



# How our word choices can empower our students

*The words we use when writing about students can influence how they think about their learning, their work, and themselves, so it's important that we choose our words carefully.*

By **Lauren Porosoff**

Part of our job as teachers is to write about our students — from completing end-of-semester progress reports to commenting on their essays, emailing their parents, filling out paperwork for their IEPs, and providing reference letters for their college applications, summer programs, scholarships, and job searches. Our written feedback can help students improve their academic performance, especially when we give them specific information about what they've accomplished and what they can do to improve (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Our written recommendations can help them gain access to further learning opportunities, support services, and employment. And our written notes to their parents can encourage greater family engagement in their schooling (Kraft & Rogers, 2015), which in turn often promotes greater achievement (Castro et al., 2015). In short, what we write about our students has enormous potential to affect their lives.

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Writing about our students can be hard to do, however. Even those of us who enjoy talking about our students' work might not enjoy synthesizing those observations into crisp prose. Depending on the task at hand, we might have to describe the student's performance in very fine detail, or we may be called upon to describe their strengths and areas for improvement in extraordinarily careful language, explaining ourselves in a way that's honest and helpful yet palatable for the sensitive person who will read our text. It all takes a lot of time and effort, often extending well beyond school hours — especially when we have to write about not just one student but 12 or 25 or 80 of them.

But if writing about students is such hard work, then we might as well dignify that work by communicating in ways that help our students grow. Our words can empower our students to discover where they are as learners, what seems important to them, how well their learning strategies serve them, and what else they could try. To see how our various written communications can empower our students to notice and choose to do what works for them, let's turn to an unlikely source of empowerment: our grammar.

### Adjectives

Adjectives describe nouns. In communications about students, adjectives might describe the students themselves: Thea is conscientious and earnest in science class, and she has established herself as a curious scholar and a trustworthy collaborator. Adjectives might also describe the student's work products (an *excellent* poster, an *inventive* solution) and their contributions to class (*insightful* comments, *provocative* questions).

Teachers sometimes describe students as nice and lovely, or as having a bright smile or a cheerful disposition. But using an adjective that could just as easily describe room décor (a lovely rug, cheerful wallpaper) makes it sound like the students are there to please the teacher instead of to learn.

Adjectives become particularly problematic when they convey race and gender biases. Do we call students of color *insightful* and *creative*, or do we use those words more often to describe White students? How often do we describe boys as *compassionate* or *helpful*? How many girls' contributions get called *powerful* or *persuasive*?

But even if we focus on our students' work (as opposed to our own enjoyment) and carefully attend to race and gender and other forms of bias, adjectives still represent our subjective judgments, not our observations. My *imaginative* might be your *irrelevant*; my *stubborn* might be your *determined*. We're not telling our readers what we see; we're telling them how we feel about what we see.

Also, when we modify a noun with an adjective, we fix that characteristic to that thing. Even if that characteristic

is positive, we're telling our readers what the student *is*, rather than helping them see what the student *does*.

### Verbs

Instead of using adjectives to characterize students or their work products, we can use verbs to name their behaviors. The behaviors might be specific to the class: "In essays, Udi *communicates* his ideas clearly and *supports* his claims with plenty of textual evidence." Or the behaviors might be overarching skills related to interpersonal interaction, time and materials management, or leadership: "In class, Udi *tests out* his ideas during discussions, *asks* questions, and *listens* with interest and compassion to his peers."

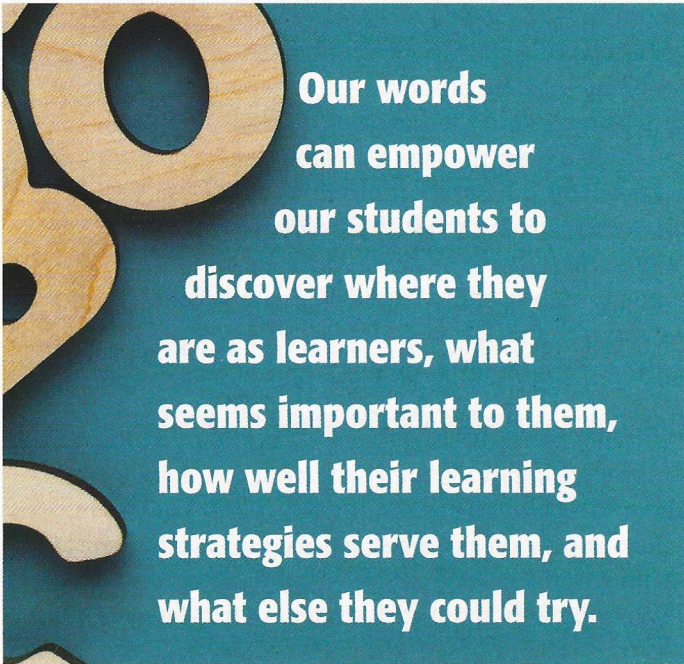
Verbs can also help us show students which behaviors aren't working and what replacement behaviors might work better: "When she makes an outline, Taja should state her claims as complete sentences (rather than only *listing* the topics of her paragraphs), so when she's *writing*, she *knows* her point and can *stick* to it more easily."

To replace your adjectives with verbs, try asking yourself what students do to make you describe them in a particular way. Let's say you're writing a home report for Patrick, and you've said, "Patrick is a *responsible* and *confident* student." What does Patrick do to show he's responsible? Perhaps he *brings* his materials to every class, *writes* his questions about the homework, and *makes* study guides for every test. What does he do that make you think of him as confident? Maybe he *raises* his hand often, *debates* ideas, and *offers* feedback to his peers.

Adjectives are a sort of shorthand: we use up much less word count (and energy) calling a student *insightful* than noticing and describing behaviors that demonstrate the student's insights. Using verbs demands a level of mindful observation we might not think we have the time or headspace for — though we always seem to have the time and headspace to make judgments.

### Nouns

If we are to help students, their parents, or anyone else reading our words understand what's happening and what could be happening in class, we need to create vivid visual images: things to picture in their minds. To name those things, we need specific nouns. We might name a student's work products (poem, cell model, integer skit), materials they use (writer's notebook, graduated cylinder), or topics they studied (lizards, Mount Fuji, opioids). While it might not be strictly necessary to mention that Amari chose the black-capped chickadee for his bird study or that Eleanor built her DNA model out of jelly beans, such images provide students and parents with a more vivid record of their learning experiences.



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Imagery also offers a reader who doesn't know the student, such as an admissions officer or district special education chair, a clearer idea of who the student is. Perhaps most important, including specific images also provides evidence that the teacher is paying attention to the student's choices: "I see you."

### **Conjunctions**

In many communications about students, we deliver information about what the student has learned or does well alongside information about what the student still needs to learn or improve. Conjunctions — words like *and*, *but*, *while*, *although*, and *unless* — relate such pieces of information to each other. The conjunctions we choose can reveal our attitudes toward students and shape their attitudes toward themselves, their learning, and our classes.

Imagine, for example, that Tariq's English teacher wants to share the following two pieces of information about his development as a writer:

- Tariq has gotten better at using imagery.
- Tariq needs to work on sticking to his thesis.

Now let's look at different ways of putting these two pieces of information into one sentence:

1. Tariq has gotten better at using imagery and needs to work on sticking to his thesis.
2. Tariq has gotten better at using imagery but needs to work on sticking to his thesis.

Using the conjunction *and* makes these two pieces of information equivalent. Tariq's strength is just as important as his weakness. Both are simply part of the learning process. Using the conjunction *but* frames Tariq's strength as qualified or perhaps even limited by his weakness. Tariq might get the impression that he's not a particularly good writer or that his efforts to use more specific imagery don't matter very much.

Let's look at another set of examples:

3. While Tariq has gotten better at using imagery, he needs to work on sticking to his thesis.
4. While Tariq needs to work on sticking to his thesis, he has gotten better at using imagery.

This time, the teacher used the subordinating conjunction *while* to put the two pieces of information together. A teacher might prefer the first sentence because it begins with the strength. However, leading with praise sometimes makes the praise sound like a concession, and the criticism sounds like the main point. Tariq might be getting better at using imagery, but what really matters is that he can't stick to a thesis.

More important than putting praise or criticism first is putting the student's strength in the sentence's main clause. Subordinating conjunctions like *while*, *although*, *unless*, *because*, and *even if* make the information in that part of the sentence depend on information in the rest of the sentence: I can't say "While Tariq needs to work on sticking to his thesis" without adding more to the sentence. If we put the strength in the main clause, like in example four, the strength is unqualified by and independent of the weakness.

### **Adverbs**

Adverbs describe qualities of action: *how* students work, learn, relate to each other and to you, ask questions, seek help, and do anything else in your class. When we use adverbs in communications about students — pursuing a topic *curiously*, using materials *resourcefully*, sharing *courageously* — we're showing our readers the qualities of action that matter to us. Unlike adjectives, adverbs do not describe static things; they describe dynamic actions and are therefore less likely to be interpreted as judgments of the students themselves or their work.

Also unlike adjectives, which describe goals to be completed, adverbs tell us about ongoing values. For example, writing an *effective* essay is a goal. Once the student writes the effective essay, she's done working toward her goal. She could set a new goal of writing another effective essay or

even a more effective essay, but these are just new goals she can work toward and complete. But writing *effectively* is a value: an ongoing process the student can engage in any time, for any assignment, in any class or outside school, after she graduates and enters a profession, when she communicates with friends and relatives and her community, and in any and all aspects of her life that she chooses. It might sound a little grandiose to say this about everybody's least favorite part of speech, but adverbs tell us how we want to live our lives.

### Pronouns

As we become more aware of the gender spectrum, we can stop assuming pronouns based on how the student looks and acts, or what sex the student was assigned at birth. We can ask each student him/her/them/zirself which pronouns to use. When you introduce yourself, you can let your students know which pronouns you use and ask them to introduce themselves with their pronouns so no one makes assumptions.

We can also pay careful attention to when we use the pronoun *I* in our communications about students. Compare these two lines:

- I would like to see Jaime proofreading more carefully to improve his writing.
- Jaime can improve his writing by proofreading more carefully.

In that first sentence, the subject is *I* (the teacher). In the second one, the subject is *Jaime* (the student). Of course we can acknowledge our own existence: We can't separate what happens in our classrooms from ourselves, and we should own our opinions. But every time *I* is the subject of a sentence, the communication becomes a little more about us and a little less about the student.

When I make myself the subject of a sentence in writing about a student, it's usually to extend an invitation for further learning, like "I encourage Chandra to email me any questions she doesn't get a chance to ask in class" or "I suggest that Logan sit closer to the front of the room in order to minimize distractions." Occasionally, I close a report or email with an expression of enthusiasm for participating in the student's learning: "I'm excited to support Justus as he continues to expand his reading and writing repertoires" or "I can't wait to read more of Micah's work."

But what I no longer write are sentences that express my approval. "I love how Tayo acknowledges his peers' perspective while also asserting his own." "I was impressed by how much information Jana put into her video." "I'm proud of August's efforts." Sentences like these make it sound as if

the purpose of student work is to please me, rather than to give students opportunities to practice important skills and create meaningful products.

If we notice ourselves writing sentences like these, we can rewrite them to make them about the students. "Tayo acknowledges his peers' perspective while also asserting his own." "Jana put so much information into her video." "August deserves to be proud of his efforts." And in any event, if we find a lot of sentences with *I* as the subject, we can ask ourselves whether the communication is really about the student or about us.

### Conversations about communications

Although exploring the grammar of communications about students can be useful, codifying these ideas into a rulebook won't help. Some conventions ensure consistency in our schools' messaging: At my school, for example, we write comments about each student in trimester reports, and these are supposed to be 150-200 words and written in third person (that is, about the students rather than directly to them). But these are positive rules: they tell us what to do. When we make avoidance-based rules like "Don't say I" or "Don't use adjectives," our goal becomes following the rule rather than anticipating the effect of the communication.

Instead of making rigid rules, we can regularly review our communications about students within a group that already works closely together, such as an academic department or a grade-level team, and structure our discussions such that teachers can reflect critically about their own work while expressing curiosity about each other's. What do we notice about the words we use in our own communications? What messages about our expectations do we send with those words? How might students and parents experience these messages in light of their identities? What messages do we want to send? Questions like these can help teachers notice how their language affects students and choose language that better serves their values. ■

### References

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