WORKING WITH ERROR

Suggestions for You, the Instructor
Follow this general procedure:

1. Read the whole draft, sitting on your hands if necessary
2. Comment on strengths and weaknesses in content, organization, and other “more global” issues.
3. Mark (circle, underline) places where errors interfered with your comprehension. (Mark examples of effective language use, too!)

Also, you don’t have to comment on linguistic accuracy every time you respond. Just make sure to tell students what you’re focusing on.

If you want to do more, here are some ideas:

• If you notice some patterns of error throughout the paper, **pick 1-2 patterns to focus on.** Circle a few examples, explain the rule if you can, and ask the student to find the rest and try to fix them for the next draft or next assignment.
  o This can be for errors that interfere with meaning or errors that don’t (e.g. subject-verb agreement, like “it spend”). Note, though, that some errors are considered “nontreatable” because they are governed less by rule than by convention or context and so will likely be difficult for the student to fix. Nontreatable errors includes articles (a, an, the), prepositions (e.g., “your interest of health”), word choice (e.g., “your body spends a lot of calories”; “to make muscle”); treatable errors include subject-verb agreement, verb issues, run-ons, and fragments.
• **Focus your error-marking on a single paragraph.** (This is important if you do want to correct or line-edit (instead of circling or underlining). It’s also a good idea to explain your choices. (E.g., did you rewrite something because was a non-idiomatic word choice, or because it was wordy?)

Suggestions You Can Give Students

• **Get another pair of eyes**, whether a friend or tutor. This works best if the other person notes the error and the student makes the changes.
  o This is the Writers Workshop’s policy: not to fix the errors for the student but to help them identify their common errors and work with them to fix them. (And, of course, often discussions with a friend or tutor about language lead to revisions in argument.)
• **Consult self-editing handbooks** for ESL writers, such as the following:
  o *Read, Write, Edit: Grammar for College Writers* (2004): Patricia Porter and Deborah von Dommelen;
  o *Writing Clearly: Grammar for Editing* (2011) by Janet Lane and Ellen Lange;
• **Keep a log of common errors.** When editing, they could make separate passes through the paper for different errors.
  o This works best for “treatable” errors, as described above.
• **Try reading the paper aloud.** (Note: this may work for some students but not others.)
• **Start early.** Writing something the night before often leaves little time for language editing, let alone revising for content and organization.