Frequency of Errors in Essays by College Freshmen and by Professional Writers

Author(s): Gary Sloan

Frequency of Errors in Essays by College Freshmen and by Professional Writers

Gary Sloan

Although systematic instruction in grammar, usage, mechanics, and punctuation is on the wane in freshman composition courses, students are nevertheless commonly expected to avoid various types of "errors." Usage handbooks remain among the most popular resources available to instructors of freshman English. While the authors of such handbooks generally eschew a sternly prescriptivistic attitude, they create the impression that good writers steer clear of the kinds of errors defined and illustrated in the handbooks. These errors are said to distract readers or to weaken the writer's credibility even when the errors do not obscure meaning.

Over the years, empirical studies have quantified a variety of errors in the writing of college freshmen (Witty and Green; Hodges; Sloan; Connors and Lunsford; Haswell). That professional writers, too, violate rules of correctness is a commonplace among linguists, lexicographers, and composition specialists. It has been pointed out that instructors do not give equal scrutiny to errors committed by authors of composition texts and errors committed by students (Williams). And while just about everyone who teaches freshman English is also, it seems, aware that professional writers do indeed flout this or that canon of correctness, no one, as far as I can determine, has published a systematic comparative analysis of errors in the writing of college freshmen and of professionals. A number of studies have shown that the inexperienced and the expert writer do not share the same set of assumptions about the constituents of good writing and that the two approach prewriting, writing, and rewriting in quite different ways (Elbow; Beach; Freedman; Sommers; Flower et al.). While such studies are by no means silent about errors, the treatment is essentially piecemeal and tangential. From the data available, one would have trouble constructing a theory that would even roughly predict the relative distributions of various types of errors in the writing of freshmen and of professionals. Since essays by professional writers are still widely used as models for freshmen to emulate, instructors may find even a modest comparative study of errors informative. It may belie random impressions.

Gary Sloan is professor of English at Louisiana Tech University. His "The Perils of Paper Grading" (*English Journal*, May 1977) anticipates some of the conclusions of the above article. His most recent article in *CCC* is "Relational Ambiguity Between Sentences" (May 1988).

The body of writing I examined consisted of a similar number of words written by college freshmen and by professional authors: 9,392 to 9,374. The students' writing was in the form of twenty essays written during the final meeting of an introductory course in composition. Given topics a week in advance, the students had two hours in which to write essays of around 500 words. The essays were the tenth the students had written. Although none of the students had qualified for the freshman honors course in Engish, all had scored high enough on college entrance examinations to be exempted from a remedial course. While the students did not receive any systematic instruction in usage and mechanics, they were during the sixth week of the term (as part of a departmental requirement) given a multiple-choice test over the 123-page "Handbook of Grammar and Usage" in the ninth edition of Trimmer and Mc-Crimmon's *Writing With A Purpose,* the rhetoric used in the course. Throughout the term, the correction symbols that appear inside the back cover of the rhetoric were used to call students' attention to violations of the prescribed forms. Departmental policy required that students be penalized for flagrant commission of errors.

The professionals' writing came from twenty essays in the reader the freshmen used: the second edition of Elizabeth Penfield's *Short Takes: Model Essays for Composition.* Since I wanted to match modes of discourse and number of words per author with the distribution in the freshman essays, I did not use complete essays by the professionals, but on the average the first 470 words or so. Table 1 gives the number of words used per writer along with names, original site of publication (when known), and original date of publication. The authors are listed in the order they appear in the textbook.

In determining the frequency of errors in the two batches of essays, I confined the analysis to errors denotable by the correction symbols in Trimmer and McCrimmon's handbook. Some readers, no doubt, will question the typology of errors used in the study. Some of the putative errors (such as structural ambiguity, verbiage, and triteness) could just as easily be treated as stylistic features. I included such "errors" because they are regularly included in freshman handbooks that purport to inculcate the principles of "standard" usage, punctuation, and mechanics.

My approach to the students' essays was somewhat different from my normal evaluative procedures. In the comparative analysis, I marked many errors I would ordinarily, for a variety of reasons, not have marked. Still, it is unlikely that I spotted all errors of the sorts I looked for, because certain types—like structural ambiguity or "unwarranted" shifts in tense—can be quite unobtrusive. Also, because of the complicated cognitive processes that come into play when one reads a text and because certain types of errors are not uniformly demarcated, what seems an error to one reader may not to another. For example, should one classify as a comma splice a comma that separates two short independent clauses that have an antithetical relationship ("She is not angry, she is weary")? I did not. Or should one treat as a fragment a group of

Table 1

Author	Source	Date	Words
Walter Nelson	*College Comp. and Commun.*	1979	433
James Baker	*Chronicle of Higher Ed.*	1982	435
Russell Baker	*New York Times*	1977	358
Fred Hechinger	*New York Times Magazine*	1980	396
Frank Trippett	*Time*	1981	414
Jake Page	*Science 1984*	1984	373
Frank Gannon	*Saturday Review*	1985	381
Daniel Greenberg	?	1981	341
Carll Tucker	*Saturday Review*	1979	454
Lance Morrow	*Time*	1984	419
Roger Angell	*The Summer Game*	1963	336
Robert K. Miller	*Newsweek*	1980	489
William Raspberry	*Washington Post*	1982	473
Paul Bohannan	*Science 1981*	1981	552
Leanita McClain	*Newsweek*	1980	558
Barbara Mujica	*New York Times*	1984	506
Dennis Keihn	*Chronicle of Higher Ed.*	1985	557
Betty Wisdom	?	1982	534
Ellen Goodman	*Boston Globe*	1979	651
John Connor	*New York Times*	1985	714

words punctuated like a sentence but lacking subject or verb (or both) when the "fragment" is not readily attachable to an adjacent independent clause ("You shouldn't expect to get a good seat. If you do, good luck.")? My fragments were of the attachable sort (cf. Kline and Memering). My criteria for the errors I marked conform in large measure to the definitions set forth in Trimmer and McCrimmon's handbook. I excluded several types of "errors" from the analysis because they seemed too much liable to the vicissitudes of personal judgment. Lack of subordination, tonal unevenness, and questionable passivizations fall into this category. Even with such exclusions, my figures must inevitably be tainted by a certain amount of subjectivity. At any rate, I tried to apply the same evaluative principles to both sets of essays—equally vigilant of errors in both.

I do not pretend that my study is anywhere near definitive. Because of the smallness of my samples, I regard the study as merely suggestive—and, I hope, provocative. A different group of freshmen and professionals—differently situated, writing for different audiences, working under different constraints—might yield different results. Nor can I be certain that the writing of the professionals is entirely their own. Before the writers' manuscripts were printed, editors, proofreaders, typists, and others may have eliminated some errors and added others. The students' essays, on the other hand, were indisputably solo ventures. One would like to have known, too, how long on the average it took the professionals to write the body of words I analyzed. If they

had been limited to two hours of writing time (as had the students), would the frequency of errors have increased? Or if they composed more rapidly than the students, would a more leisurely pace have diminished the number of errors? I had no way of being sure.

Table 2 provides an overview of the frequency of all errors in the two groups of writers. Parenthetically noted is the number of essays in which each error appeared. The errors are listed according to their frequency of occurrence in the students' essays.

The distribution of errors in the students' writing is consistent with figures from previous studies. Comma, spelling, and "exactness" head the errors Hodges found in 16,000 essays marked in 1941. (Hodges put "wordiness" among the top-ten errors—the only previous researcher, apparently, to have tabulated verbiage.) More recently, in the 3,000 freshman essays they examined, Connors and Lunsford found omission of commas, vague pronoun reference, and faulty word choice to be the three most common errors. Connors and Lunsford found 9.52 errors per essay or 2.26 errors per 100 words; my figures for the same are 9.60 and 2.04. The professionals have 8.55 errors per writer and 1.82 per 100 words.

On the basis of the data in Table 2, one could draw any number of conclusions. The most obvious is that the freshmen and the professionals are almost

Table 2

Type of Error	Students	Professionals
Misspelling	38 (11)	0
Comma (excluding comma splice)	27 (13)	25 (16)
Word Choice	25 (16)	14 (9)
Pronoun reference	17 (11)	14 (10)
Verbiage	11 (8)	20 (13)
Pronoun agreement	9 (6)	3 (3)
Structural ambiguity	8 (8)	16 (10)
Shift in person	7 (5)	8 (7)
Comma splice	6 (5)	1 (1)
Capitalization	6 (3)	0
Tense	6 (6)	6 (5)
Fragment	5 (5)	13 (8)
Faulty complement	5 (4)	5 (4)
Subject-verb agreement	4 (4)	0
Adjective for adverb	4 (3)	0
Apostrophe	4 (4)	0
Parallelism	3 (3)	2 (2)
Case	3 (2)	1
Triteness	2 (2)	30 (12)
Numbers	1	13 (10)
Principal part of verb	1	0
Totals	192	171

equally prone to commit errors. On the other hand, if "error" is defined as deviation from the linguistic practices of skilled writers, one might wish to reexamine the definition. Or one could keep the definition and assume that this particular group of professional writers is atypical. One could then seek writers in whom errors are less profuse. Of course, if one maintains that skilled writers do not make the kinds of errors listed in Table 2, one might at some point have to argue that most professional writers are unskilled. If one asserted that writers who avoid errors are skilled writers, one might have to defend the proposition that not a few students can write better than nationally acclaimed (but rule-flouting) authors.

Certain types of errors, Table 2 shows, are almost exclusively the province of one group or the other. With the exception of the treatment of numbers (where conventions are highly variable) the professionals' writing is free of mistakes that lend themselves to the simplest of editorial emendations: mechanical and spelling errors. It would not be at all surprising if some errors of these types were indeed eliminated by editors. If the students had corrected— or someone had—their misspelled words, their total error count would have been lower than the professionals'.

Another notable difference lies in the professionals' propensity for trite expressions—"battle fatigue" (J. Baker), "mortar had . . . hardly dried" (Hechinger), "flowering of romance" (Gannon), "blind faith" (Angell), "no doubt in my mind" (Raspberry), "fight a holy war" (Bohannan), "white collar pencil pushing" (McClain), "bashed their . . . brains out" (Connor). This fondness for the hackneyed phrase occasionally produced mixed metaphors: the "state of the art" was "boiled down" (Trippett), a holding "ploy" became a "flicker" in the "annals of waiting" (Morrow), a "baby boom" could be "harvested" (Hechinger). That the freshmen used few clichés could have meant (since I had not said much about the subject) that the students were attentive to the handbook proscription against trite language or that previous teachers had successfully inveighed against it. A more plausible explanation is that the students had only a small fund of clichés from which to draw.

The professionals' greater facility with language may explain the higher frequency of verbiage in their writing. When words come easily, one naturally tends to produce more words than the idea requires. Once written, the supererogatory words may not be perceived as such. Even if they are, writers may be loath to revise if what they have written appeals to their inner ear or expresses their semantic intent. Revision may be especially uninviting to authors who think of style and content as separable elements rather than an indissoluble compound. Whatever the cause, verbiage was a recurrent feature of the professionals' prose: e.g., "scant and skimpy" clothing (Tucker), "basic necessities" (Morrow), "bourgeon and flourish" (Angell), "absolutely parallel" (Bohannan), "[T]here is another important issue that has to be addressed, and that is the issue of integrity" (Keihn). Some of the verbiage in the students' writing was perhaps born of a need to fill up space—hence, such familiar spec-

imens of prolixity as, "We are all bored by different things. What is interesting to one person can be completely dull to another. It all depends on the person," etc.

Despite their collectively greater fluency, the professionals occasionally nodded. The students' errors in diction were apt to be blatant: "contribute" for "attribute," "reception" for "deception," "persecute" for "prosecute," "cloth" for "clothe," "selectful" for "selective," "loose" for "lose," "their" for "there," "holy" for "wholly." Students were also unversed in the idiomatic use of prepositions: "an element for his decision," "due in part of his absence," "lose all interest of college," "in pursuit for happiness." The professionals' imprecision of diction was more subtle: "Instilling in my children a sense of family and ethnic identity is my role [responsibility]" (Mujica), "do [play] basketball well" (Raspberry), "protect the right of a parent or guardian to dispose of [determine] that child's fate" (Goodman), "The real issue [problem] is in reconciling athletics and academics" (Keihn).

The higher frequency of structural ambiguity in the professionals' writing may be attributable to my pedagogic emphases. On the students' earlier essays, I habitually marked such ambiguity. So students were presumably on guard against ill-positioned words. Structural ambiguity may well be the most insidious (and one of the most pervasive) of all errors. If one looks for it, one can usually find it, as the following examples suggest: "The best . . . cold avoidance program thus consists of washing the hands frequently when colds are about"—i.e., "frequently washing" (Trippett); "I knew at that moment I was just another chunk of freight"—"At that moment I knew" (Bohannan); "Sometimes, when I wait at the bus stop with my attaché case"—"when with my attaché case I wait" (McClain); "To falter in either area often means giving up both"— "Often, to falter in either area" (Keihn); "Many zoos [are] making new efforts to breed endangered species with desperate haste"—"With desperate haste, many zoos" (Wisdom).

Some errors common to both groups occurred in similar syntactic environments. The fact that kindred structural conditions regularly elicited the same errors suggests that both students and professionals were applying similar principles of logic—which happened to clash with handbook pronouncements. Here are paired examples of such errors, the student example given first.

"Misuse" of Comma
   a. "There are various forms of education, and many different ways of obtaining these kinds of education."
   b. "To set one ethnic group apart as more worthy of attention from others is unjust, and might breed resentment against that group" (Mujica).

   a. "Illiterate simply means that a person has no education, or has no ability to read or write."
   b. "It [an automobile] waits until it reaches a downtown intersection in the middle of the rush hour, or until it is fully loaded with family and luggage on the Ohio Turnpike" (R. Baker).

Pronoun Reference
  a. "Students often feel pressured into drinking at parties and other so-cial gatherings. This can be caused by even close friends."
  b. "First, excess space should make it possible to run smaller schools—fewer pupils in each building. This could solve some of the most serious problems" (Hechinger).

  a. "When a concert band performs, it is usually in a hall, and the band is the main attraction."
  b. "If a basketball fan says that the Boston Celtics' Larry Bird plays 'black,' the fan intends it . . . as a compliment" (Raspberry).

Pronoun Agreement
  a. "A person who uses marijuana just because their friends do may lack self-esteem."
  b. "The conflict was between the right of the parent to make deci-sions about bringing up their children, and the rights of their chil-dren to their liberty, and to due process" (Goodman).

Shift in Person
  a. "One can enjoy being around a friend but not like group behavior. Look at what happens at college basketball games."
  b. "Waiting casts one's life into a little dungeon of time. . . . Con-sider one minor, almost subliminal, form" (Morrow).

Fragment
  a. "We rush around so much we don't have time for a good, decent meal, so we compromise and eat at fast-food restaurants. Or stop and pick up some junk food at a convenience store."
  b. "But the law is not necessary to protect children from wise and sensitive parents. Nor is made to interfere with families function-ing smoothly on their own" (Goodman).

Faulty Complement
  a. "My reason for majoring in electrical engineering is mainly the many job opportunities available in the field."
  b. "My point is the harm that comes from too narrow a definition of what is black" (Raspberry).

It would be tempting to argue that some of the students' errors resulted from conscious emulation of the solecistic forms in the model essays and that without the countervailing effect of the handbook proscriptions, errors would have appeared in greater profusion. While that view has an appealing logical symmetry, both halves of the argument are tenuous at best. For the students read only four or five of the essays I analyzed, and research has shown that study of the rules of "grammar" has little effect on the way writers use the language (Hartwell; Rose).

A better explanation for the high frequency of errors in both groups lies in the role of the handbook, my arbiter of correctness. Handbooks (and Trimmer and McCrimmon's is typical) are not necessarily reliable guides to the practices of skilled contemporary writers—not, at any rate, of the most visible ones. Between the handbook prescriptions/proscriptions and actual practice may lie a considerable gulf. The disparity may arise from insufficient observation on

the part of the handbook authors or from a tendency to repeat the assertions of predecessors. In this latter tendency, the authors are abetted by the many instructors who prefer linguistically conservative texts. Whatever its cause, the ensuing gap between prescription and practice makes the word "error" something of a misnomer. A number of the "errors" I marked are perhaps better viewed as manifestations of rhetorical choice from among equally legitimate alternatives. I refer not only to stylistic features like triteness, verbiage, and "dangling" word groups, but to such commonly deprecated forms as loose ("broad") reference of "it" and "this," plural pronouns with "singular" antecedents (e.g., "everyone" and "anybody"), many fragments, and various wayward uses of the comma. (Charles Meyer's *A Linguistic Study of American Punctuation* shows how certain deviations from the bookish rules of punctuation obey a systematic rationale.) Such "errors," one suspects, bother only those who are trained or paid to regard them as mistakes.

If not in the commission of significantly fewer "errors," in what does the superiority of this group of professional writers consist? Not, I think, in keener reasoning ability. The professionals no less than the students committed elementary fallacies. A student's contention that box-office records are being smashed because today's movies are qualitatively better than yesteryear's was no worse that the professional's *post hoc* assertion that SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores are declining because students no longer have to calculate their own change at checkout counters (Greenberg). Another student's claim that "everyone gets divorced for a different reason" had its hyperbolic counterpart in "For any trend, there are as many reasons as there are participants" (Tucker). Moreover, for every student who exhorted the reader to be compassionate or to follow the golden rule, there was a professional who also took the moral high road: "What we need to remember . . . is that some things deserve to be judged harshly: we should not leave our kingdoms to the selfish and the wicked" (Miller); "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could infect black children with the notion that excellence in math is 'black' rather than white, or possibly Chinese?" (Raspberry). Nor were the professionals exempt from the unwitting puns and verbal snarls that in student writing sometimes elicit wry marginalia: e.g., "These [the 1950s] were the days of heavy petting in the back seats of sexy cars to the beat of seminal rock 'n' roll" (Gannon); "We all seem to be constantly trying to balance the see-saw parallel to being unique and being assimilated into society" (Bohannan).

It is true that judged by Kellogg Hunt's chief indicators of syntactic maturity the professionals' style was more "mature" than the students'. The professionals got 10.4 words per clause and 17.1 words per T-unit, the students 9.0 and 15.1. The difference is almost wholly traceable to the differing number of clauses written by the two groups: the professionals used 548 independent and 358 dependent clauses, the students 621 and 418. The 133 extra clauses produced by the students exerted, of course, a potent downward drag on words per clause and per T-unit. While the professionals used more prepositional

phrases (950 to 885) and appositives (19 to 13), the students used more participial, gerundive, and infinitive phrases (412 to 344). The frequency of nominative absolutes, passivizations, explicit transitional markers, and inversions was not significantly different. The two groups, then, exhibited essentially the same repertoire of syntactic structures.

What gave the professionals a collective advantage as writers owed in part, I believe, to the richer diversity of words they put into the structures. Their ample vocabularies allowed for a finer delineation of idea and greater "solidity of specification." A passage like the following was beyond the lexical reach of the students: "We used to be a romantic people. Our culture—our music, our drama, our art, our literature—was characterized by the romantic qualities of innocence, intensity, vulnerability, optimism, ardency, mystery, nostalgia, melancholy, glamour, flirtation, guilt, and restraint" (Gannon).

Other elements in the professionals' literary superiority did not seem amenable to statistical procedures. For example, the professionals seemed better informed about their subjects than were the students about theirs. This advantage in knowledge was to be expected since the professionals (presumably) had more time to research and to reflect on their topics. Also hard to quantify, but easy to sense, was the spirit of commitment or passion or at least enthusiasm the professionals brought to their topics. By comparison, the students' writing too often seemed perfunctory, the discharge of an imposed duty (which of course it was).

Just as we do not expect a chrysalis to turn into a butterfly overnight, so we can scarcely expect freshmen to blossom instantaneously into writers of professional caliber. But even though we cannot do everything, we can still do something. While not original nor intended to be comprehensive, the following procedures may very well diminish the gap between the writing of professionals and of students.

1. Let students select their own topics. It is hard to be passionate about a subject in which one has no interest.

2. Have students research topics before writing about them. (Some topics, of course, require more research than others.)

3. Let students write at their own pace. Those who write slowly or who want to excel are victimized by severe time restrictions. Such restrictions also crimp efforts to explore one's beliefs via writing.

4. Extend students' audience beyond oneself. Give them a sense of the larger social functions of writing.

5. Help students to expand their lexical resources by becoming close observers and emulators of lexically accomplished authors.

6. Do not exact fidelity to a linguistic code violated by reputable writers. While some errors merit corrective action (e.g., blatant lack of agreement, idiosyncratic spelling, the wrong word, punctuation and me-

chanics that obfuscate), others can be defended as acceptable stylistic options.

Works Cited

Beach, Richard. "Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Non-Revisers." *College Composition and Communication* 27 (May 1976): 160–64.

Connors, Robert J., and Andrea A. Lunsford. "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research." *College Composition and Communication* 39 (Dec. 1988): 395–409.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. London: Oxford, 1973.

Flower, Linda, et al. "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision." *College Composition and Communication* 37 (Feb. 1986): 16–55.

Freedman, Sarah W. "The Registers of Student and Professional Expository Writing: Influences on Teachers' Responses." *New Directions in Composition Research*. Ed. Richard Beach and Lillian S. Bridwell. New York: Guilford, 1984. 334–47.

Hartwell, Patrick. "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar." *College English* 47 (Feb. 1985): 105–27.

Haswell, Richard H. "Error and Change in College Student Writing." *Written Communication* 5 (Oct. 1988): 479–99.

Hodges, John C. *Harbrace Handbook of English*. New York: Harcourt, 1941.

Hunt, Kellogg W. *Syntactic Maturity in Schoolchildren and Adults*. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970.

Kline, Charles R., Jr., and W. Dean Memering. "Formal Fragments: The English Minor Sentence." *Research in the Teaching of English* 11 (Fall 1977): 97–110.

Meyer, Charles F. *A Linguistic Study of American Punctuation*. New York: Peter Lang, 1987.

Penfield, Elizabeth. *Short Takes: Model Essays for Composition*. 2nd ed. Glenview: Scott, 1987.

Rose, Mike. "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University." *College English* 45 (Apr. 1985): 341–59.

Sloan, Gary. "The Subversive Effects of an Oral Culture on Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 30 (May 1979): 156–60.

Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (Dec. 1980): 378–88.

Trimmer, Joseph F., and James M. McCrimmon. *Writing With A Purpose*. 9th ed. Boston: Houghton, 1988.

Williams, Joseph M. "The Phenomenology of Error." *College Composition and Communication* 32 (May 1981): 152–68.

Witty, Paul A., and Roberta La Brant Green. "Composition Errors of College Students." *English Journal* 19 (May 1930): 388–93.