

# Assessing Sentence-Level Writing Competence in a Second Year Science Course

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## Introduction

- Debate whether feedback improves writing is ongoing (Evans 2013)
- One problem may be misaligned objectives for feedback between instructors and students (Jonsson 2013)
- We focus on sentence-level feedback to avoid misaligned objectives
- We are using a scaffolded writing assignment to increase likelihood of students applying feedback (Hounsell 2007; Freestone 2009)

## Methods

- Scaffolded submission:
  1. Introduction
  2. Results & Discussion
  3. Complete report
- TA were trained to identify 9 possible issues with a discipline-specific comment bank
- TAs targeted 1-3 issues per student in the first assignment
- 120 voluntary submissions were analyzed to determine changes between assignments 1-2, 2-3, and 1-3.
- We also distinguished between changes with targeted feedback, non-targeted issues, and overall changes

## Results

- B students improved the most, followed by A, C and D students
- Overall, students improved the most with regard to their sentence clarity
- Subject-verb agreement also improved in all but the D students
- TAs overwhelmingly singled out sentence clarity for their feedback, distantly followed by tone.
- TAs may not recognize comma splices as a problem.
- Feedback identifying sentence clarity, tone, and tense was the most likely to produce changes

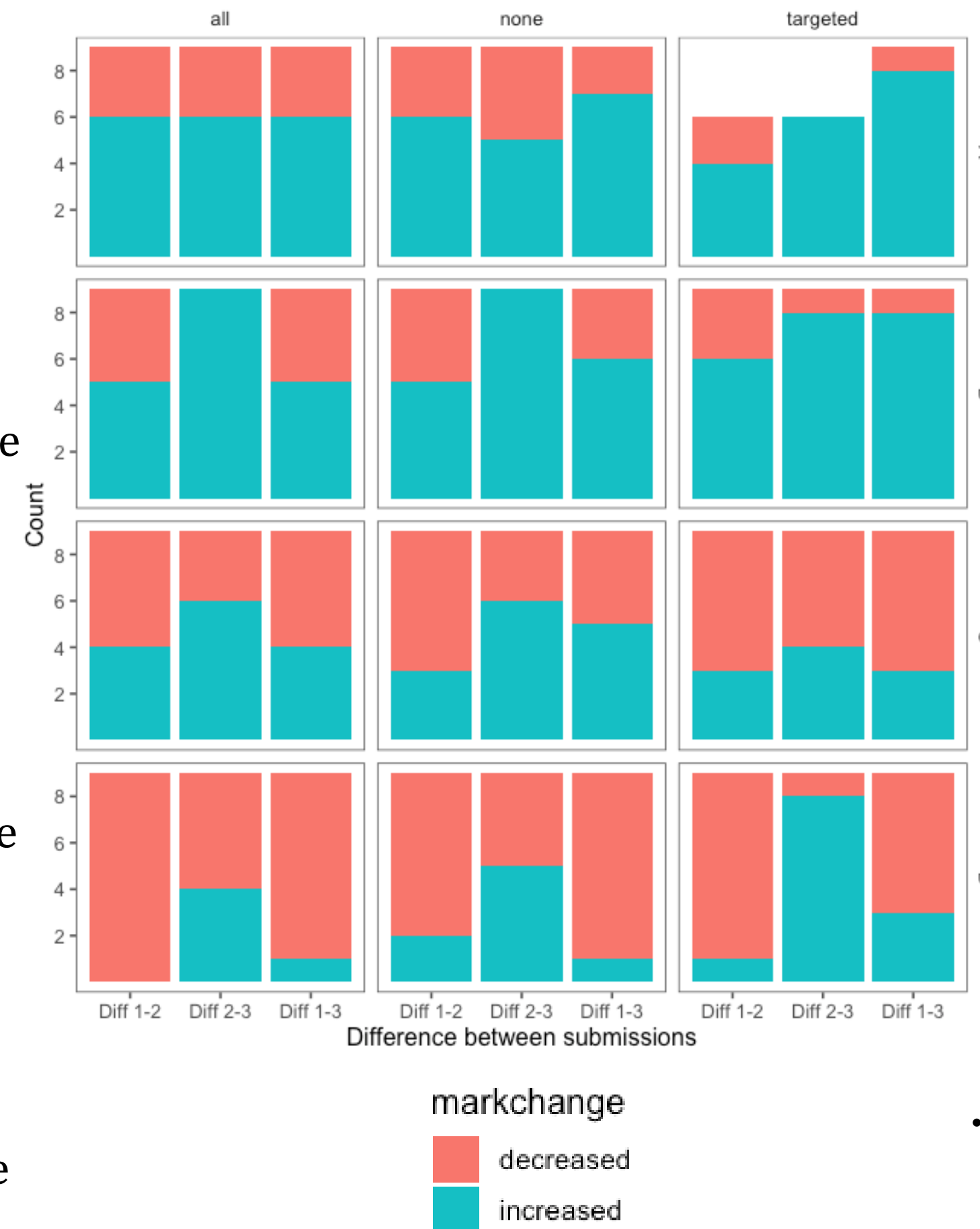


Figure 1. Overall changes in student writing

## Discussion

- Feedback was most productive for students when it was addressing more intuitive aspects of writing (e.g., tense, tone, and clarity)
- Feedback was least productive for technical issues (e.g., comma splices)
- TAs should speak as readers, rather than as writing experts
- “How did you feel about this piece of writing?” is a better TA training question than “Can you identify what is wrong with it?”.

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## References

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