays.

You may wish to move on to the unit on paragraphs (Unit 4) after a brief introduction to writing (Unit 1) and then work on vocabulary (Unit 2) and grammar (Units 3 and 7) in bits as students practise writing paragraphs and then essays. You can draw from Unit 6, Rhetorical Skills, as you assign different types of writing tasks.

The reading units in Part 2 offer you a range of choice. Each article and short story is a self-contained unit and thus can be studied on its own, in any order. The non-fiction units have two articles on the same theme—you can do both or just

one. The variety of topics allows you to pick selections according to the curriculum, your students' needs, and your own tastes. Moreover, the readings have been chosen so that there is not a wide range in length or difficulty, which means that they can be treated equally. Thus, for example, you can assign different readings for summary assignments or group presentations, and the work load would be fairly divided. You can also change the readings you present each semester to keep the course fresh.

Paragraphs and Essays

Students are given an opportunity to work on independent paragraphs before they move to the essay. This allows them to practise their skills in shorter writing assignments. The focus is on the basic academic skills of making points and supporting them.

Some educators argue against teaching the five-paragraph essay, since it is so formulaic and not “real world” writing. However, it is a useful pedagogical structure that teaches the skills students need for all kinds of writing—the ability to organize thoughts, present ideas, and support them. Whether they have to write a cover letter for a job application or a business report, they still have to introduce a topic, divide their arguments into well-structured body paragraphs, and write a conclusion—just as they do in an essay. Students who struggle with writing benefit from having a well-defined structure to follow.

Readings

Reading and writing go hand in hand. It is not enough to add some readings to a writing text as an afterthought. Students with weak writing skills often have weak reading skills, and this must be addressed. Good reading comprehension is paramount—no instructor would deny that as skills are ranked, understanding the main idea of a newspaper article is surely more important than being able to fix a comma splice. Furthermore, to become good writers, students need to read more in order to learn the written language—its structures and vocabulary.

It is essential to test students' reading ability with comprehension questions, paraphrasing, and summarizing. Otherwise, it is easy to miss students' reading problems.

The readings in this text serve several functions. First, they give students an opportunity to improve their reading skills and their vocabulary. Second, students are asked to look at sentence, paragraph, and essay structures in the readings so that they can carry over what they learned about grammar and writing into their reading. They can see different writing styles at work. Third, the readings provide the students with interesting subjects to discuss and write about.

The non-fiction readings are presented in seven thematic units (Units 9–15). Each unit includes two articles and a five-paragraph essay on the theme. A wide range of writing topics is given in the Discussion and Assignment topics for each article and in the Additional Topics at the end of the unit. Each unit includes both journalistic and academic writing styles.

The book also contains four fiction readings—three short stories and one excerpt from a novel. It is important to include fiction in students' reading diet because students sometimes have difficulty understanding the difference between fiction and non-fiction. Moreover, reading fiction develops language skills, captures and exercises the imagination, and even improves social skills.

Besides the typical comprehension questions, discussion topics, and assignment suggestions, the readings are accompanied by language study and notes on structure and technique. These elements are intended to make students more conscious of the language as they read. They can then apply what they learned about vocabulary and sentence structure to actual words and sentences in the reading.

Vocabulary Study

In developmental English courses, building vocabulary is crucial. Spoken English uses a fairly small range of words, so reluctant readers have limited exposure to less common words and need more guidance to learn the patterns that can help them make connections between words. For that reason, this text has work on collocations, parts of speech, and common roots and affixes.

Each of the readings is accompanied by a variety of vocabulary exercises. Students can use the context to find the meaning of the less common, more difficult words in a matching exercise. The Word Families charts allow students to figure out the derivatives of some more common words, including words from the Academic Word List. The lists also draw students' attention to idioms, common expressions, and collocations. The exercises are designed to make students more conscious of the words and expressions they come across; they are not simply supplied with the definition and asked to read on.

Interesting and problematic words and expressions (such as *toonie* and *afford*) are explained in the context of the reading, but because these explanations are useful beyond their use in the specific reading, such words and expressions are listed in the index.

Grammar

Grammar can be a contentious issue. Instructors all agree that grammar instruction is necessary, but there is so much to learn and practise that the areas to focus on must be carefully chosen. Most ESL students have been given formal grammar instruction, whereas native speakers have not. However, native speakers have a better sense of the structure of English even if they have trouble with basic labels, such as *noun* and *verb*.

Grammar exercises have little carry-over to actual writing ability; some students excel at the exercises but make errors on the same grammar points in their writing. Error correction and the construction of complex sentences are two areas that are more like real writing work. Unit 7 focuses on error correction, explaining the process and highlighting common errors. Most of the sentences used for error correction are taken from actual student writing.

Grammar labels can be another problem: students are unfamiliar with the words, and terminology can vary. Therefore, the terms are kept simple and are defined the first time they are used; the index points to these definitions.

Discussion and Assignment Topics

Assignments are left open-ended so that you can tailor them to your class needs. For example, if your class is still working on paragraph structure when you do a particular reading, your assignments will focus on paragraphs. If you are working on reports or research essays, you can choose a topic for students to explore in such an assignment. You may want to specify length and format. The discussion topics can be used as writing topics.

The Third Edition

Instructors who have used earlier versions of *Skill Set* will find the third edition quite different. Besides its new readings and rewritten explanations, the book has been reorganized, and some sections have been moved. For instance, the explanation of the use of *you* in academic writing can now be found under Correcting Pronoun Errors in Unit 7.

Teacher's Resource

The online Teacher's Resource offers supplemental material such as sample course outlines and lesson plans, answers to exercises, and sample quizzes. It also offers guidance for beginning instructors.

Introduction for Students: Developing Study Skills

Skill Set is a book that will help you improve your reading and writing skills, but it cannot do so unless you do your part. It is important to develop good study habits in order to be successful in college or university.

Passing your English course is not your end goal—improving your reading and writing skills is. The stronger your literacy skills, the more success you will have both in your education and in your future career, so it is important to attend class, participate, do the work required, and strive to improve.

Using the Textbook

A textbook is a valuable resource for any course. Once you have bought your book, your first step is to familiarize yourself with the contents and organization. Look over the table of contents and the index. Check out what the appendices have to offer. Scan the textbook by reading subtitles to identify the different sections. Be sure to bring your textbook to class.

How the instructor uses the textbook depends on the individual instructor. Two teachers may have the same book but present very different courses. Whatever the approach, instructors generally ask you to do homework from the text. Be sure to do the assigned reading. It is a waste of your time and tuition money to come to class unprepared.

Textbooks generally offer more than can be covered in a course, but you can use the rest of the book as a resource and for reading practice. For example, you can read the section on Punctuation and Capitalization if punctuation is a particular weakness you have. Moreover, instead of just covering the assigned reading selections, you can read the other articles and short stories when you have some free time. You will be improving your reading skills and your background knowledge.

Unit 8 gives details on how to read the textbook and how to prepare assigned readings.

The index is a valuable resource for locating topics and for finding definitions of grammatical and literary terms. For example, if you forget what a transitive verb is, you can find the term listed in the index with the page reference for the explanation of the meaning. The index will also help you to locate the usage explanation for words and expressions, such as *used to* and *clothing*, from the notes for the reading selections.

Time Management

One of the biggest changes students face when they make the leap from high school to post-secondary school is the need for time management skills. In high school, your time is often managed for you. Much of your work is done in class, and your assignments may be divided into smaller chunks. In college and university, however, you may have several weeks to complete an assignment, but how and when you do it is your responsibility. For every hour spent in class, you are expected to do two or three hours working on your own.

It is important to use some sort of calendar to organize your semester. Schools often provide specially printed handbooks or agendas that include important dates in the school year, such as holidays and exam week. Alternatively, you could use an electronic format, whether it be on your laptop or on your phone. Enter test and assignment due dates as you get them. Make daily and weekly “to do” lists, and use them.

Start assignments as soon as you get them while the instructions are fresh in your mind. Work on them in manageable chunks. Finish early so that you can review everything before you hand it in. Getting an assignment done early clears the way for other work. It also helps you to avoid last-minute problems such as a malfunctioning computer. (Remember to back up all your work on other sites, such as your school electronic folders, or other media, such as flash drives.)

Review and study your material as the course goes on. Last-minute cramming is never as productive as keeping up with the flow.

Your schedule should allow for some flexibility and downtime. Take breaks, get some fresh air and exercise, and try to get enough sleep. Your mind will function much better if your body is healthy.

Multi-tasking

Today’s technology encourages multi-tasking. Students have multiple windows open on their computer screen. They send text messages while they walk, talk, and study. However, the human brain has not evolved to handle more than one task at

a time. It can switch rapidly between tasks, but it cannot do two at once. Studies show that you lose time and efficiency when you try to multi-task. You will work more efficiently if you commit to the task at hand and avoid distractions. While background music can be beneficial, anything that draws your attention away from your work is a problem.

Active versus Passive Learning

People learn things much better when they are active rather than passive learners. Active learning requires doing something—taking notes, summarizing material, asking questions, making comments, and talking about the topic. Passive learning is just reading or listening. Even telling your roommates or family about what you studied in class will help you to remember it.

Classroom discussion is an important part of active learning. Good students are attentive and engaged. They answer the instructor's questions and ask questions when they need more information. Instructors do not want to lecture for an hour—they would rather hear their students' opinions. Unfortunately, many students today are reluctant to speak up in class. Those who do, however, are rewarded with better learning.

Taking Notes

College and university instructors expect you to take notes in class. This does not mean simply copying down what the instructor writes on the board or shows on a screen. You need to process the information that is being presented to you and write down the main ideas. Pay attention to what the instructor stresses as important.

Capturing electronic records is not the same as taking notes. An audio recording of a lecture is more difficult and time-consuming to review than good handwritten notes. Taking pictures with your smartphone is also no substitute. Even typing notes on a laptop may not help you to remember as well as handwritten notes. Muscle memory and the hand-to-brain connection play an important part in processing and remembering information.

A good strategy is to flesh out the notes soon after class while the information is still fresh in your mind. For example, you can write down the meanings of the new vocabulary items you jotted down during class.

Making reading notes is also useful. You can summarize a chapter in a few notes after you have read it to aid your comprehension and memory. Moreover, notes are useful when you study for tests and exams.

Keeping a separate vocabulary notebook allows you to create a useful learning tool, much like your own dictionary. Write down new words and expressions. Add grammatical information, such as the part of speech. Write down the phrase or sentence that the word appeared in. Jot down the meaning and related words.

Following Instructions

While some people think that following instructions is only for mindless automations, it is vital in the workplace where failure to do so can result in lost work hours and added expense or even lead to life-threatening situations. In school, following

instructions is the key to getting good grades. One of the common complaints of all instructors in any institution is that students often do not do what they have been asked to do.

Read written instructions carefully, more than once. For example, you can read them when you first get an assignment, while you are working on the task, and again as a final check before you hand the work in. Highlight important instructions you do not want to overlook. Listen to oral instructions carefully, taking notes. Instructors repeat directions because they are so important and because students often do not pay enough attention to them.

Developing Language Skills

Students who are learning English as a second language (ESL) should recognize that it takes years to develop the language skills required to function in an English-speaking academic environment. If their goal is a diploma or a degree from a Canadian institution, they must work at their language skills all the time—not just for the duration of English class. They need lots of exposure to both written and spoken English, so they should read, watch educational television, and surf the Internet in English.

Students whose native language is English have mastered the spoken language, but if they do not read much, they may still be considered language learners for written English. They also need to build their vocabulary and learn about the structures of academic English.

Learning from Mistakes

Making a mistake creates an opportunity to learn. Indeed, learning would not take place without mistakes. Of course, errors also mean lower marks, so you should try to avoid making them. However, for those mistakes you do make, be sure to learn from them and avoid them in the future.

Writing instructors spend a lot of time marking essays. They write corrections and comments. Students who take the time to go over their marked essays can see where they have problems and how they can improve for the next assignment. Unit 7 guides you in the process of correcting and editing and highlights common problem areas.

Practice

In his 2008 book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell explains what leads to success and shows that talent and skill are not enough. He argues that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become a world-class expert at something. Wayne Gretzky undoubtedly had a lot of natural talent, but he would not have become “The Great One” without the hours he spent practising his hockey skills every winter on his backyard rink.

While you do not have to put in 10,000 hours to become an expert essay writer, you must recognize that you cannot hope to become a competent writer without lots of practice. Take advantage of any practice opportunity you are offered. Some instructors mark practice essays and allow you to rewrite them.

Some students find journal-writing a low-pressure way to practise expressing ideas in writing. A journal is a notebook that you write in on a regular basis. You can record your thoughts about almost anything—a movie you saw, a class you attended, what you think about a political issue, or your observations of your classmates. Keep in mind, though, who might read your writing. If you are keeping a journal as part of your class work, your audience is your instructor. If the journal is just for you, you do not have to be as careful about what you say.

Furthermore, writing in a journal and reading a chapter in a novel are good ways to wind down at the end of the day. Studies show that watching television and staring at a computer screen immediately before bedtime can interfere with sleep rhythms.

Reading comprehension and speed also improve with practice. At the end of Unit 8 are some tips for building reading skills.

Seeking Help

Colleges and universities offer many services to help students succeed. They may offer a study skills course, for example. The library may have tutors and seminars. Conversation groups may be arranged for ESL students. Remember that you have paid for these services in your tuition fees, so take advantage of them.

It is important to ask questions in class when you do not understand something. Do not be shy about it—chances are that other students are wondering the same thing. Moreover, the instructor would prefer that such general questions be asked during the class instead of several students asking the same question immediately after class.

If you have concerns about the course or your progress in it, be sure to talk to your instructor before taking a drastic measure such as dropping the course. Sometimes students give up prematurely, thinking they have no chance of passing the course when in fact they are making good progress.

Abbreviations and Conventions Used in the Text

n:	noun
v:	verb
adj:	adjective
adv:	adverb
tr:	transitive (verb)
U:	uncountable (noun)
C:	countable (noun)

In Part 2, Reading Selections, numbers in square brackets refer to the number of the paragraph where a vocabulary item can be found.