

TEACHER INTERVENTION DURING
THE WRITING PROCESS: AN ALTERNATIVE
TO PROVIDING TEACHER FEEDBACK
ON EFL ACADEMIC WRITING IN LARGE CLASSES

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Abstract

Providing written feedback is often burdensome and time-consuming for teachers, especially in large classes. This quasi-experimental study was conducted to test an alternative to giving teacher feedback in large EFL classes, i.e. employing teacher intervention during the writing process. The subjects were undergraduates taking a writing course at a Thai university. Two intact groups were employed, one assigned to be a control group and the other an experimental group. The control group finished their draft, submitted it to the teacher, and received individual written feedback while in the experimental group the teacher intervened in the writing process by giving explanations and asking the students questions before they accomplished their draft. The findings revealed a constant trace of improvement in the experimental group as measured by three tests, suggesting that this innovative teacher intervention technique was effective and may help writing teachers to deal with a large class more efficiently.

Introduction

In an age where English dominates the academic and technological world, students' ability to communicate by writing in English is widely regarded as necessary and is one of the language achievements required by most higher educational institutes. However, the ability to write with high-standard English is not a mere academic requirement, for, in writing an essay, paper, report, or examination, it can have a profound effect on their success both professionally and personally. Yet, writing is the area that many EFL students find the most difficult, and teachers also find it hard to assist students in producing pieces of quality academic writing.

For years, teachers of EFL writing have been striving to find ways that can help their students to produce writing pieces which are communicative and acceptable among the academic discourse community, as well as other communities that require skilled writers of English. Many approaches to teaching writing have been proposed by scholars during the past few decades. Although some scholars (e.g., Atkinson, 2003; Mutsuda, 2003) suggest that the writing arena has already entered the post-process era, which others still object to, one of the most widely used and popular approaches among EFL teachers until now is still the process-oriented approach, an approach to teaching writing that requires many steps, including producing numerous drafts before students submit a final product. According to this approach, teachers focus their teaching on a series of steps the students are engaged in to produce a piece of writing. Generally, these steps of writing found in most writing texts for EFL students include prewriting (creation), drafting, revision, and editing. This approach process views writing in progress as a dynamic entity which can be substantively improved by multiple drafts and revisions (DiPardo and Freeman, 1987). According to Furneaux (1998), process writing represents a shift in teaching writing from the product of writing activities (the finished text) to ways in which the text can be developed, that is, from concerns with questions as 'What have you written?', 'What grade is it worth?' to 'How will you write it?', 'How can it be improved?' The writing teaching paradigm has been shifted from an emphasis on the product to the process of writing.

The study of the writing (product) itself has shifted to the study of what writers do (process) as they write (Dyson and Freeman, 1990). According to Tribble (1996: 160), the process writing approach is an approach that stresses the creativity of individual writers and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of a model. For him, the focus of writing, consequently, shifts from the final product itself to different stages the writer goes through in order to create the product. By breaking down the task as a whole into its constituent parts, writing can be seen as much less daunting and more manageable to students, especially EFL students.

There are many useful process writing techniques which feed into a variety of approaches (Furieux, 1998). White and Arndt (1991: 4) offer teachers a framework which captures the nature of writing. They suggest that activities to generate ideas (e.g. brain storming) help writers tap their long-term memory and answer the question, 'What can I say on this topic?' Focusing (e.g. fast writing) deals with 'what is my overall purpose in writing this?' Structuring is organizing and reorganizing text to answer the question, 'How can I present these ideas in a way that is acceptable to my reader?' Activities such as reformulation and the use of a checklist in guiding feedback develop essential evaluating skills. Feedback focuses initially on content and organization. The overall aim is to create meaningful and purposeful writing tasks that develop the writer's skills over several drafts or during the process of writing.

One of the most interesting points for the process approach perhaps is that each stage of the writing process allows opportunities for the teachers to intervene and support their student-writers. The students often receive feedback from both their writing peers and from the teacher and then use it to revise and improve their drafts. Keh (1990: 294) defines feedback as 'the comments, questions, and suggestions a reader gives to a writer' in order to produce 'reader-based prose.' According to Gabrielatos (2002), feedback can and should be a learning experience, which provides the link between consecutive writing sections. When learners have become familiar with feedback procedures, feedback activities can also be set as homework. Gabrielatos also advises

that the feedback focuses on a limited number of elements. Giving learners feedback on a large number of elements can only confuse the learners. The feedback procedures suggested by Tribble (1996) and White and Arndt (1991) include both linguistic or communicative competence and linguistic or communicative performance. The former part covers spelling, grammar, vocabulary, natural use of language, linking and signposting expressions, layout, organization, clarity of expression, regard for reader (e.g. level of explicitness), the area(s) which the previous lesson(s) focused on, and only what affects clarity or task achievement. The latter part covers comments and guidance questions, teacher-learner conference, self/peer correction using a checklist, identification of problems and suggested improvements using a handout or overhead transparency.

It is widely accepted that the provision of feedback is one of the most important elements in the process approach to writing. However, giving feedback to students' written work is not simple or straightforward. Probably, two issues, at least, that the teachers need to take into consideration are at what stage of the writing process and in what form feedback should be given (Kroll, 1991). Although the most popular practice is probably that the teacher provides written feedback after the students finish their draft, oral feedback is also widely employed. An obvious advantage of responding to students' writing through speech seems to be that the teacher can provide more information in less time compared to written feedback. Traditionally, however, oral feedback is provided via personal conferencing or tape recording, which may still cause a burden to the teacher, especially when the class is large. An interesting alternative may be that instead of waiting until the students finish their draft and then giving feedback, the teacher may intervene during the writing process by asking reminder questions which may focus on both content and language to the whole class. This approach may help the students to be aware of necessary elements while they are developing their drafts and help save the teacher's time as well.

The teacher's intervention, when carefully and selectively prepared, can play a very crucial role in the writing process. White and Arndt (1991) suggest using questions to assist students in

generating, selecting, and organizing ideas by focusing on the concept of 'shared knowledge' between the reader and the writer. The teacher can intervene during the students' writing process by frequently asking and provoking their ideas by using editing or a writing checklist which covers the areas of content, cohesion, and coherence. These activities, e.g., reformulation and the use of checklists in guiding feedback, help develop essential evaluation skills. Reviewing is standing back from the text and looking at it, asking 'Is it right?' The intended aim is to create meaningful, purposeful writing tasks that develop the writer's skills over several drafts. For Leki (1990), collaboration between learners and teachers is essential, resulting in changes in teacher and learner roles, and it has implications for teacher and learner training. Consequently, students seem to be clearer in what they are doing, thinking and writing, thus resulting in better logical written pieces and automatically increasing cohesion and coherence of the content. According to Holmes (2003) with various types of rhetorical organization, such as narration and description, and the interpretation of communicative events in context, the simple principles of genre and discourse analysis can easily be incorporated into several stages in the writing process. For her, the covert interaction between the reader and the writer can be overtly constructed to assist the writer in the ideas-generation and focusing stages. Thus, teacher-evaluation stages in process-oriented writing can also be seen, to a certain degree, to assist the students in the task of discourse recreation.

Nevertheless, although the process writing-approach is viewed as an effective way of helping EFL students when learning how to write, teachers and students often still encounter difficulties in organizing one-to-one conferences, teacher-reviews, and self revisions, especially when teachers have to work with a large class. Kao and Tang (2003) state that these procedures are time-consuming, and many EFL teachers complain that it is difficult to monitor the progress, to guide discussion, and to provide help to the students during their group or individual activities. To minimize these problems, the present researchers propose 'one-topic-only writing' and teacher intervention techniques as an alternative to the learning/teaching procedure

and to facilitate student self-revision when teaching large classes. Once students master a good command of writing, they can write further on any other topic as they like or need. Note that this technique may also work equally well with small classes.

A recent preliminary study (Syananondh, 1999) depicted a lesson applying 'one-topic-only' writing and teacher intervention techniques where students, in their graduate writing course, were constantly reminded of using proper directional words (conjunctive adverbs or adverbial conjunctions), such as 'in fact', 'however', 'in addition', 'on the contrary', etc., so that their critical thinking could be alerted to pay attention to content organization, cohesion, and coherence in the paragraph while writing. Qualitative and quantitative observation indicated that these individual students' writing ability increased significantly when compared to that before this technique was introduced to them. In other words, the content in the paragraphs written by these students became more logically and meaningfully organized.

Considering the advantages of the process-oriented writing approach mentioned above together with tentative promises of oral feedback in the form of intervening questions given to the students during their writing process, this study was, consequently, conducted in order to examine whether or not and/or to what extent the teacher-intervening and supporting technique, i.e., encouraging the students to think and to try to answer questions from the editing and writing checklist and from the teacher during the process of writing, would help the students produce better quality written pieces in terms of content organization, cohesion, and coherence through the students' supposedly increased critical thinking. The students' perception about the usefulness of the intervening questions in helping them to develop their writing was also examined.

Method

Subjects and Design

Two groups of Thai-speaking third-year undergraduate students taking the Writing Academic English course in the 2nd

semester of the academic year 2003 at the Thai university participating in this study. The first class, comprising 46 students, was purposively assigned to be the experimental group receiving teacher intervention while writing their drafts. The second group of 34 students was assigned to be the control group and was taught by the traditional process approach (teacher written feedback was given after the students submitted their working drafts).

Both groups of students were pre-tested; then their scores were used to pair the students in one group to those in the other group on the basis of their equivalent scores. Only 20 pairs of students were used for this study. By selecting the sample subjects this way, the researchers minimized any possible problems with internal validity because the groups were equivalent at the outset. Since it was impractical for the researchers to assign the students randomly to the two different classes, two intact groups were used, thus limiting this research to a quasi-experimental study. Both groups were taught by the same instructor, one of the current researchers.

Syllabus

During the 15-week course, the students in both the experimental and control groups were given lectures on writing principles and then practiced writing based on the course books Writing Academic English (Oshima and Hogue, 1999) and Academic Writing Course (Jordan, 1999).

Teaching/writing procedure

At the beginning of the course, a writing model was provided, together with an explanation for each step of writing. This would help students gain a clear overview of the target work.

The first five weeks of the course covered the introduction and the general writing process including the review of necessary language skills and academic writing skills, such as narrowing a topic, taking notes from reading articles, paraphrasing, summarizing, avoiding plagiarism, and using in-text citations. The students were assigned to write a short essay of more than one page. The topic and content selection were strictly under the

control and responsibility of the teacher in order to facilitate the process of providing comments and suggestions to the students as a whole group. It was assumed that as the students practiced the language skills introduced by the instructor, they would acquire the writing skills at the same time. For this reason, necessary language skills were taught first and separately from the content. It was also assumed that later, during the process of writing, the students would be required to reflect upon how to apply the language skills they had already learned in order to complete each writing task effectively.

From the sixth week on, the students practiced writing, and pre-writing activities, including brainstorming and discussing ideas. The students also practiced narrowing a subject to a suitable and manageable topic. The students had opportunities to look for writing models from the readings in the course book. In addition to the topics in the syllabus, the teacher integrated issues for writing a research report, such as avoiding plagiarism by means of paraphrasing, summarizing, and acknowledging different sources including appropriate use of in-text citations.

At the end of each week (three hours of learning/teaching) in the last ten weeks, the students in both groups were assigned to write a short essay of not more than one page in length. They were instructed to write on the same topics since different topics might have required different types and areas of feedback, and this might have resulted in unwanted and uncontrollable complications.

During the in-class writing process, the teacher did not intervene in the control group nor support the students with any suggestions. However, they received written teacher feedback in terms of comments, suggestions, and corrections, after they submitted their finished draft to the teacher. The areas of feedback given were based on the students' problems and needs as perceived by the teacher, and the areas of feedback were considered equivalent to what those in the experimental group would receive in class. The feedback was later returned to the students with their draft. The students in this group were also given a writing checklist to study on their own.

In the experimental group, the students were given a different treatment. That is, the teacher-intervening and supporting technique was applied. The students, as a whole group, received oral input and feedback by means of sporadic explanation and questions from the teacher while they were developing their draft. The instructor had opportunities to support the students by asking them many questions related to strategies and writing skills previously learned. Some evidence has shown that this technique using teacher support and frequent and proper use of questions from a writing checklist can result in effective revision of student drafts (Syananondh, 1999). The technique included questions designed to investigate the effectiveness of applying the repetition of key nouns, referring expressions, and transition signals, which showed how one idea was related to the next and which helped to achieve coherence through arranging sentences in a logical order. In short, all of these practices were intended to help improve and increase the quality of written work by intervening and supporting student writers during their writing process. The questions used in the intervening process were mainly about the content and the coherence of the tasks including: Are parts of the writing task well put together?, Are repetitions of key nouns used properly?, Are the sentences written meaningful?, Are the ideas presented in a logical order?, Is the argument consistent?, Is the argument explicit?, Does each paragraph have one idea?, Is each main idea expressed clearly in a topic sentence?, Is all the content relevant?, Is the use of pronouns consistent?, Is content in each paragraph relevant?, Is any section too long?, Is there anything missing or redundant?, Are references provided for all the ideas and information taken from published sources?, and Are transitional signals used properly?

The procedure of giving feedback for the whole class was facilitated by the fact that all students were assigned to write on the same topic. At the end of each week, the drafts were submitted for correcting and scoring and were then returned to the students. In addition, in order to draw the students' attention to any improvement in their writing ability, their final draft was assessed by the instructor once every three weeks. Analytic methods of

scoring, i.e., methods of scoring which require a separate score for each of a number of aspects of a task, were applied. In this study, the scale devised by John Anderson, based on an oral ability scale found in Harris (in Hughes, 1996: 89-93) was used. The areas for assessment were mainly focused on content, organization, cohesion, and coherence. More specifically, the use of discourse connectors including temporal devices (e.g., first, afterward, finally) and logical devices (e.g., however, in addition, consequently) that could help consolidate the coherence of the text was checked for their proper use. These scores were used to trace the students' writing improvement. (See Appendix A for more detailed scoring criteria.)

Findings and Discussion

A clear distinction between the two approaches to teaching academic writing in this study lied on the points where the teacher provided input or feedback to the student writers. That is, for one group, the written feedback was provided after the students finished their draft while for the other, feedback in the form of the teacher's oral intervention and support or preemptive negative feedback was given while the students were developing their draft. The comparison of the levels of the students' writing progress taught by different approaches was anticipated to give some practical insights for the teacher and students alike. To answer the two research questions posed, the data collected from the scores of six writing tests were analyzed and displayed in Table 1 on the next page.

Table 1
Comparison of the Scores of Two Groups of Students Receiving Feedback
During and at the End of the Writing Process (Total = 100)

Types of Feedback	Mean/S.D. of Test Scores				
	t-test / p value				
	Test 1	t-value	Test 2	t-value	Test 3
a. At the end of writing process	43.56/8.25 t= 0.33	t= 0.27	44.22/7.04 t= 0.58	t= 0.28	44.82/6.31 t= 0.80
b. During the writing process	44.29/5.41	t= 0.63	45.33/4.97	t= 0.38	46.75/8.62

N= 20 * = significant at 0.05

Apparently, as seen from Table 1, both approaches to providing feedback seemed to have a positive effect on the students' writing improvement as shown by the constant increase of scores from Test 1 to Test 3, but the increase was very slight, which resulted in no statistically significant difference between the mean scores between each pair of tests, that is, between Test 1 and Test 2 and between Test 2 and Test 3. Moreover, although the scores of the experimental group seemed slightly higher than those of the control group, no statistically significant difference was found between the mean score of the students in the control group receiving written feedback at the end of the writing process and that of the students in the experimental group who received feedback in the form of teacher intervention and support during the writing process. The fact that these different approaches did not result in statistical difference could be attributed to, at least, three factors. First, both approaches may be equally helpful for the students to improve their writing. Second, in the control group, it could be ensured that the students were made aware of the teacher's oral feedback since it was given while they were writing in class, so they might be able to make use of the feedback for their future writing. However, those in the control group might

have also paid equal attention to the teacher's written feedback once they received their drafts back, and this might have helped them to be aware of their writing problems, and thereby able to benefit from the feedback to develop their writing ability as well. Further studies may need to monitor if or to what extent the students in the control group pay attention to the teacher written feedback. Third, there might have been some flaws in the teacher oral feedback itself. In other words, the teacher might have failed to provide feedback that suited the individual students' needs, which resulted in their inability to adequately benefit from the feedback.

Another objective of this study was to examine the students' perceptions of the usefulness of intervening questions in helping them to develop their writing. The data obtained from a questionnaire (see Appendix C) given at the end of the semester yielded the results as shown in Table 2 on the next page.

Table 2
Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Intervening Questions
During the Writing Process

Intervening Questions	Mean	S. D.	Rank
a. Are the ideas presented in a logical order?	4.10	2.6	7
b. Is repetition of key nouns used properly?	3.37	1.98	11
c. Is use of consistent pronouns properly employed?	3.11	2.27	13
d. Are transitional signals used properly?	4.63	2.08	1
e. Is the argument consistent?	4.55	2.13	3
f. Is the argument explicit?	4.25	1.99	5
g. Does each paragraph have one idea?	3.84	2.06	9
h. Is each main idea expressed clearly in a topic sentence?	4.60	1.92	2
i. Does a topic sentence have the controlling idea?	4.21	2.11	6
j. Do all of the sentences support the topic sentence?	4.33	2.35	4
k. Is all the content relevant?	3.87	1.76	8
l. Is content in each paragraph relevant?	3.84	1.75	9
m. Is any section too long?	3.26	2.18	12
n. Is there anything missing, or anything that is redundant?	3.10	1.92	14

N= 20, Criteria for Rating: 5= very useful, 4= mostly useful, 3= useful,

2= hardly useful, and 1= not useful

It can be seen from the table that the levels of usefulness of feedback in the form of intervening questions as perceived by the students in the experimental group ranged from 3.10 to 4.63 or from the levels of 'useful' to 'very useful'. The top five levels of usefulness of the questions were concerned with the proper use of

transitional signals (d), the clarity of the main idea (h), the consistency of the argument (e), the proper use of supporting sentences (j), and the explicit argument (f). The checking of the missing or redundant information was perceived by the students as the least useful (n). However, picturing as a whole, however, all intervening questions were considered useful for the students to develop their writing.

Although the feedback approach applying the teacher's intervention during the writing process did not yield a significant difference from the written feedback given after the writing process, a few advantages of the former approach over the latter one should not be ignored. One obvious problem concerning the effect of the teacher's written feedback is that the students may not pay attention to the feedback and, therefore, cannot make use of the feedback for the revision of their next draft. Nevertheless, the feedback in the form of teacher intervention will ensure that the students receive immediate detailed feedback through teacher explanation and suggestions. In addition, since this kind of feedback is given in class, the students' attention is drawn to the feedback, and this can help raise their consciousness and may help them to notice the areas that can help them produce a piece of writing acceptable to the academic discourse community. Spontaneous interaction in class will allow the teacher to ask students about confusing points and, at the same time, provide them with many opportunities to clarify their points to the teacher and their peers. In this sense, the teacher can avoid appropriating the students' written work. This can help create an atmosphere conducive to critical thinking for their writing and might have been an important factor that contributed to the students' improvement in this study.

Based on literature in Second Language Acquisition, input is generally accepted as a crucial factor that helps learners acquire a second language, and many SLA scholars (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 1992; White, 1990) believe that negative input may be necessary for adult L2 learners. Negative input can be either preemptive, i.e., linguistic explanation or grammar rules given to learners before they produce incorrect use, or reactive, i.e., feedback given to the learners as a reaction to their production of

mistakes (Long, cited in Gass, 1997: 37). Teacher intervention during the writing process used in this study may serve as preemptive negative input/feedback given to help students acquire writing skills at the discourse level. The questions asked by the teacher are like an oral checklist of things for the students to look for, but instead of assigning the students to do the checklist on their own individually, the teacher makes the students do the checklist in the presence of the teacher as a whole group. Another aspect that makes this technique interesting is probably the fact that it allows for more feedback. If the students do not understand, for example, the topic sentence, rather than going forward and producing a paragraph without a topic sentence or with an inappropriate one, they can receive reminding remarks, assistance, or explanation from the teacher, who is present in the classroom. The oral feedback, therefore, allows for the potential clarification of critical features of the writing.

Another practical advantage of the preemptive negative feedback in the form of teacher intervention, despite the fact that it seems as effective as the traditional written feedback, is that it can help save the teacher's time. As mentioned earlier, one important problem of many EFL teachers is that their classes are often large, and this may prevent the teachers from providing sufficient, clear, and detailed written feedback or comments on the students' work. One-to-one conferencing between the teacher and the student may help ease the problem of clarity and misunderstanding, but that is time-consuming. In contrast, providing oral feedback in class consumes much less time and can be made in more detail, which makes it more practical for a large writing class. For this reason, the oral teacher feedback given to the whole class during the writing process can be considered an interesting and promising alternative, and its effect may be stronger if applied for a longer period of time.

It is generally agreed upon that writing is a complex skill, and several aspects of competence are required to develop an acceptable piece of academic writing. In addition to grammatical accuracy (Celce-Murcia, 1992) and appropriate use of vocabulary, the writers need to possess discourse skills in order to produce a coherent piece that serves the communicative goal in the target

context, i.e., the academic discourse community. Many approaches to and techniques for teaching writing to EFL students have been proposed by a good number of scholars in the field, yet many EFL students cannot produce an acceptable piece of academic writing. Probably, one obstacle that hinders the development of EFL students' writing ability is their low level of English proficiency. As in the case of this current study, the students' background in English was quite low and seemed insufficient to meet the demands for academic writing at a high level. It can be hypothesized that there is a threshold level of English proficiency that students need to meet in order for teaching techniques to be effective and, in particular, for the students to make use of teacher feedback. Simply put, in order to benefit from writing activities as well as teacher or peer feedback to improve their writing, students may need to possess a certain level of English proficiency. This can be a major factor that explains why many approaches to teaching writing result in unsatisfactory outcomes.

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Appendix A
Additional Criteria or Points for Scoring

- a. Title which gives the reader some ideas of what the essay is about and ideally is also interesting
- b. Introductory paragraph that introduces the topic and draws the reader into the essay
- c. Effective thesis statement that announces the topic and the point the author wants to make about the topic
- d. Three supporting paragraphs that each develops a point which supports the main idea
- e. Effective transitions between sentences and between paragraphs
- f. Concluding paragraph that gives the essay a feeling of being finished and not that the author just stopped writing
- g. Grammar/Punctuation/Vocabulary/Spelling /Topic appropriate for a definition or process essay
- h. Is it too broad or too narrow? Is it too abstract? Is it too complicated? Is the format correct?

Appendix B Guiding Questions for Editing

Originally, these questions, appearing in Oshima and Hogue (1999: 29), are intended to use for peer editing. However, in this study, the teacher resumed the duty of the peer by using the questions to make comments on the students' written work with the intention to help them pay close attention on the content, organization, and clarity.

1. What do you like best about this paragraph?
2. Is the format (title, indenting, double spacing, margins) correct? Does it look like the model on page 19?
3. Topic sentence: Is there a clear topic sentence? Does it have a controlling idea?
4. Supporting sentences: Is the main idea clear? Does the writer need to add more details to explain it?
5. Concluding sentence: Is there a concluding sentence? Does it begin with an appropriate end-of-paragraph signal?
6. Are there any unclear sentences? Can you suggest a way to improve them?
7. Are there any errors in grammar and mechanics (spelling, pronunciation, and capitalization)?

Appendix C

Questionnaire on Students' Preference of Intervening Questions

Instructions: Rate your preference of each type of intervening questions used during your writing process by using the following criteria:

5 = very useful, 4 = mostly useful, 3 = useful, 2 = hardly useful, 1 = not useful. Circle the number you choose.

Types of Intervening Questions During Writing Process	Rating Scale				
a. Are the ideas presented in a logical order?	5	4	3	2	1
b. Is repetition of key nouns used properly?	5	4	3	2	1
c. Is use of consistent pronouns properly employed?	5	4	3	2	1
d. Are transitional signals used properly?	5	4	3	2	1
e. Is the argument consistent?	5	4	3	2	1
f. Is the argument explicit?	5	4	3	2	1
g. Does each paragraph have one idea?	5	4	3	2	1
h. Is each main idea expressed clearly in a topic sentence?	5	4	3	2	1
i. Does a topic sentence have controlling idea?	5	4	3	2	1
j. Do all of the sentences support the topic sentence?	5	4	3	2	1
k. Is all the content relevant?	5	4	3	2	1
l. Is content in each paragraph relevant?	5	4	3	2	1
m. Is any section too long?	5	4	3	2	1
n. Is there anything missing, or anything that is redundant?	5	4	3	2	1