GRADING STRATEGIES

Why Writers Make Mistakes and What We Can do to Help Them

The more we understand the reasons writers make the errors they do, the easier it will be for us to give them power over their own errors. This resource provides a list of some of the causes of which error may be symptomatic, a description of useful teaching strategies, issues in responding to error on drafts and the final copy, and in deciding how large a part error should play when we assign a grade.

Why do my students make so many mistakes? Shouldn't they have learned how to write by now? Many of us ask these questions because we feel overwhelmed by the number of punctuation and grammar mistakes we see in our students' writing. It's easy for us to feel the situation is hopeless or to blame the problem on bad high school instruction. Certainly, sometimes our students were simply not taught some of the rules we find so obvious, but more often than not, our students misplace commas or write convoluted and awkward sentences for reasons related to the overall process of writing. Ignorance of convention is the first logical explanation for many of us, but frequently, ignorance is too simple an explanation for the complex factors that influence a student's writing.

Common Mistakes - Why do students write in ways not in keeping with Edited American English?

Unclear purpose:
Many times writers will write extremely long or convoluted sentences because they are not yet sure what it is they want to say. Using more words or adding more clauses may be a way for the writer to "hedge" as she or he is thinking of what to say next, just as we might say "um" or "and then" when we are speaking to give us a moment to consider what to say next.

Difficulty of topic or unfamiliarity with information:
Awkward sentences frequently appear because the writer may be paying more attention to other issues. For example, if the topic of the paper is particularly difficult because it presents a new issue or new information, the student may need the majority of his or her concentration to understand the topic and might not be able to give enough attention to sentences. In other words, writers might concentrate on what they are saying rather than on how they're saying it because the difficulty of the topic or argument doesn't allow them to concentrate on both.

Misperceptions about style of language suited to audience:
Many times students feel that if their sentences are too straightforward or clear, they are not writing "academic" English. They may deliberately complicate their sentences or vocabulary because they feel that is what the teacher expects. [Ken Macrorie, a composition specialist, calls this Engfish because it is such a "fishy" version of English.]

Attempts to stretch style or to experiment:
Frequently when students attempt a structure that they have never used before or are trying to embed their sentences with more clauses to achieve a more sophisticated style, they may make errors or produce a sentence that doesn't sound "quite right."

Confusion about the task:
Students frequently confuse their sentences and even overall organization when they are unsure about what an assignment requires. The feeling of "I don't know if this is what she wants," or "I can't tell if this is what I'm supposed to be doing" can influence all aspects of a piece of writing, including grammar and usage. Again, students may be expending a good portion of their energy on worrying about or trying to figure out the constraints of an assignment and not be able to pay as much attention to other writing constraints.

Influence of spoken conventions:
Our first reaction to errors like this is that it seems like our students write like they talk. In some ways, this reaction is right on the money. Many errors can arise because of the conflation of spoken and written conventions. Since there is a lot of cross-over here, our students are not misguided when they attempt to rely on rules they have internalized about speaking and to apply these rules to writing. Spoken language conventions vary according to where our students

were brought up, so the influence of spoken convention may vary from student to student. This reliance on spoken convention can manifest itself in many ways. We see it most frequently in misspelled words when the student relies on a phonetic spelling of a word. The misspellings may vary according to the student's region or neighborhood of origin. Spoken convention may also appear in sentence structures. The writer may rely on a structure that, while perfectly appropriate in his spoken dialect, clashes with written convention.

How to Respond - How can I help students gain control over the expectations for grammar and usage in Edited American English?

Drafting Sequences and Response:
Of course, merely knowing the cause of many errors does not help us know when we should intervene and discuss errors with the student. There's a strong inclination that comes over us all to begin talking about errors immediately, especially when a paper is so riddled with errors that it
interrupts our reading of it. We feel that if we ignore it, our students will never learn "to get it right."

Talking about errors too early in the drafting sequence, however, can be more detrimental to the student than ignoring it. Because many errors are symptomatic of other writing problems, such as difficulty of topic or argument, we may end up discussing sentence problems that would disappear as the student revises and refines his or her purpose. The topic of error should not be approached until the student is fairly close to a final draft of a paper. If we wait until this point, we not only avoid discussing errors symptomatic of other problems, but we also send the message to students that the content of a paper and their own ideas on a topic are more important than "correctness." This attitude does not translate to "anything goes." Correctness does have a place in writing, but correcting the way the students write something cannot precede their working out what it is they want to write.

An attitude that ignores correctness in early drafts also lets students view their text as something changeable. They are thus encouraged not to think of the first draft of a paper as the final and only draft; instead, they are prompted to see their papers as something that can be "repaired and changed" at any time.

Mina Shaughnessy, one of the groundbreaking researchers on error, also points out that an attitude of correctness too early in a drafting sequence can actually subvert a student's own grammatical intuitions. Shaughnessy writes: "If a writer is not worried about being wrong, if he sees a chance for repairing and perfecting his copy at a later point before anyone sees it, he will be free to think about what he means and not worry so much about the way he is saying things, a worry that almost inevitable cuts him off from his best grammatical intuitions" (Errors and Expectations 79).

Although Shaughnessy mentions that a student can perfect a paper "before anyone sees it," this does not mean that teachers cannot help students manage their errors better, or intervene at an appropriate point in the drafting process and comment on error. There are several ways of approaching topics of grammatical correctness in a classroom when the student has reached the appropriate place in the drafting process. Most of these methods require little classroom time to implement. Before discussing these methods, however, let us turn to the type of error that will probably not disappear as a student refines his or her paper. These are the errors caused by rules the student has internalized at some point during his or her life. We refer to these rules as "grammar baggage" because every writer has his or her own internalized "bag" of grammar rules internalized; some are accurate, and some are not.

Grammar Baggage, or Internalized Rules:
When our students make numerous punctuation errors, it is easy to assume that they are being careless or ignorant of convention. While many students are poor proofreaders and may need instruction on how to locate their own errors with more accuracy, it is just as probable that the student has a reason, or a "logic" behind the errors in his paper. Students are not "blank slates" about punctuation (or anything else) when they enter our classroom. Many times a student may be making an error consistently not because she or he does not have a reason or a rule in his or her mind, but because the rule she or he has internalized does not apply to the situation in question. In example 1 we see a student applying an erroneous rule that has been internalized.

> Example 1: Even though I really wanted to go, I couldn't because I needed a break to sleep as long as possible, the sleep helped a lot.

Here, the student uses two commas, one correctly and one incorrectly, but if

we examine the example closely, we can see that the use of commas is consistent. Many students have internalized the rule of putting a comma every place you would pause when reading the sentence aloud. In both cases above, the student has correctly noted a pause, but in doing so has created a run-on in the second instance. The student's "commas when you pause rule" will serve him or her accurately about 75 % of the time, but when this rule contradicts another, she or he will make an error.

We can discern a similar logic in examples 2 and 3. Both of these examples come from the same paper, separated by two error-free pages.

> Example 2: When he reaches California he must take possession of the talisman; which is a crystal ball alive with magical powers. He travels in this world and another, the territories, which is a place you get to by just wishing you were there; sort of like a Wizard of Oz deal.

> Example 3: One of the things King is famous for is description; at least in my opinion.

In all three of these sentences, the student misuses semicolons, but if we look closely, we can see a pattern to the semicolon errors. In each case, the student uses a semicolon to attach additional information that is either parenthetical or nonessential. The writer correctly intuits the need for some punctuation mark to separate these clauses and phrases from the main sentence; his or her only error is in choosing a semicolon rather than a comma. Yet, the student has obviously internalized a rule to use a semicolon in these instances because it is done so consistently.

Another example of an internalized punctuation rule can be seen with a student who repeatedly misplaced apostrophes when forming contractions, writing the following: "must'nt", "should'nt", "did'nt", and so on. When the instructor discussed this error with the student, the student said she thought the apostrophe was used to indicate where the two words join rather than that the apostrophe stood in for the omitted letters. Once the student was able to "unlearn" this rule and learn the correct one, her apostrophe errors in forming contractions disappeared.

Logics, or patterns of error, may surface not only with punctuation but with other "grammatical" concerns as well. In Examples 4 & 5, we see a student struggling with pronoun agreement:

Example 4: When soccer players make mistakes, it is usually easy to assume that he or she doesn't practice enough, but this is not always the case.

Example 5: The team gave their decision.

Both these examples come from the same paper, but the student's pronoun agrees with "team" in Example 5, but in Example 4, she or he moves from the plural "players" to the singular "he or she. " The logic behind this error may be that the student assumes that when people do things as a group, the pronoun should be plural, but when they do things individually, like practice, that the pronoun should be singular. This would be a correct assumption had the student not begun the sentence as if the group "collectively" made mistakes.

If we recognize the logic behind "grammar baggage" mistakes, it becomes easier to intervene and help the student gain control over their errors. Part of this task is to teach editing and proofreading strategies, strategies which will serve as our next focus.

What Not to Do

There are many ways of approaching grammar and punctuation with students, some of which are more successful than others. A brief list of the common fallacies in grammar instruction starts this discussion, followed by more successful approaches to this complex issue.

The Fallacy of Teaching Grammar Out of Context:
When we speak of "teaching" grammar, most of us hearken back to our early English classes, perhaps all the way back to high school, and we instantly recall reams of exercises in grammar workbooks. Because this is the way that many of us were taught, it is easy to assume that this is the only, or the best way to teach grammar. Yet constant repetition of exercises, memorizing parts of speech, or diagramming sentences are all methods that teach grammar out of context. Research studies, some conducted as early as the 1920s, have repeatedly shown that teaching grammar in this way does not carry over to a student's writing. Many students can perform perfectly on a sentence fragment worksheet, for example, and still write fragments in their papers. Although grammar and punctuation continue to be taught in this way in many high

schools, this method has been proven time and time again not to help students write. It remains a pedagogical tool more because of the inclination to "teach as I was taught" than because of any acceptable basis in scholarship or research.

The Fallacy of Correction:
Another assumption that many of us may have carried over from our own education is the fallacy of correction. Many people still believe that correcting errors for students on their papers will lead them to make fewer errors on the next paper. However, research has shown that students tend to ignore our corrections or not recognize why it was that their formation was wrong. Although there are other ways of responding to error, this fallacy persists because of the common misconception that correction is a teaching strategy. Unless an explanation or a call for the student to apply this correction in another context accompanies a correction, then it functions only as an evaluative tool, not a pedagogical one.

Teaching Strategies-Some Successful Ways of Teaching Grammar and Punctuation

Searching for Error Patterns - The Necessary Precursor to Almost All Error Instruction:
Although a student may make many errors in one paper, we must be cautious not to try and address all the problems at one time. Not only would this overwhelm the student, but it would also reduce the effectiveness of the instruction. For this reason, it is useful to examine a student's text closely for the types of errors he or she is making and pinpoint the areas of concern that seem most pervasive.

For example, a student may make 20 comma errors in a 3-page paper, yet it might not be possible to deal with all these errors in one shot. We need first to look at the paper and see in what instances he or she is misusing commas. When we look at the paper, we might discover that in 10 of these 20 instances he or she has joined two sentences with a comma. In the other 10 instances, he or she has used a comma before an "and," even though neither "items in a series" nor a "complete sentence" follow the "and."

Thus, by searching for patterns in this student's text we discover that there are not 20 separate errors but only two. We might then decide to segment the instruction and deal with the run-on sentences first, since they represent a more "serious" misuse of a comma. We would still deal with the error represented in example 2, but only after the student has mastered the first error.

Although searching for error patterns takes time, it usually takes no more effort than correcting the same student's errors for him. Peer responding (discussed below) can also provide an alternative to performing an error pattern analysis ourselves.

Teaching Grammar and Punctuation through Discursive Explanations:
Students rarely make errors truly from ignorance; they usually have a reason or "logic" behind their errors. Because of this fact, one of the most useful ways of teaching grammar is to discover first what this logic is. One way of getting at this is through discursive explanations. If a student is repeatedly having problems with semicolons, as in our earlier example, one exercise is to have the student number all the semicolons in a paper. Then on a separate piece of paper, or perhaps in a journal entry, have him or her write an explanation of why he or she felt a semicolon was needed in that instance. Students may find this difficult at first, especially if they feel as if they need to sound like a grammar handbook. To allay this fear, don't require them to use any grammatical terminology. Merely ask them to explain it to themselves in terms they are comfortable with. Frequently this will produce rather creative explanations that sound like no grammatical rule we have ever heard, but remember that these explanations are not for public display; only the student needs to understand them fully.

When we receive these explanations from a student, it is now our job to look for the common pattern among them. We might then explain to the student in a conference or in writing that it is correct to assume that additional information needs to be set off, but that standard rules require us to use a comma in this instance. We would not need to explain the correct use of a semicolon unless the same student is joining sentences incorrectly. It is when we work with this error that an explanation of semicolons would be appropriate. The student's next step is to write a rule for himself or herself about the use of commas in this instance. This rule may become a part of a

running journal or notebook that can be referred to when editing.

Peer Responding:

Peer responding groups are useful not only for reactions to the content of a paper but also for comments on grammar and syntax. Rather than asking students to try and respond to everything in each other's papers, it is useful to schedule a responding day dedicated only to grammar and punctuation. (Another alternative would be to have the students make photocopies of their papers to give to members of their group so that they can then respond in writing at home. This is especially useful if your syllabus does not allow for class time for a responding group.)

In order to respond to grammar and punctuation effectively, students will need some training. Like us, their first impulse will be to correct each other's papers. Not only will this correction subvert the use of the group for instruction, but frequently the student doing the correcting may also be unfamiliar of the proper format for that sentence. A useful exercise is to have the responders underline sentences that strike them as strangely worded or punctuation marks that seem misused. In this way, the writer is given the final responsibility for determining if the specified portion is indeed an error, and if so, he is then also responsible for correcting it.

These corrections may also be worked on collaboratively. Once the students have been trained to use handbooks as reference sources, they can then help each other determine what, if any, error has been specified in order to look up the appropriate remedy in the handbook. Or, they can use each other as resources and explain the rule that might have confused the other student. Peer groups are also a useful place to use discursive explanations. After the readers have specified problem areas, the writer can then explain his or her reasons for the constructions noted. Another group meeting could follow at which time the group can provide a contrast or modification of the writer's discursive explanations. In all these scenarios, however, having the students write down their own explanations in the journal or log is a necessary follow-up and reinforcement to the group work.

Handbooks as Reference Sources:

Although handbooks may not be useful for their exercise sections, they can

serve as excellent reference sources for students. Remember, however, that most of our students have the same preconceptions of handbooks as we do--they see them in terms of exercises and assignments; therefore, it is useful to spend a short time in class or one-on-one with a student introducing them to a different use for handbooks. Usually this introduction merely includes a short explanation of how to scan a table of contents for the appropriate section or how to use the index if the students are familiar with grammatical terminology. Following these explanations with a short exercise using either their own work or a prepared text reinforces and tests their ability to use a handbook in this way. Handbooks can serve like a dictionary as a reference source for students, a place to look when unsure about where to place a comma, for example.

Emphasizing this use of handbooks, however, does not help students recognize their own errors, thus the use of handbooks needs to be accompanied by other strategies. Many instructors require the purchase of a handbook for a writing class, listing it as a required text, so that all the students will have the same resource available for group work, etc. The Writing Center can provide you with some guidelines for choosing among the numerous handbooks available or provide you with a short list of recommended handbooks to review.

Read-Aloud Strategy:
Encouraging students to read their papers aloud at home, in conference with you, or with their peer group are useful ways of teaching them to recognize some of their sentence errors. This strategy is especially useful for students writing "funny," "awkward," or "confusing" sentences. Frequently, when students read their text aloud, they realize that a sentence or phrase doesn't sound quite right. Sometimes recognizing this alone is sufficient for them to rewrite the sentence; at other times, they may recognize a problematic area but be unable to fix it. In the latter instance, it is useful for the teacher in conference or a student in the peer group to cover the text with his or her hand and ask the writer to ignore the paper and just tell him or her what the sentence means. In most cases, the student's verbal explanation will be less convoluted than the written version.

Reading Backwards:
Encouraging students to read their texts backwards is especially useful for those with spelling or missing word problems. Frequently, when we read our own texts, we "fill-in" the missing portions in our minds, failing to notice a

missing because we read in "chunks," anticipating what will come next. Very few adult readers actually read each individual word on the page. The reading backwards strategy subverts this tendency that misleads us when we are proofreading or editing. Reading backwards forces students to see each individual word, frequently allowing them to discover misspellings or missing words.

Spelling Logs:

The reading backwards strategy above, of course, assumes that students can recognize most of their own misspellings, and in many cases, they can. In the cases when they cannot, encouraging them to use a computer with a spell checker is one possible solution. Another solution would be for the students to begin a "spelling log", listing the correct form of the words they frequently misspell. Juxtaposed to the correct form would be their normal spelling of the word, as in the example below. In this way, students begin to become more aware of their "problem areas" and have an immediate reference source for those areas at their fingertips.

Some Ways of Responding to Error When Grading

When it comes time to grade a paper, it is easy for all of us to fall back on the fallacy of correction that we saw in section 3. Correcting errors when grading, however, may be our first impulse, but again we need to resist the impulse if we see evaluation as an additional teaching tool. Below are some suggestions about responding to error when grading that will help the student use evaluation as a learning tool to be applied to future tasks.

Error-Pattern Analysis:

Commenting on patterns of error is more useful than correction. In our comments, we may point the student to one or two patterns in his writing, highlighting a few examples. In this way, rather than commenting on all the errors present in the text, it is possible to hierarchize the errors for the student, designating the most problematic areas. As a follow-up, students can be asked to find other unmarked examples of this pattern and correct them, again writing the new rule in a grammar journal. Seeing the students' corrections and the new rule can help us assess whether the student is able to recognize this pattern and remedy it appropriately. If not, we now know where it is that we need to intervene. Commenting only on one or two patterns also helps students not to feel overwhelmed. Many studies have shown that students who receive papers back littered with red marks frequently react with a hopeless feeling. The sheer quantity of error that the students see marked make the possibility of ever achieving control over the errors seem impossible.

Marginal Markings:

Another method of marking error is simply to designate the line an error appears in with a check (or asterisk) in the margin. Many instructors then require their students to correct the error in the lines marked in groups using handbooks, or individually. Afterward, the students return the papers for comments on their corrections alone. This method works better with students who make fewer errors, or what is sometimes called "performance errors." In the latter case, the student's errors may be a result only of poor proofreading, and searching for the error makes him or her pay closer attention to the text than he or she may have previously. If a student makes many errors, error pattern analysis is preferred because 50 checks in a margin can overwhelm a student just as easily as a paper covered in red pen. Another option to checks in the margins of a line is to underline the specific problematic section of the text. This method is helpful if the students need more direction and guidance in their proofreading.

Some Ways to Consider Error When Assigning a Grade:
Whenever we discuss assigning a grade, we are forced to discuss hierarchies. What is most important? What was the reason for the assignment? Were the students successful? We are all familiar with these questions, but they seem to become more difficult when applied to writing, particularly when grammatical errors come in to play. As with any piece of writing, our first priority must be with the content and ideas communicated in a paper. Grammar and punctuation are a part of any writing, certainly, but unless errors interrupt the communicative ability of a text, they should not be considered primary. Some reduction of a grade based on surface features of a text (i.e., grammar and punctuation) is warranted, but it should perhaps be one of our lower criteria; it should certainly never be our first.

If we think about it in the opposite terms, we would never give a paper an "A" simply because it was error free. Considered in this light, giving a paper that represents well-formed and supported ideas an "F" only because there are errors in the paper seems equally misguided. Although this example is, of course, an exaggeration, we need to remain aware that errors frequently make us see red (as well as write in it). If we recognize this, we can try to keep our reactions in perspective. Reacting too seriously to error also sends an erroneous message to students. If we discuss in class the importance of their ideas and research and then react primarily to the correctness of their texts when grading, students will quickly view writing as an exercise in correctness rather than an act of communication. As a result, we will begin getting correct texts without any substance or original
thinking.

In this light, many instructors decide to solve the problem by instituting the split-grade solution, giving one grade for content and another for grammar. However, this method is equally problematic, perhaps even more so, because it artificially separates grammar and usage from writing when these issues are inextricably tied. Segmenting these concerns in this way gives the student an artificial representation of the writing task. The only viable solution is to grade a piece of writing as a whole and to keep our reaction to and evaluation of error in the proper perspective.

The tables below outline concepts addressed in this resource in an abbreviated form. For more suggestions on Grading Strategies, see other resources listed under this topic.