

# *Errors and expectations*

A GUIDE FOR THE TEACHER  
OF BASIC WRITING

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# I Introduction

## Background

Toward the end of the sixties and largely in response to the protests of that decade, many four-year colleges began admitting students who were not by traditional standards ready for college. The numbers of such students varied from college to college as did the commitment to the task of teaching them. In some, the numbers were token; in others, where comprehensive policies of admissions were adopted, the number threatened to "tip" freshman classes in favor of the less prepared students. For such colleges, this venture into mass education usually began abruptly, amidst the misgivings of administrators, who had to guess in the dark about the sorts of programs they ought to plan for the students they had never met, and the reluctancies of teachers, some of whom had already decided that the new students were ineducable.

It was in such an atmosphere that the boldest and earliest of these attempts to build a comprehensive system of higher education began: in the spring of 1970, the City University of New York adopted an admissions policy that guaranteed to every city resident with a high-school diploma a place in one of its eighteen tuition-free colleges (ten senior colleges and eight two-year colleges), thereby opening its doors not only to a larger population of students than it had ever had before (enrollment was to jump from 174,000 in 1969 to 266,000 in 1975) but to a wider range of students than any college had probably ever ad-

mitted or thought of admitting to its campus—academic winners and losers from the best and worst high schools in the country, the children of the lettered and the illiterate, the blue-collared, the white-collared, and the unemployed, some who could barely afford the subway fare to school and a few who came in the new cars their parents had given them as a reward for staying in New York to go to college; in short, the sons and daughters of New Yorkers, reflecting that city's intense, troubled version of America.

One of the first tasks these students faced when they arrived at college was to write a placement essay and take a reading test. Judged by the results of these tests, the young men and women who were to be known as open admissions students fell into one of three groups: (1) those who met the traditional requirements for college work, who appeared from their tests and their school performance to be competent readers and writers with enough background in the subjects they would be studying in college to be able to begin at the traditional starting points; (2) those who had survived their secondary schooling but not thrived on it, whose reading was seldom voluntary and whose writing reflected a flat competence, by no means error-free but limited more seriously by its utter predictability—its bare vocabulary, safe syntax, and plattitudinous tone, the writing of students who had learned to get by but who seemed to have found no fun nor challenge in academic tasks; (3) those who had been left so far behind the others in their formal education that they appeared to have little chance of catching up, students whose difficulties with the written language seemed of a different order from those of the other groups, as if they had come, you might say, from a different country, or at least through different schools, where even very modest standards of high-school literacy had not been met.

Of these groups, the first was clearly the group whom college teachers knew best. They were the students for whom college courses and tests had been designed and about whom studies had been made. The second group, however, was also known to them; its students resembled the academic stragglers of another era, those who had tended to end up in "bonehead English" perhaps but at least some of whom had been known to take hold at a later point in their development and go on to complete their academic work creditably. The third group contained the true outsiders. Natives, for the most part, of New York, graduates of the same public school system as the other students, they were none-

theless strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and ritual of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them. Most of them had grown up in one of New York's ethnic or racial enclaves. Many had spoken other languages or dialect at home and never successfully reconciled the worlds of home and school, a fact which by now had worked its way deep into their feeling about school and about themselves as students.

They were in college now for one reason: that their lives might be better than their parents', that the lives of their children might be better than theirs so far had been. Just how college was to accomplish these changes was not at all clear, but the faith that education was the on available route to change empowered large numbers of students who had already endured twelve years of compulsory schooling to choose to go to college when the doors of City University suddenly swung open.

Not surprisingly, the essays these students wrote during their first weeks of class stunned the teachers who read them. Nothing, it seemed short of a miracle was going to turn such students into writers. Not uncommonly, teachers announced to their supervisors (or even the students) after only a week of class that everyone was probably going to fail. These were students, they insisted, whose problems at this stage were irremediable. To make matters worse, there were no student guides, nor even suitable textbooks to turn to. Here were teachers trained to analyze the belletristic achievements of the century marooned in basic writing classrooms with adult student writers who appeared by college standards to be illiterate. Seldom had an educational venture begun so inauspiciously, the teachers unready in mind and heart to face their students, the students weighted by the disadvantages of poor training yet expected to "catch up" with the front runners in a semester or two of low-intensity instruction.

Five years have passed since that first class of open admissions students entered City University. Some of those "ineducable" students have by now been graduated; some have dropped out; some have transferred to other types of programs after having found their vocational directions; and still others remain in college, delayed because of outside jobs that eat into their college time and because of the extra time they spent at the outset developing their skills as readers and writers. The teachers who five years ago questioned the educability of these students now know of their capabilities and have themselves under-

gone many shifts in attitude and methodology since their first encounters with the new students.

Despite such advances, the territory I am calling basic writing (and that others might call remedial or developmental writing) is still very much of a frontier, unmapped, except for a scattering of impressionistic articles and a few blazed trails that individual teachers propose through their texts. And like the settlers of other frontiers, the teachers who by choice or assignment are heading to this pedagogical West are certain to be carrying many things they will not be needing, that will clog their journey as they get further on. So too they will discover the need of other things they do not have and will need to fabricate by mother wit out of whatever is at hand.

This book is intended to be a guide for that kind of teacher, and it is certain to have the shortcomings of other frontier maps, with doubtless a few rivers in the wrong place and some trails that end nowhere. Still, it is also certain to prepare the inexperienced teacher for some of the difficulties he is likely to encounter and even provide him with a better inventory of necessary supplies than he is likely to draw up on his own.<sup>1</sup>

The book is mainly an attempt to be precise about the types of difficulties to be found in basic writing (BW) papers at the outset, and beyond that, to demonstrate how the sources of those difficulties can be explained without recourse to such pedagogically empty terms as "handicapped" or "disadvantaged." I have divided this territory of difficulty into familiar teaching categories, which serve as headings for the main sections of the book: Handwriting and Punctuation, Syntax, Common Errors, Spelling, Vocabulary, and Beyond the Sentence. In each of these sections, I have tried to do three things: first, to give examples of the range of problems that occur under each category of difficulty; second, to reason about the causes of these problems; and third, to suggest ways in which a teacher might approach them.

The examples have been drawn largely from placement essays, some 4,000 of them, that were written by incoming freshmen at City College of the City University of New York over the years 1970 through 1974. To the criticism that samples written under testing situations do not

1. After having tried various ways of circumventing the use of the masculine pronoun in situations where women teachers and students might easily outnumber men, I have settled for the convention, but I regret that the language resists my meaning in this important respect. When the reader sees *he*, I can only hope *she* will also be there.

represent the true competence of writers, I can only answer that where writers are as unskilled as the student writers we are considering, the conditions of writing seem to matter less than they do for more advanced writers. Thus the initial essays of this group proved to be highly accurate guides to placement. Indeed, it was not unusual to find students at this level doing better on their test essays than on outside assignments.

The reader will quickly—perhaps even impatiently—note that I have tended to use more examples of individual difficulties than he needs in order to identify the sort of problem I am discussing. I have done this in part to suggest that the problem I am naming occurs in a variety of contexts but also because I see a value to being immersed in examples. It deepens one's sense of pattern and thereby develops the ability to make swift assessments and classifications of writing difficulties. Should the reader feel no need for this immersion, however, he will be able to follow my line of analysis without heeding all the examples.

In reasoning about the causes of the various difficulties BW students have as writers, I have drawn from three resources: my students and the explanations they have given me, directly and indirectly, of their difficulties with written English; my colleagues, who have shared their insights with me over the years in many different settings, both formal and informal; and my own experience as someone who writes and therefore understands the pressures and peculiarities of that behavior.

From these resources, I have reached the persuasion that underlies this book—namely, that BW students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes. These they make aplenty and for such a variety of reasons that the inexperienced teacher is almost certain to see nothing but a chaos of error when he first encounters their papers. Yet a closer look will reveal very little that is random or "illogical" in what they have written. And the keys to their development as writers often lie hidden in the very features of their writing that English teachers have been trained to brush aside with a marginal code letter or a scribbled injunction to "Proofread!" Such strategies ram at the doors of their incompetence while the keys that would open them lie in view. This is not to say that learning to write as a young adult does not involve hard work, for certainly it does, but only that the

work must be informed by an understanding not only of what is missing or awry but of why this is so. In each chapter, I will therefore be trying to tease out the reasons that lie behind the problems I have illustrated.

My suggestions for helping students overcome these problems are of several sorts. Sometimes I offer actual lessons; sometimes I recommend a method or strategy, such as sentence-combining or free writing, that is already (or ought to be) part of a teacher's technology; and at others, I merely urge a fresh perspective on an old problem. The teacher therefore who is searching for a tightly and fully structured writing program will not find it here. This book is concerned with the orientations and perceptions of teachers in relation to a specific population of student writers. It assumes that programs are not the answers to the learning problems of students but that teachers are and that, indeed, good teachers create good programs, that the best programs are developed *in situ*, in response to the needs of individual student populations and as reflections of the particular histories and resources of individual colleges. Thus, while I have sketched out a course plan in my final chapter which arranges the pieces of my analysis into teaching order, I do not expect anyone to accept it as a prototype. It is, let us say, a tried way of beginning a writing apprenticeship.

The course plan also serves to suggest the proportion of time that would be given in class to the goal of achieving correct form. Without this indication, the reader is certain to conclude that the "basic" of basic writing is not how to write but how to be right, for five of the book's eight chapters are devoted to the errors students make. This attention to error is certain to raise questions—both pedagogical and political—in the minds of many teachers. Why, some will ask, do English teachers need to be told so much about errors? Isn't their concern with error already a kind of malignancy? Ought we not to dwell instead upon the options writers have rather than the constraints they must work under if they are to be read without prejudice?

There is a short answer to these questions—namely that the proportion of time I spend analyzing errors does not reflect the proportion of time a teacher should spend teaching students how to avoid them. But since teachers' preconceptions about errors are frequently at the center of their misconceptions about BW students, I have no choice but to dwell on errors. The long answer to these questions leads us into more controversial territory. Yet it is important, before this exploration of

student writing begins, that I explain more fully why error figures so importantly in this book.

### Some views on error

For the BW student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone. The spoken language, looping back and forth between speakers, offering chances for groping and backing up and even hiding, leaving room for the language of hands and faces, of pitch and pauses, is generous and inviting. Next to this rich orchestration, writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws.

By the time he reaches college, the BW student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer. He is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes. He can usually think of little else while he is writing. But he doesn't know what to do about it. Writing puts him on a line, and he doesn't want to be there. For every three hundred words he writes, he is likely to use from ten to thirty forms that the academic reader regards as serious errors. Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled. The following passage illustrates the disintegration of one such writer:<sup>2</sup>

Start 1

Seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to infant.

Start 2

To a infant seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to infl

Start 3

I agree that seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to a infants. A infants heres a strange sound such as work mother, he than acc

2. Unless otherwise indicated, the writers of sample passages are native to the United States, where they have had from twelve to thirteen years of public schooling, mostly in New York City. The topics of placement essays, from which many of the samples come, are given in the Appendix. In this essay, an initial class essay, the student was attempting to contrast the ways in which infants and adults see the world. Each of the "starts" in the present sample was crossed out in the original.

## Start 4

I agree that child is more sensitive to beauty, because its all so new to him and he apprec

## Start 5

The main point is that a child is more sensitive to beauty than there parents, because its the child a infant can only express it feeling with reactions,

## Start 6

I agree a child is more sensitive to seeing and hearing than his parent, because its also new to him and more appreciate. His

## Start 7

I agree that seeing and hearing have a different quality for infants than grownup, because when infants comes aware of a sound and can associate it with the object, he is indefeiyng and the parents acknowledge to to this

## Start 8

I agree and disagree that seeing and hearing have a different quality for infants than for grownups, because to see and hear for infants its all so new and mor appreciate, but I also feel that a child parent appreciate the sharing

## Start 9

I disagree I feel that it has the same quality to

## Start 10

I disagree I fell that seeig and hearing has the same quality to both infants and parents. Hearing and seeing is such a great quality to infants and parents, and they both appreciate, just because there aren't that many panterers or musicians around dosen't mean that infants are more sensitive to beautiful that there parents.

So absolute is the importance of error in the minds of many writers that "good writing" to them means "correct writing," nothing more. "As long as I can remember," writes a student, "I wanted to be an English teacher. I know it is hard, keeping verbs in their right place, s's when they should be, etc., but one day I will make them part of me."

Much about the "remedial" situation encourages this obsession with error. First, there is the reality of academia, the fact that most college teachers have little tolerance for the kinds of errors BW students make, that they perceive certain types of errors as indicators of ineducability, and that they have the power of the F. Second there is the urgency of the students to meet their teachers' criteria, even to request more of the

prescriptive teaching they have had before in the hope that this time it might "take." Third, there is the awareness of the teacher and administrator that remedial programs are likely to be evaluated (and budgeted) according to the speed with which they produce correct writers, correctness being a highly measurable feature of acceptable writing.

Teachers respond differently to these realities. Some rebel against the idea of error itself. All linguistic forms, they argue, are finally arbitrary. The spelling of a word, the inflectional systems that carry or reinforce certain kinds of information in sentences—these are merely conventions that differ from language to language and from dialect to dialect. And because the forms of language are arbitrary, the reasoning goes, they are not obligatory, not, at least, in those situations where variant forms can be understood by a reader or where the imposition of new forms undermines the writer's pride or confidence in his native language or vernacular.

Such a view excludes many forms from the province of "error." Certainly it leaves no room for those refinements of usage that have come to be associated with writing handbooks—who-whom and that-which distinctions, the possessive form with the genitive, the split infinitive, etc. Beyond this, it would exclude variant grammatical forms and syntactical patterns that originate in varieties of English that have long been spoken but only recently written, and then only in folk and imaginative literature. These forms would include double negatives, regularized irregular verbs (grow, grewed, growed), zero inflections in redundant situations (e.g., the omission of the plural s in *ten jobs* because plurality is already indicated by the number), and various orthographic accommodations to vernacular forms.

When one considers the damage that has been done to students in the name of correct writing, this effort to redefine error so as to exclude most of the forms that give students trouble in school and to assert the legitimacy of other kinds of English is understandable. Doubtless it is part of a much vaster thrust within this society not only to reduce the penalties for being culturally different but to be enriched by that diversity.

Nonetheless, the teacher who faces a class of writers who have acquired but a rudimentary control of the skill discovers that the issue of error is much more complex and troubling than it seems in theory. He finds, for example, that the errors his students make cannot be

neatly traced to one particular source, namely, the habitual preference of a vernacular form over a standard form. Instead he finds evidence of a number of interacting influences: the generally humiliating encounter with school language, which produces ambivalent feelings about mastery, persuading the child on the one hand that he cannot learn to read and write and on the other that he has to; the pleasures of peer and neighborhood talk, where language flows most naturally; the contagion of the media, those hours of TV and radio and movies and ads where standard forms blend with all that is alluring in the society.

The writing that emerges from these experiences bears traces of the different pressures and codes and confusions that have gone to make up "English" for the BW student. At times variant and standard forms mix, as if students had half-learned two inflectional systems; hypercorrected forms that belong to no system jut out in unexpected places; idiosyncratic schemes of punctuation and spelling substitute for systems that were never learned and possibly never taught; evasive circumlocutions, syntactical derailments, timid script, and near-guesses fog the meaning, if any remains after the student has thus spent himself on the sheer mechanics of getting something down on paper. One senses the struggle to fashion out of the fragments of past instruction a system that will relieve the writer of the task of deciding what to do in each instance where alternative forms or conventions stick in the mind. But the task seems too demanding and the rewards too stingy for someone who can step out of a classroom and in a moment be in the thick of conversation with friends.

Confusion, rather than conflict, seems to paralyze the writer at this level. Language learners at any level appear to seek out, either consciously or unconsciously, the underlying patterns that govern the language they are learning. They are pressed by their language-learning faculties to increase the degree of predictability and efficiency in their use of language. This is less a choice they make than an urge they have to move across the territory of language as if they had a map and not as if they were being forced to make their way across a mine field. What has been so damaging about the experience of BW students with written English is that it has been so confusing, and worse, that they have become resigned to this confusion, to not knowing, to the substitution of protective tactics or private systems or makeshift strategies for genuine mastery of written English in any form. Most damaging of all, they have lost confidence in the very faculties that serve all language

learners: their ability to distinguish between essential and redundant features of a language left them logical but wrong; their ability to draw analogies between what they knew of language when they began school and what they had to learn produced mistakes; and such was the quality of their instruction that no one saw the intelligence of their mistakes or thought to harness that intelligence in the service of learning.

There is no easy or quick way to undo this damage. The absence of error, it is true, does not count much toward good writing, yet the pile-up of errors that characterizes BW papers reflects more difficulty with written English than the term "error" is likely to imply. To try to persuade a student who makes these errors that the problems with his writing are all on the outside, or that he has no problems, may well be to perpetuate his confusion and deny him the ultimate freedom of deciding how and when and where he will use which language. For him, error is more than a mishap; it is a barrier that keeps him not only from writing something in formal English but from having something to write. In any event, students themselves are uneasy about encouragement to ignore the problem of error, often interpreting them as evasions of the hard work that lies before teachers and students if the craft of writing is ever to be mastered. Indeed, many students still insist, despite the miseries of their earlier encounters with grammar and despite the reluctance of teachers who have lost confidence in the power of grammatical study to affect writing, that they need more prescriptive grammar. Perhaps, as some would say, the propaganda of a long line of grammar teachers "took." But it may also be that grammar still symbolizes for some students one last chance to understand what is going on with written language so that they can control it rather than be controlled by it.

There is another reason why the phenomenon of error cannot be ignored at this level. It has to do with the writer's relationship to his audience, with what might be called the economics of energy in the writing situation. Although speakers and listeners, writers and readers, are in one sense engaged in a cooperative effort to understand one another, they are also in conflict over the amount of effort each will expend on the other. That is, the speaker or writer wants to say what he has to say with as little energy as possible and the listener or reader wants to understand with as little energy as possible. In a speech situation, the speaker has ways of encouraging or pressing for more energy than the listener might initially want to give. He can, for example, use attention-

given  
+  
cont.

getting gestures or grimaces, or he can play upon the social responsiveness of his listener; the listener, in turn, can query or quiz or withhold his nods until he has received the "goods" he requires from the speaker.

Nothing like this open bargaining can go on in the writing situation, where the writer cannot keep an eye on his reader nor depend upon anything except words on a page to get him his due of attention. Thus anything that facilitates the transfer of his meaning is important in this tight economy of energy. Great writers, it is true, have drawn deeply upon the energies of readers, holding them through pages of exasperating density or withholding from them conventional word order or vocabulary or punctuation in order to refresh the language or create new perceptions; but even here the reader expects his investment to pay off in intellectual or emotional enrichment. He is, after all, a buyer in a buyer's market.

Errors, however, are unintentional and unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reader. They introduce in accidental ways alternative forms in spots where usage has stabilized a particular form (as is now true in spelling, for example, or in the familiar albeit "illogical" inflections). They demand energy without giving any return in meaning; they shift the reader's attention from where he is going (meaning) to how he is getting there (code). In a better world, it is true, readers might be more generous with their energies, pausing to divine the meaning of a writer or mentally to edit the errors out of his text without expecting to be rewarded for their efforts, but it would be foolhardy to bank on that kind of persistence except perhaps in English teachers or good friends. (That errors carry messages which writers can't afford to send is demonstrated by the amount of energy and money individuals, business firms, publishing houses, etc., spend on error removal, whether by correcting fluids, erasers, scrapped paper, or proofreaders.)

All codes become codes by doing some things regularly and not others, and it is not so much the ultimate logic of these regularities that makes them obligatory but rather the fact that, logical or no, they have become habitual to those who communicate within that code. Thus the fact that in the general dialect the *-s* in *ten jobs* is a redundant form merely repeating what a numerical adjective has already established does not reduce the general reader's pause over *ten job*. The truth is that even slight departures from a code cost the writer something, in whatever system he happens to be communicating, and given the hard

bargain he must drive with his reader, he usually cannot afford many of them.

This is not to say, of course, that the boundaries of error do not shift nor to suggest that certain battles along those borderlines are not worth waging. English has been robustly inventing itself for centuries—stretching and reshaping and enriching itself with every language and dialect it has encountered. Ironically, some of the very irregularities that students struggle with today are there because at some point along the way the English language yielded to another way of saying something.

But when we move out of the centuries and into Monday morning, into the life of the young man or woman sitting in a BW class, our linguistic contemplations are likely to hover over a more immediate reality—namely, the fact that a person who does not control the dominant code of literacy in a society that generates more writing than any society in history is likely to be pitched against more obstacles than are apparent to those who have already mastered that code. From such a vantage point, one feels the deep conserving pull of language, the force that has preserved variant dialects of English as well as the general dialect of literacy, and one knows that errors matter, knows further that a teacher who would work with BW students might well begin by trying to understand the logic of their mistakes in order to determine at what point or points along the developmental path error should or can become a subject for instruction. What I hope will emerge from this exploration into error is not a new way of sectioning off students' problems with writing but rather a readiness to look at these problems in a way that does not ignore the linguistic sophistication of the students nor yet underestimate the complexity of the task they face as they set about learning to write for college.



ing to clear them completely from a student's writing before moving on to other things.

They are errors that usually surprise or even alarm a college teacher the first time he sees them in a group of freshman themes, for they differ not simply in frequency but in type from the errors he is prepared to find in freshman writing (i.e., the familiar verb form errors, tense switches across sentences, pronoun case, dangling modifiers, broken parallels, etc.). Indeed, unless the teacher has had some experience teaching English to the foreign-born, it may be some time before it occurs to him that the errors he is encountering, while they may not disturb the sense of a message deeply, seem often to him to cut across the "Englishness" of English, producing deviant forms in spots where the so-called "native" speaker rarely seems to err—in, for example, the inflection of regular verbs (especially those endings involving the letters -s and -ed) and of nouns (both with the plural and possessive forms), the basic verb combinations in tense formation, the use of the article, and even the two-part nature (subject-verb) of predication in formal English.

Linguists, in their studies of the origins and features of Black English Vernacular, have greatly increased our understanding of the sources of such errors among native-born black students. What has not been noted as often, however, is the extent to which errors of this type *also* show up among non-black students who are native Americans with twelve years of schooling but who have grown up under the influence of another language or dialect besides formal English. Here, for example, are passages written by three native-born Americans who had twelve years of school in New York City: the first a Jewish student whose mother tongue was Yiddish, the second an Irish-American student, and the third a Chinese-American student:

It is my feeling that is worthwhile for a young person to go to college for a degree. College is not only suppose to gave a high paying job, but well rounded education and understanding of the fine thing in the life. For young person to be with its peers, it gives better understanding people.

My parent were both born in a small town in Ireland, which far better or worse was untouch by modern science. This was not a hinderance to any of the mother at that time. They were all experience with the proper knowledge of childbirth. One thing that was very influenced to my life occur the man and woman decided to marry.

## 4 Common errors

When a writer breaks the rules of word order that govern the English sentence, he usually disturbs the reader at a deep level, forcing him to re-cast mentally the deviant sentence before he can proceed to the next one. As we saw in the last chapter, however, the source of such ungrammaticality among the student writers we are considering is often located at what might be called the surface of their performance—in their inexperience with writing rather than with the language itself. On the other hand, the grammatically less important errors these students frequently make in their efforts to write formal English, errors that do not seriously impair meaning, are often rooted in language habits and systems that go back to their childhoods and continue, despite years of formal instruction, to influence their performance as adult writers.

These errors, since they usually affect ordinary features of written English, are easy to spot and, for English teachers, almost irresistible to correct. Yet despite the amount of time teachers have spent doing this, the errors cling—often remaining with the writer long after more important difficulties have disappeared. The stubbornness of these problems and the economics of getting rid of them (the cost of the letter in remedial writing programs, for example, would be worth exploring) raise questions about the nature of the errors and the wisdom of try-

Engineer and mechanic are rated fourth and fifth. When they should be rated in first and second because engineers helps to build better machine and car and other thing and mechanics are their to repairs all these new equipment.

Such writers, however different their linguistic backgrounds, are clearly colliding with many of the same stubborn contours of formal English (note in the above example, the common difficulties with -ed and -s) that are also troublesome to students learning English as a second language. At the same time, however, the native-born students differ from the second-language students in significant ways: they have usually experienced little or no success with written English in school, which is often not so of foreign-born students in relation to their native languages; they have not identified the real reasons for their lack of success in writing, having usually perceived themselves (and having been perceived by their teachers as well) as native speakers of English who for some reason use "bad" English; and finally, perhaps most importantly, they have been functioning in English for years, understanding the English of people in their communities and being understood by them in the full range of situations that give rise to speech, and managing, although usually in more restricted or restricting ways, to hold jobs, get diplomas, and talk with a variety of "outsiders." At a disadvantage primarily as writers or readers, such students seem at times to be revealing through their writing grammatical problems with formal English that are no longer even apparent in their classroom speech. One must of course be alert to the possibility that writing, by making the language of the student visible rather than audible, exposes what might otherwise be hidden by phonetic blurring and the tendency of listeners to hear what is not pronounced—the *-ed*, for example, in *supposed to* or the possessive *s* in *my girl friend's song*.

If the students whose writing we are considering do indeed have this quasi-foreign relationship to the language they are learning to write, the teacher is in the position, first, of having to teach features of English he has seldom had to think about, features whose complexity and irregularity or arbitrariness have been masked by habit, and second, of having to search out the logic of his students' preferences for erroneous forms. Here he will find that much of value can be extrapolated from linguists' studies of the speech of children and younger adults and from contrastive studies of English and relevant source languages. Still, the student from the kind of language background we are describing who

has finished high school and become a freshman in college can be expected to have already made many shifts in the direction of standard English, however unsatisfactory his skills might seem to an English teacher, and a list of his difficulties with written English will not usually include all the contrasting features from his first language. Indeed, it may omit some of the most obvious characteristics of the source language: negative concord (as in the double negative of "It won't make no difference"), for example, is not a high-frequency error in the writing of BW students even though it is a common feature in BEV, Spanish, and other European languages represented in the population. A highly stigmatized form, it is apparently replaced much earlier than other dialect forms by the standard form when the student finds himself in a formal speech situation.

It is difficult to know, of course, how many errors, while not directly attributable to first-language interference, are nonetheless an indirect result of the students' uneasiness with or misunderstanding of specific features of the formal code. In at least one study of the dialect mixture among a remedial group of City College freshmen, there was found to be a high correlation between the scores on a test designed to elicit non-standard features and placement in the first level of remediation even though these non-standard features did not appear in the students' placement compositions, which were designated "remedial" for other reasons.<sup>1</sup> Either they had learned the standard forms or they had learned to avoid using the non-standard forms in certain situations.

Even after we subtract, however, for the disappearance of certain features of the first language and the masking of others, we are left with a sizable list of erroneous forms that reflect more reason than randomness once we are sensitive to the complex and even ingenious ways in which people acquire second languages or dialects. It is the purpose of this chapter to identify the most common of these errors, suggesting wherever possible the logic behind them, and to recommend ways of helping a student recognize and correct them.

## Verbs

Verbs probably create more difficulty for writers at this stage than any other part of the grammatical system. This is not surprising when one

1. Daisy Crystal, "Dialect Mixture and Sorting Out the Concept of Freshman Remediation," *The Florida FL Reporter* (Spring/Fall, 1972).

semantically appropriate to the statement he is making. Students whose mother tongues either do not have these features or have alternative ways of creating tense distinctions or have the features in some contexts and not in others can be expected to have difficulty remembering them or believing that they are important in getting their meaning across. This is especially true where the unlearned form serves no semantic purpose in standard English—that is, where it is redundant.

The letter *-s* in the third-person singular present tense is the best example of such a redundancy. Except for the inflections that indicate number in the first and third persons indicative in the present and past tense of *to be*, this letter is the only inflection that survives an older system which distinguished number in all tenses and moods. Uniformly called for with all verbs in the third-person singular present indicative, it would seem to be an easy inflection to remember, despite its anomalous role in the present verb system. Yet the letter *-s* will simply not stick in the minds or habits of a wide range of students. One can only conclude, when intelligent people have such difficulty mastering a "simple" feature of a language, that the feature is not simple.

Most BW students partially control the *-s* form, but their use of it is not habitual, and with certain words it can be habitually absent—particularly with words like *makes*, *finds*, or *expects*, where the two final consonants are both voiced or both voiceless. Thus in the sentence

They do [what] *pleases* them which *make* life great.

the writer has added the *-s* inflection where there is no consonant cluster but has omitted it where there is.

However, the problem is clearly more than a phonological one for most students, as is often illustrated by the presence of the plural *-s* for nouns and the absence of the *-s* for verbs in the same sentence.

- The boy hear *birds*. The boy's father want to show other things besides birds. It good that the boy like birds.
- There is alot of things a baby see differently from a grownup.
- The adult feel it is good that the child is taking an interest in nature for future accomplishments.

At least two other reasons for the *-s* difficulty must be added to the phonological: that the *-s* serves no purpose, the number of the subject already being indicated by the subject itself or by a limiting adjective; and that the stem form of the verb often appears after a third-person

considers the many ways in which verbs can go wrong in formal English. The most common verb, *to be*, has eight forms, five of them bearing no resemblance to the stem, and one of them (*was*, *were*) requiring a change of form to indicate number in the past tense, the only such concord in the system. This key verb functions not only as a main verb in many sentences but also as an auxiliary verb in the progressive tense and in passive constructions. Like *to be*, the verb *to do*, which serves not only as an important main verb but as the key word in forming questions with most finite verbs, is formed irregularly. Then there are all the other irregular verbs of English—the oldest verbs of the language—whose "regularities" have been rubbed off by the centuries.

But even the "regularities" can be troublesome to the BW student. The inflections of the "regular" verbs (*-ed*, *-d*, *-t*) are easily lost in speech, especially where a speaker's mother tongue has given him no or limited experience with such an inflection. Add to this already bewildering assortment the periphrastic forms required to indicate tense (and the complex interrelationships of tense within and between sentences), and one marvels at even the partial mastery of the formal verb system that students from other language backgrounds demonstrate.

As English teachers know, the irregularities of verbs and the fine discriminations made possible through the tense system pose difficulties for so-called native speakers of standard English. There is probably not a college handbook in print that does not list the parts of the main irregular verbs or attempt, once again, to distinguish between *lie* and *lay*, *rise* and *raise*, or *sit* and *set*, or reiterate the distinctions between tenses and devise exercises for avoiding illogical tense shifts. Such books, however, are less likely to take note of the kinds of verb problems BW students run into in their efforts to master formal English. "Regular verbs," writes the author of one handbook, "give no trouble to anyone." The teacher of BW students needs but one set of themes to discover otherwise.

Problems distinctive to this group arise in three general areas: inflections, periphrasis, and time relationships. These are overlapping areas, yet the operations involved in each of them are different. With inflection, the writer's attention is on the word, usually the end of the word; with phrasal verbs, the writer must concern himself not only with the ends of words but with words that precede the main verb and are themselves often inflected; with time and mood relationships the writer has to make certain that the forms he is using are logically related and

subject in contexts that are difficult for a learner to distinguish from the third-person present indicative. The first reason suggests why students have so little motivation to master the form, and the second reason suggests why they have so much difficulty mastering it even when they try. For while the rule for adding *-s* to the verb stem is without exception, there are conditions that must exist *before* the rule can be applied—namely, that the subject be a certain person and number and that the predication be in a certain mood and tense. Unless the student can make these abstract discriminations, he is likely to be confused by the many occurrences of the stem form of the verb after third-person-singular subjects, a confusion that is reinforced by the tendency of teachers to stress the third-person-singular condition for the rule but to ignore the fact that the learner often *hears* third-person-singular subjects followed by stem-form verbs. He hears this most commonly in questions that begin with *does*, where the *-s* form *precedes* the subject and the stem follows the subject:

Does *he want* a course in biology?

A somewhat similar confusion can result from questions that begin with modal verbs or even in statements using modal verbs:

Can *she run* as fast as her brother?  
*She can run* faster.

These verbs are in themselves difficult for many students to "fit" into the verb system as it is usually presented to them. The verbs do not carry time-meaning nor do they combine with verbs so as to indicate past time, as other auxiliaries do. They may therefore seem to the student to meet the requirement for present tense of the *-s* rule. The following student sentence suggests this kind of confusion:

*He can make* up his own mind on what *he want* out of life.

Add to this the probability that *can* in spoken sentences such as "She can run faster" is likely to be unstressed to the point of becoming attached to the subject as a contraction (*shé-cu' rún fástēr*) and therefore to be perceived as analogous to *she run faster*. There are many other situations in which the student might perceive a third-person-singular subject as being linked to a present-tense verb. In the sentence

She can do everything but smile.

the student is likely to hear a connection between *she* and *smile*. And

how is he to explain a contradiction such as the following, where the non-finite nature of the second verb is masked by the absence of the infinitive signal (*to*), making it appear to the student that the stem form is acceptable with a singular third-person subject:

She makes the student laugh.

Without even considering the semantic complication of having to use *-s* to indicate plurality with nouns and singularity with certain verbs, we begin to see the difficulties this "simple" inflection poses for students who are not in the habit of using it.

The *-ed* inflection raises similar difficulties: it is often redundant (although not always); phonetically it often disappears (as in *walked downtown, he locked the door, used to go*); and it is not highly predictable, being the regular way of indicating past tense or forming a past participle in a verb system that relies heavily on a relatively small number of irregular verbs. In addition, it is required in a variety of grammatical settings—in past, present perfect, and past perfect tenses (*married, has married, had married*); in a variety of passive structures, including finite verb forms (*he is married, he has been married, he will have been married, etc.*) and passive infinitive phrases (*to be married, to have been married, etc.*); in attributive positions in noun phrases (*the married man*); and in both predicative adjunct positions (*The man is married* and *Married, the man now lives in the suburbs*).

For a small number of writers at this level, the *-ed* inflection is rejected in almost every situation:

When he was finish  I return  to find out why my combatants has left me like that. I ask  them all why and they all had the same answer. Their were scare . I would has been scare  myself.

For most writers, however, the *-ed* is more likely to appear in some situations than in others. Although it is a form in flux among these writers, it is stabilized (in writing) in the direction of the standard form wherever the main verb is carrying a simple narrative line. But it is frequently rejected in situations where auxiliary verbs precede the main verb (especially in passive constructions) or where, through passive transformations, the verb has become an adjective:

With perfect tense

There are many students who *have drop* out of high school.

- I will like to be a person that *have* study more than high school cours.
- I've *experience* it myself.

*With passive voice*

- One should not *be force* to go.
- He *wasn't train* for a job. He *was train* to go on to college.
- Stenographers soon will *be replace* by speedwriting.
- The jobs that are going to *be demand* you have only *been train*.

*With past participle as adjective*

- It has to be of a strong and *determine* character.
- They are not *qualify* students for college.
- He was a *frighten* man.
- They are looking for college *train* jobs.

In teaching the use of inflections such as *-s* or *-ed*, teachers tend to concentrate on those situations where the inflections are required, even though the student is often just as troubled by situations where they are *not* required. The ability to think analogically is central to language-learning, but it can also multiply errors in those situations where the rule has exceptions and the analogy therefore breaks down. Thus a student who has learned that

auxiliary + regular verb stem → *-ed*  
(have) (walk) (have walked)

might reason that

can + walk → can walked

or the student who has learned

You study today. You studied yesterday.

may decide that he should also write

Do you study math every day? Did you studied math every day?

unless he has learned that certain auxiliaries combine with the stem form—the future and modal auxiliaries (*shall, will, would, could, may, can, must, etc.*). And here spoken English may often blur the distinction, since familiar modal auxiliaries like *could* or *must* frequently contract with *have* in such a way as to slight the *have* and stress the juxtaposition of auxiliary and inflected verb (*must've walked, could've danced*). As the sentences below suggest, however, not all of these erroneous *-ed* inflections have phonological explanations. Rather, they seem to reflect analogical thinking that simply happens not to work in formal English:

- We can always *used* it in another field.
- Machines can easily *performed* many manual labors.
- Children *will listened* to the parents to a certain extend.
- If you look sometime at the statistics *you'll decided* not to go to college.
- People *would received* the smallest salary.
- Quite a few college grads have been out of work because the jobs that they *would liked* to do was not in demand.
- A person *shouldn't jeopardized* his or her changes of starting right.
- My mother made him stand by me *should I needed* help.

When learners move into uncertain territory, they tend to go by the "rules," even where the rules lead them to produce forms that sound completely wrong. Their intuitions having proved wrong in so many instances, they may even conclude that "sounding wrong" is a sign of being right. Yet without the help of their intuitions they must depend upon rules that rarely if ever cover all the situations they are likely to create in their natural use of the language. Thus one can expect many errors to crop up with those forms that are linguistically too mercurial to be held by work-a-day rules.

The infinitive is such a form. Distinguished by the marker *to* in some instances, it can also appear without it in a variety of situations—with future and modal auxiliaries, with *do* and *did*, with sentences where it is an objective complement (*I watched her go*) or where it follows certain words (*He does nothing but study*). There are, furthermore, situations where it would seem, by analogy, to be appropriate but where it is non-grammatical or where *to* shifts meaning. One can say, for example, that someone *ceased to sing* but not that he *finished to sing*; and *to stop to think* is not analogous to *start to think*, the first meaning *to stop in order to think*, and the second meaning *to begin the activity of thinking*. In all these situations the infinitive takes the stem or first-person form of the verb (creating, as we have seen, a problem for students who are learning the *-ed* inflections). But it has also acquired in linguistically more recent times a number of expanded tenses in which the main verb is inflected (*to be asked, to be asking, to have asked, to have been asked, etc.*).

Thus we have in the infinitive a form that is difficult for a learner to predict—sometimes it appears with *to*; sometimes it does not and when it does not it appears to the student to be inflectable; in some situations



The student who does not habitually indicate tense through inflection or whose verb-phrases system differs from that of formal English must reason his way through what seems to him a periphrastic maze, and if he is not aware of the difference between *do* and the other auxiliaries, he might quite rationally assume that *do* should be followed by inflected forms:

- The highest number of openings will occur in fields that colleges *do not trained* people for.
- This opportunity *does not happens* every day.
- The government set up certain jobs which *don't required* much training.
- I don't think it makes sense for a person to go to college for something that *doesn't required* a college degree. If a person does decide to go to college for one of the jobs that *don't required* a degree . . . Note correct as well as incorrect use of *do* in this passage.

Both as an auxiliary and a main verb, *to be* is often wrongly inflected for number (the singular forms *is* and *was* being favored over *are* and *were*). In addition, this verb is often missing in grammatical contexts where formal English requires it, a clear consequence of interference from languages such as Chinese or BEV that permit sentences without verbs. Such omissions occur before predicate nouns and adjectives (*What the sense of going? You very busy on the job*), after filler subjects, or expletives (*It because of the time I live in. A child begin to feel that it true.*), and in verb phrases where *be* is an auxiliary (As long as this country continues to move in the manner it moving . . . So you enjoying what you doing plus you getting about \$150,000 a year).

Finally, we must add to these difficulties with regular inflections and basic verb phrases a number of irregular verbs whose forms are often erroneously regularized.

- My older brothers and sisters *founded* life not very much different.
- Now you wish you had *stucked* to your job.

Or mixed:

- It should be something you saw once. I didn't go around labling everything I seen.

Or ignored in preference to the stem form:

- We sometimes have to have things *show* to us.

- People have not *make* up their minds.
- When they first *build* the park it was a nice new park.

In considering the difficulties students have with the forms of verbs we should not forget that the forms often carry little meaning for writers whose native languages or dialects do not make the same tense distinctions or make them in different ways. The student often works at such forms as he might a mathematical formula, without any attention to semantic context, only to find that he has used a standard form in the wrong place. Student A, for example, in the passage below has not yet learned *how* to form the perfect tenses; Student B has not learned the context for the past perfect tense:

Student A

I feel that if I *had go* on to college instead of to work as I did I would be more capable to simply communicate to my fellow employers in a more open-minded way and maybe they *would have realize* how close-minded they were.

Student B

Engineering is an old profession. I think that engineers *had done* a great deal for modern man.

The erroneous shifting of tenses, both within and between sentences, appears to be a different order of problem from the tense shifts that are common among more experienced writers who forget (especially in narrative passages) to sustain the tense they start out with. The examples below suggest, rather, a confusion about tense meanings:

- When we *are* first born and we *began* to recognize things which we have no knowledge of, it seems very beautiful, but as we *grow* older we *began* to know the difference then problems *begin* to arise.
- Then the good father *came* along and *feels* he should share the experience.
- I *will like* to be a person who *have study* more than high school.
- In the middle of this park *lies* a lake which *was* about three fourth of a mile.

We have been considering common verb errors one by one, noting not only the errors but some of the reasoning that may be behind them. This rather orderly way of looking at errors does not prepare a teacher, however, for the kind of palimpsest he is likely to find in an actual theme, where regular forms intermingle with deviant forms, and a few



dialect features that go back to the writer's childhood mix with a scattering of hypercorrections that would strike any speaker of English (including the student himself) as odd. Thus although students may, for example, reject *-ed* in various settings for linguistically logical or understandable reasons, the fact that they do not do so habitually makes their errors appear random or illogical. In the following passage, for example, a number of problems collide:

I feel that no education is *wasted*. If it is not *use* in the speciality that we were *trained*, we can always *used* it in another *related* field.

Here we have evidence that the writer knows how to use the *-ed* in passive phrases (*is wasted, were trained*). The verb *use*, however, often appears in student writing without the *-ed* so that the omission in *is not use* is not surprising. Yet in the same sentence we can find *can always used*, which appears to be a hypercorrection rooted in the mistaken (but common) notion that modal auxiliaries must be followed by the past-tense form. The final error is not an *-ed* error but a vocabulary error, the *-ed* having been added correctly to make a word that doesn't exist.

This sense of a language in flux dominates the writing at this level. The student who in one sentence writes correctly ". . . who at least had 2 years of college" will write in another sentence "You *would had stayed* in school." In one sentence appears a dialect form that is rarely heard even among children followed by a most peculiar hypercorrection that one might never have heard (I don't understand why the child has to see and hear things as *he father did*s). Correct and erroneous forms of the same word or phrase will appear in different parts of the same sentence (Money is the only thing that if it is saved *would save* them in case something like the depression *would ever happened*). And not infrequently two forms will appear side by side, as if the writer could not finally make a choice (I think it *do does* make sense to learning as much as you can; I think it *is would be* advisable).<sup>2</sup>

These fluctuations in form are not haphazard, although they may seem to be at first glance. They suggest, rather, that in moving into formal English a learner does not move evenly on all fronts. Sometimes habit will control his choice in the direction of his mother tongue, leading him to use a form that is present in that tongue but absent in formal English. The appearance of double modal forms, however, may also reflect the influence of a southern dialect, as in *may can do it, might could do it, I used to could, or I should ought to do it*.

English (negative concord, for example) or to omit a form that is required in formal English but not in his mother tongue (the *s* inflection, for example). At other times, the need to make choices within some kind of conceptual frame rather than haphazardly will lead him to simplify the grammar in the interest of greater predictability (as with the inflection of the main verb in modal tenses). He will be aided in this not only by his own powers of reasoning but by the simplifications of classroom grammar, which seem often to function for the learner as highway signals too often do for the driver, giving him abundant information where he doesn't need it and then abandoning him at the crossroads.

There is no point in discouraging a learner from making these premature formulations. He will make them anyway, sensing that mastery lies in the direction of generalization rather than memorization. Language, it is true, is too mercurial and rich and centuried to allow for easy predictions, yet the native-born speaker of English has, after all, already absorbed the English language in all its essentials. He is simply stuck at a number of secondary points where habit does not serve him. And here he may need help of various kinds—grammatical explanations, practice, or simply time to absorb those features of the language that resist schematization. More will be said toward the end of the chapter about these strategies. For now it is important to note how often the errors students make with verbs, no matter how peculiar they may sound to a teacher, are the result not of carelessness or irrationality but of *thinking*. Part of the task of helping such students master the formal verb system therefore depends upon being able to trace the line of reasoning that has led to erroneous choices rather than upon unloading on the student's memory an indifferent bulk of information about verbs, only part of which relates to his difficulties. "We done all the conjugations of the verbs for a semester," wrote a student after completing a course that had worked exclusively on abstract grammar, "but I haven't did any writing yet."

## Nouns

Nouns are inflected to indicate number and possession, and although there are a number of rules for pluralizing nouns (requiring stem changes with words that end in *-f, -fe, or -y*, changes of the stem vowel in key words like *woman-women*, Latin and Greek endings for a num-



ber of words, and no inflections for others, as with *sheep* or *fish*), they would seem to be easier to master than more complicated number-tense rules that govern verbs. Still many errors occur with nouns, most of them involving the letter *-s*. And once again, the rejection of that letter, this time to mark plurality rather than singularity (as in the verb) or to indicate possession, has both phonological and grammatical explanations which are reinforced by the predominance of the stem form of the noun in standard English.

The sound of the terminal *-s* is easily lost in speech, especially where mother-tongue influence leads the speaker to reject certain sounds because they are too difficult to pronounce (as with *-sts* or *-sks* endings in words like *wrists* or *desks*). In the following passage, for example, the writer applies one rule for pluralizing a noun that requires even a change in the stem form (*laboratories*) and yet omits the *-s* on two words that would be more difficult to pronounce (*-sts* in *scientists*):

In the depth of the ocean *scientist* will be exploring with underground *laboratories*, *biologist* will be trying to understand our wild life and preserve our natural habitat.

But where this disinclination to pronounce *-s* is reinforced by a different system for indicating plurality or possession (as in Chinese or BEV), the *-s* is even more likely to be rejected. Teachers whose experience has been entirely with standard English forms are often so attuned to the pluralizing force of *-s* that they mistakenly assume that students who do not use the *-s* lack the *concept* of plurality rather than the habit of using a particular form to indicate that plurality. A closer look at their students' writing will generally reveal that the students are in fact using the pluralizing *s* in many contexts but avoiding it in settings where it would seem to the teacher most needed, that is, in phrases where the plurality is made explicit by a quantifier:

- for at least four year of college
- in many field
- 2.8 million job each year
- these program
- these two suggestion
- some year back

Such a pattern suggests that where plurality is indicated in some other way, these writers feel no need for the pluralizing *-s*. Like the third-person *-s* on the verb, it appears to them to be redundant, despite the static its absence in these particular contexts might create for English

teachers. Thus this sentence is not as inconsistent in the matter of plural forms as it might appear:

Your would be wasting your time by going to college for four, five, six year when the jobs are in the fields that require a minimum training.

For the student who has been corrected often for "missing" *-s*'s without having felt the need for them in the formal system, the habit of using *-s*'s in some places and not in others can appear to be quite random. In some sentences the plural form of a verb, or pronoun, or some other contextual clue may still make the plural marker seem redundant. Thus:

- Life is fill of *up* and *down* and it is up to you to make the best of *them*.
- When a man starts to question its not for beauty but for the how and why *thing* do what it is *they* do.
- Also by going to college you have the opportunity to learn the legal *aspects* of *thing*.

But the reasoning behind other inconsistencies is not clear:

- I also think that all colleges and universities should provide course for those field that are creating a great many jobs.
- If we did not have engineers we would not have *subways* car, light and the *thing* we use in every day life.

Some hypercorrections suggest real confusion about when and where to add the *-s*:

- The jobs that are going to be in most demands . . .
- Despite the familiar expression—in *most demand*—the writer appears to have responded to the plural sense of *most*.
- It is a temporary *things*.

Certain irregular plural forms are mixed or missing, particularly the forms for child and woman:

- The *childs* do not understand the grownups.
- Today's women are confused. She realized her roles as a *women* but also she herself as a *women*.

And finally, it often becomes apparent when a student is asked to read his paper aloud that the plural forms are in fact sometimes present in

his spoken English but absent in his writing. Where there are discrepancies between spoken and written forms we might expect the language skill acquired last (i.e., writing) to reflect later stages of the student's spoken language. Yet the reverse situation has been noted among students at much earlier ages. Thus a ten-year-old student who wrote "I like going to school here because there are air-conditioner, squirrel, and crow" supplied the plural -s's when asked to read his passage out loud. When asked to repeat "squirrel" he clearly pronounced the missing -s; yet when asked what the last letter in the word was, he said "l."

Where students have been influenced by a language that has no form comparable to the 's (BEV, for example, depends upon juxtaposition to indicate possession—Mary house; Chinese uses a special word, *de*, following the word that would have 's in formal English; Spanish indicates possession by *de* preceding the owner), the resistance to pronouncing the final *s* is reinforced by a contrasting grammatical pattern. Two types of problems result: the 's is simply ignored in favor of juxtaposition, a pattern which could be seen as analogous to noun compounds such as *school bus*, *child welfare*, *student activities*, etc.:

- in today world
- over 42% of this nation youths
- these people beliefs are of the early middle ages
- a parent positive thinking

or the 's is used indiscriminately to mark possession, plurality in the noun, or even singularity in the verb:

- I think that grownups are just as creative and cheerful as *baby's* but one thing a *baby's sight's* and sounds are or can't be expressed by an older person.
- the next ten year's
- two college diploma's
- because it help's the mass production of this country
- Their life were completely different from mine's, that kids my age's think different . . .

The distinction between the plural and singular possessive is peculiar to writing. A speaker cannot indicate, except by context, whether he is talking about the *girl's clothes* or the *girls' clothes*. To master this, the writer must be able to distinguish between the stem and plural forms of

nouns. Even then, the rule has important exceptions since a number of common words do not form their plurals by adding -s to the stem (*children*, *men*, *people*, etc.). The plural form plus apostrophe (*girls'*) rarely appears in writing at this stage, and to the student who perceives the 's as redundant, this even finer distinction between plural and singular possessives must indeed seem fussy. The rule, if it is to be taken up at this point, should be simplified as much as possible and applied in a way that clarifies rather than complicates the problem:

1. Add 's to all singular nouns;
2. Add 's to plural nouns that don't end in -s;
3. Add an apostrophe alone to plural nouns that end in -s.

Word to be marked for possessive	's	Application
girl	X	the girl's house
girls	X	the girls' house
child		
children		
actress		
actresses		
Marvina		
person		
people		
man		
men		
etc.		

When a student omits *s* regularly as a plural and possessive marker, there is usually no point in repeatedly reminding him to put the *s* in. Instead, he needs to be on a surer footing with nouns—that is, be able to recognize them first and then understand the rules for marking them. And because abstract definitions of parts of speech are too mercurial for such purposes, the student should have a more dependable way of identifying nouns. Here, word lists of the sort that Fries uses in his

discussion of parts of speech are effective.<sup>3</sup> Columns of words belonging to Class 1 (nouns) are listed beside contrasting forms (verbs and adjectives) of the same word. Thus:

Class 1	Class 2	Class 1	Class 3
arrival	arrive	bigness	big
refusal	refuse	activity	active
departure	depart	truth	true
delivery	deliver	idealism	ideal
	etc.		

By exposure to large numbers of nouns, the student begins to sense what they are. Then if additional tests for nouns can be added—i.e., that they sound "right" with determiners (*the, a/an, my, your, each*, etc.) or with prepositions (*in, on, for*, etc.) in front of them or some form of the verb *be* after them—the *s*-rule for adding the meaning of "more than one" to nouns or for indicating the meaning "possession" or "related to" is easier to apply.

### Pronouns

The formal English pronoun system is more complicated than need be for the purpose of communicating. Possession could, for example, be shown by juxtaposition, as it is with some nouns in formal English (*child welfare*) and regularly in BEV (*in they house*). The fact that *his* can serve both for *his house* and *this is his* suggests that there is no need for *yours, ours*, and *theirs* (a pattern that students often extend to *mine*—as in *a habit of mines*). Finally, the existence of some pronouns that do not change form to indicate number (you), gender (they, you), or objective case (it, you) establish that it would be possible in English to determine number, gender, and objective case by context and sentence position alone. Such anomalies and redundancies do not (and need not) swiftly disappear from natural languages simply because they pose difficulties for learners, but teachers who see the gaps and illogicalities in what they are teaching are more likely to respect and understand their students' reasons for being wrong. As should now be clear, being wrong is often synonymous with being linguistically consistent or efficient at those points where the language is not.

Learners who experience forms as redundant or inconsistent are likely

3. Charles Fries, *The Structure of English* (New York: Harcourt, 1952), Chapter 7.

to disregard them at least some of the time. And where this tendency is widespread, cutting across dialects and registers, it usually means that the redundant form is losing ground. For example, the *who-whom* distinction, now in flux even among the well-educated, does not seem to warrant the attention that English teachers often give it, particularly at the basic level of instruction. The absence, however, of other forms, perhaps equally redundant, may cut deep into the average reader's sense of the way things ought to sound in formal English.

Two errors of this order should be noted under pronouns: the use of juxtaposition rather than a special form for indicating possession and the apparent disregard for number and person in matching pronouns with their antecedents. We have already encountered juxtaposition as a way of construing possession with certain noun compounds, and even the regular way of adding 's or the apostrophe alone to the noun stem involves but a slight alteration of the noun. Most pronouns, however, change their forms notably in order to indicate possession:

I—my	we—our
he, she—his, hers	they—their

All these forms are known and used by writers at this level; however, students who have been strongly influenced by a language or dialect that shows possession by juxtaposition and who have done little reading or writing will often prefer juxtaposition with *they* to the regular possessive form, *their*, and, very rarely, a student will favor *he* to *his*:

- They don't see and hear things the same way as *they* children do.
- I may not be saying how I want to follow the footsteps of my parents exactly, but I am showing *they* morality and determination.
- . . . a child has to see and hear things as *he* father did.

The second problem, that of agreement with antecedents, is of course rooted in the nature of the pronoun, which depends upon other words (antecedents) for its meaning and is bound by those words in specific ways—namely by number, person, and gender. But students often resist these structures. In particular, they have a tendency to accept *they* (and *their*) or *he* as all-purpose pronouns that can refer to singular or plural antecedents of both genders. The tendency points up a gap in the pronoun system itself, which recognizes gender in the third-person singular (*he, she*) but ignores it in the plural (*they*), thereby necessitating the use of either *he* or the awkward *he or she* when the antecedent

is singular and of unknown gender (as nouns often are in analytical writing—a *person*, a *student*, a *teacher*, etc.). Thus some writers will use *they* without a feeling for its plurality or with the feeling that certain words commonly used in abstract discourse, such as *person*, are like collective nouns in that they refer not so much to individuals but to a group of individuals about whom the writer is generalizing:

- It's really up to the *person*, *they* would have to think it over.
- A young *person* in our society is accustomed to whining long hair. Rather than be called square *they* go against the constant nagging of parents.
- A high school *graduate* today should continue *their* education.
- The *teacher* really has your career in *there* hands.
- But if a *person* was to receive a BA this could provide *him or her* with advance knowledge that would prove beneficial to *them* in *their* profession.

Other writers will perceive *he* or *he* or *she* as plural in certain contexts:

- More and more *students* would go to college for . . . training that might make it easier to get a good job in the field *he* was trained for.
- They children accept things *they* see without being told *he* should accept it.
- Many college *dropouts* learn ways to make money just as if *he* had gone to college for four years.
- Many *students* today may not be sure of *himself*.
- Today employers are hiring the high school *graduates* to send *him* to a professional trade school.
- The person would be able to cope with life at a much higher scale than if *he or she* didn't continue *their* education.
- If *he or she* wishes to go on even though they won't get a job . . .
- People* should go on to get a college education in the field that *he or she* is best at.

Still others resist the convention of assigning singular forms to indefinite pronouns like *one*, *anyone*, *everyone*, or *everybody*. Often, as in the first three sentences, the forms fluctuate between *he* and *they*:

- It is still important for *someone* to go to college to get a better education and to learn more so that *they* can get a higher pay. When *they* still want to be a salesperson or something else then *he* should

quit college and find someplace else where they will train *him* for that particular job.

- One can get the job *he* want and have most of the things *they* need.
- I think the main point of this paragraph is the natural sense of when one is young, to interpret things *they* see and hear as an art and beauty. When *one* starts *his* education it seems that *they* lose the meaning of hearing and seeing.
- If *someone* wants to be an architect, a sociologist or a physicist *they* should not be too optimistic.
- Everyone* is entitled to *their* own opinions of their goals, but I think *one* should be suaded to believe that *they* arent capable of becoming someone important.

Unwanted shifts in person are almost invariably movements from first- or third-person pronouns to the second person, *you*.

- A lot of people have been told if *they* want a good job *you* have to stay in school.
- The reason *I* came to college is because its the only place where to future your education and have a secure job promising to *you* for the rest of the future *I* might go into.
- If *we* came out of our shells we'll fine a lot of interesting things about *yourself*.

These shifts, disorienting to a reader, usually go unnoticed by the writer until someone points them out. Shifts in person are not uncommon among more practiced writers, but they are more likely to occur between passages rather than within sentences. Often such shifts reflect an unstable sense of the writer-audience relationship, with the shift to *you* signifying a more direct sense of audience. Shifts of the kind illustrated above, however, suggest that the *you* that intrudes is the generalized *you* of adages ("You can fool some of the people some of the time . . ." etc.) and is no more direct than such third-person words as *person*, *one*, *he*, or *they*. If so, the writer may well not feel the dissonance of a shift from *they* to *you*. (The *I-we-you* shifts, however, are difficult to explain in this way since they produce an unmistakable shift in person.)

But behind this range of specific errors in pronoun reference lie the common roots of error that we have already touched upon in our discussions of other errors. There is, first, the natural linguistic impulse to reduce complexity without impairing communication. And for the

reader's dismissing errors, even though it is often good reason for a writer's making them.

Writers who by habit ignore the -s inflection, whether with the noun or the verb, or who use that inflection erratically without an understanding of the inflectional system in formal English, will inevitably make more errors in agreement than the general writer, whose main problems with agreement arise when subjects get separated from predicates by intervening phrases or clauses or when certain refinements of agreement have not been mastered (e.g., *everyone is, one of those people who are, criteria are, either my brother or his friends are*).

The agreement difficulties of the students we are describing begin at an earlier point, with the entire convention of matching up subjects and predicates by means, largely, of one shifting letter (-s) which they tend not to perceive as important. Thus even in sentences where an error appears to be caused by the writer's unfamiliarity with a secondary rule of agreement, one is never certain. In this sentence, for example,

Take a stenographer or a secretary that don't need to go on to college . . .

the erroneous use of *don't* could be explained by the student's ignorance of the rule for counting compound subjects that are joined by *or* rather than *and*. More likely, however, the writer has perceived the singularity of a secretary or a stenographer but accepts *don't* for both plural and singular forms, as the writers of the following sentences have done:

- Sometime I say to myself that it really *don't* matter whether you go to college or not.
- I think that a person that *don't* go to college, *don't* have the opportunity to have a better life.
- More education *don't* hurt anybody.
- A person who is more knowledge or had some degree of higher education sometimes *don't* make it.

Similarly, in sentences that begin with *there is*, the writer may, like most other writers who get into difficulty with this pattern, simply fail to anticipate the number of his subject and slip into *there is* without thinking. But there is also a good chance that the writer we are describing would not change his verbs in the following sentences, even if the sentences were reversed:

student whose criteria for redundancy may be drawn from a different language or vernacular, this may result in the omission or simplification of forms (e.g., the omission of the possessive pronoun or the copula or the interchanging of certain conjunctions or pronouns) that, while they may be grammatically redundant, are deep in the grain of formal English. Second, there is the perceptual problem of remembering what has been written in sentences so that no vital part of a sentence is omitted and the sentence itself can be laced together by the various agreements of number, tense, person, and gender. And third, there is the nature of the analytical mode, which pushes writers out of reportage (description and narrative), where experience grounds their generalizations, into vaguer statements about a *person* or *they* or *one*, which are more difficult to control, or even care about.

Instruction in pronouns for such students must go beyond the conventional kind of lesson in which the three persons are identified as I—the person talking, *you*—the person I talk to, and *he, she, or it*—the person being talked about. Since the third person gives the most difficulty and is, furthermore, the most confusing with its irregular treatment of gender (*he, she* in the singular, *they* in the plural), it makes sense to begin with the third-person pronouns, giving special lessons on the correct use of that family of generalized pronouns so commonly used in abstract discourse (*he, one, everyone, etc.*). For students who favor juxtaposition to a possessive pronoun, the basis of the preference should be explained and the student given many opportunities to work contrastively with both forms. Finally, the grammatical principle of concord or agreement must be graphically demonstrated so as to heighten the student's awareness of the grammatical web he spins as he moves from left to right across the page. This can be done simply by having the student for a time circle each pronoun he uses and draw a line to its antecedent, or more elaborately by audio-visual demonstrations.

#### Subject-verb agreement

The filament that links subjects to predicates in formal English is number, and while it could be (and is) argued that word order and context suffice to give any native reader or listener a sense of the relation between subject and predicate, readers continue to be distracted by errors in subject-verb agreement. Clearly redundancy is no reason for a

2. correct use of *-s* (verb)
3. incorrect omission of *-s* (noun)
4. correct use of *-s* (pronoun)

Take a student who *want*<sup>1</sup> to become a mechanic, can't he take some course that *intrest*<sup>2</sup> him besides machines or cars. School *are*<sup>3</sup> the best years of your life. . . . A student goes back to school to get the material he or she *needs*<sup>4</sup> to advance to the position they *wants*<sup>5</sup> which *mean*<sup>6</sup> more jobs have to be produced.

- 1,2,6. incorrect omission of *-s* (verb)
3. hypercorrection with *are*
4. correct use of *-s* on verb
5. hypercorrection with *-s* on plural verb

Such passages reveal more confusion than a teacher's marginal notation (the familiar "Agr.!") is likely to dispel. If the agreement errors are to be taken up at all at this point, the approach must be basic. The student must first learn what the word *agreement* means in grammatical talk, for otherwise he will have but a vague sense of its application to subjects and verbs. The word *number* must itself be explained, since the student does not automatically translate the word into *one* or *more than one*. The student must be able to recognize subjects and be able to separate the nucleus of a subject phrase from its surrounding modifiers. He must know the intricacies of counting subjects and then of identifying verbs and knowing their singular and plural forms. He must have, in short, something approaching a short course in grammar if he is to move with certainty into the territory of agreement with the modest goal of being able to correct during proofreading the agreement errors he makes while writing.

#### Limits to correctness

When agreement errors merge with other common errors of the sort we have been discussing in this chapter, the question arises in the minds of most teachers of just how, when, and even whether error of this magnitude can be brought under control. Here, in this short but full orchestration of error, the conscientious teacher stops to ask (if only himself) whether anything he can do will make much difference:

The majority of the student<sup>1</sup> always<sup>2</sup> major in some kinds of field<sup>3</sup> that will help them in the near future. Some of them end up working

- It is believed that there is other forms of life.
- There is only 97,000 openings per year.
- For every one job there is about five people going for it.

Not only is *there are* more difficult to produce in speech than *there is* but students report that *are* seems "stiff" and "distant" to them. They tend to avoid it in other situations as well.

- Most of the jobs that will be existing *is* for stenographers and secretaries.
- The *ads* one sees in a newspaper is asking for someone who's in college.

*Have* is another verb that cuts across distinctions of number:

- My father *have* four brother and three sisters. My mother *have* seven brothers.
- As it *have* been stated . . .
- The need for college in certain fields *have* drop.

And finally, we have the overriding aversion to *-s* with regular verbs, which produces many agreement errors:

- That's why this *person need* to get a degree.
- Once *he get* into college he will get to the heart of these fields.
- It also depend on the person what *he want* to do when he get out of high school.
- Every day *man progress* a little more.
- The *future belong* to the well-trained and educated.

All these errors—the preference for certain plural forms like *don't* and *have* with plural and singular subjects, the preference for *is* where *are* is required, the rejection of *-s*, sometimes with plural subjects and more often with singular verbs, and the unpredictable hypercorrections that arise from a writer's efforts to conform to a system he is not clear about—come under the heading of subject-verb agreement errors. Not infrequently, many of them pile up in one sentence or a short passage:

A college degree *help*<sup>1</sup> one attain more than just a degree but *broadens*<sup>2</sup> their outlook on life. *Student*<sup>3</sup> then become more confident in *themselves*<sup>4</sup> and the field they have chosen.

1. incorrect omission of *-s* (verb)

in factory <sup>4</sup> because of their education. Sometime <sup>5</sup> I say to myself that it really don't <sup>6</sup> matter whether you go to college or not because people with college degree <sup>7</sup> can't even get a good job. Some countrie <sup>8</sup> or manufacture <sup>9</sup> will not hire <sup>10</sup> them because they feel that they will only work for two month <sup>11</sup> and then leaves <sup>12</sup> and they <sup>13</sup> company maybe just lost money.

Of the eighty-nine words in this passage, thirteen (14.6 per cent) are wrong. This is a discouraging number of erroneous forms. Yet a closer look reveals that ten of these errors reflect difficulties with the one letter *s* (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12). Two are common verb-form errors (6, 10), at least one of which the student could easily learn to correct (*will not hired*). And the final error (13) is the use of juxtaposition to indicate possession. In other words, three basic problems are reflected in this passage, all of them common to large numbers of writers who err not for want of intelligence or care but because of opposing language habits and analogical thinking. The student who learned to make these errors reveals, through them, all the linguistic sophistication he needs to correct them. The issue is not his capacity to master the unfamiliar forms of formal English but 1. the priority this kind of problem ought to have in the larger scheme of learning to write and 2. the willingness of the student to concentrate his energies on the goal of writing formal English.

#### *Correctness and writing progress*

On the first issue, the relationship of grammaticality to improvement in writing, there is much disagreement. Some would insist that if error becomes a subject for instruction it will quickly loom in the writer's consciousness as a central problem in writing, whereas writing is about much more than that. Furthermore, such a concentration is believed to impede the writer's development, even in relation to the reduction of error, producing highly self-conscious and hypercorrected writing that moves him even further from his resources as a native speaker of English. Others would insist that the student cannot be released into the written language until he is more certain of the code, that in fact the mastery of a common code precedes the development of an individual "voice." Furthermore, they would argue that whether his teacher concentrates on form or not, the student knows that things don't come out right for him when he writes and that more often than not he is likely to write something that, for reasons he cannot understand, will

be considered wrong and will put him at a disadvantage with his reader. Subject to the whims of language and English teachers and stocked with an assortment of grammatical superstitions and rules of thumb that have filtered through to him in the course of twelve years of schooling, he needs more than anything to get his grammatical bearings so that he can reason rather than hazard his way through his difficulties.

As yet we lack developmental models for the maturation of writing skills among young, native-speaking adults and can only theorize about the adaptability of other models for these students (Piaget's model for the acquisition of language among children, for example, or the models that have been developed in second-language teaching), who until recently have been written off as learners of the eleventh hour whose appearance on the developmental continuum has been judged too late to make much difference. Lacking a model, we cannot say with certainty just what progress in writing ought to look like for BW students, and more particularly how the elimination of error is related to their over-all improvement. Meanwhile, teachers, trained usually to evaluate writing by absolute rather than developmental standards, rarely ask how realistic it is to concentrate on certain errors during the early stages of writing instruction. Taking all errors to be the province of remedial English, they doom their students and themselves to a sense of failure when they garner but a limited crop of correct forms by the end of a semester. And how are they to interpret the phenomenon of *increased* error at the end of a semester of writing except as a sign of ineducability, even though it is not unusual for people acquiring a skill to get "worse" before they get better and for writers to err more as they venture more?

This absolute standard of correctness that has come to be associated with English teachers often precludes their asking another important question—not only how realistic it is to expect beginning writers to learn what many English teachers want them to learn in the time allotted to them for writing (usually no more than four contact hours a week) but how many readers are likely to have the same sensitivity to error as English teachers have. While we must dismiss as irresponsibly romantic the view that error is not important at all and that readers can "catch the meaning" in error-laden writing if they try, we should also be wary of any view that results in setting tasks for beginning writers that few besides English teachers would consider important. In



short, a teacher must ask not only what *he* wants but what the student is most ready to do and what, from a reader's viewpoint, is most important. Here it becomes difficult to make absolute statements. Adept as teachers may be at noting how far students fall short of a standard called "good writing" (even here there is wide disagreement), this is not the same as tracing the path that leads to such writing; we know that errors carry messages but we can make only rough guesses about the importance and nature of these messages. But within the limits created by our ignorance and the complexity of the writing situation, we must develop a fresh perspective on error. Teachers must do something on Monday morning, and this reality forces them either to do what *their* teachers did on Monday morning or to invent English composition anew out of their understanding of the craft and their observations of students learning to write. The two propositions on error that follow come largely out of the effort to follow the second alternative:

1. *Errors count but not as much as most English teachers think.* For many reasons, English teachers are inclined to exaggerate the seriousness of error. Since the birth of the composition course in American education, the English teacher has been viewed as the custodian of "refined" usage. It has been his, more often her, responsibility to press upon a linguistic culture of kaleidoscopic variety a model of good English that would not only improve communication but communicate social and educational distinctions that the society deemed significant. But distinctions of the latter sort are usually made in linguistically unimportant ways—that is, they involve changes that would not in themselves impair communication. Like the pronunciation of *shibboleth* (or the proper use of *who/whom*), they hinge upon subtle differences that do not seem in themselves important. Yet the consequences of ignoring these distinctions have seemed serious in a country as socially mobile as this society has until recently imagined itself to be.

This emphasis upon propriety in the interest not of communication but of status has narrowed and debased the teaching of writing, encouraging at least two tendencies in teachers—a tendency to view the work of their students microscopically, with an eye for forms but with little interest in what was being said, and a tendency to develop a repugnance for error that has made erring students feel like pariahs and allowed teachers of mediocre talent too many easy victories. The fact that graduate schools, aware that their students would spend a good part of their

professional lives teaching freshman English, made no effort to train students to teach writing (or to write themselves) only guaranteed that English teachers would be the last to see the limitations of the prescriptive approach to writing.

Many influences have combined, however, to expose these limitations. A revolution in social awareness has increased our interest in and respect for linguistic variety. A deeper, and more cynical, understanding of success in America has reduced our confidence in "good" English as a key to advancement. A strong egalitarian thrust within higher education has not only brought a new kind of student into the four-year college but has caused the community colleges to flourish throughout the country, and wherever the new students have arrived in substantial numbers English teachers have begun to realize that little in their background has prepared them to teach writing to someone who has not already learned how to do it. Confident in the past that students who could not master certain "simple" features of English usage were probably not "bright" enough (a much-used term) to stay in college, they now begin to wonder, when large numbers of intelligent young men and women fail to learn a simple lesson, whether the lesson is indeed so simple. And once having asked this fruitful question their own revolution as teachers of English usually begins. It is a revolution that leads not inevitably or finally to a rejection of all rules and standards, which would be to deny the very point that is finally being made about language, namely that it is variously shaped by situations and bound by conventions, none of which is inferior to the others but none of which, also, can substitute for the others. But it does produce a different view of error and of the students who make errors. That view might be compared to the view a teacher is more likely to have toward a foreign student learning English: his errors reflect upon his linguistic situation, not upon his educability; he is granted by his teacher the capability of mastering English but is expected in the course of doing so to make errors in English; and certain errors, characteristic errors for natives of his language who are acquiring English as a second language, are tolerated far into and even beyond the period of formal instruction simply because they must be rubbed off by time.

Often, English teachers with the backgrounds I have described have difficulty making this kind of adjustment to error, but teachers in other disciplines are generally more intent upon getting at the heart of what a student is saying and therefore deliberately edit out errors as they read.



Indeed, so complete is the indifference of some teachers to form that their attitude seems irresponsible rather than tolerant. ("I just want to find out what they learned," goes the disclaimer. "I'm not an English teacher.")

Someplace between the rigid prescriptions of the unregenerated English teacher and the loose permissions of the uninterested professor lies a territory of tolerable error. The territory is not well or easily mapped but its borders can be guessed at.<sup>4</sup> In an essay of 300 words an average academic reader is likely to tolerate between five and six basic errors of the kind we have been describing in this chapter before committing a writer to a semester of work on errors (a beginning BW student makes between ten and thirty). He will tolerate far more spelling and punctuation errors, provided they are the writer's only problems and the errors are familiar (*receiving* for *receiving*, for example, is less disorienting than *duagter* for *daughter*). The static around some errors is greater than that around others—an agreement error caused by the intervention of modifying phrases or clauses between subject and verb is not as serious as one where subject and verb are juxtaposed (as in *he say*). A regular pattern of error with one feature (a missing *-ed* ending on most verb phrases, for example) seems easier to accept than an assortment of -s problems of the kind illustrated on pages 117-18. Certain erroneous verb forms (*done* for *did*, for example, or *seen* for *saw*) are more distracting than others. Nonetheless, it is the number of serious errors that seems to make the crucial difference for readers, shifting their attention from the meaning to the form of things and, beyond that, to questions about the writer's broader competencies.

2. *The teacher should keep in mind the cost to himself and the student of mastering certain forms and be ready to cut his losses when the investment seems no longer commensurate with the return.* As we have seen, common errors persist because they make some kind of linguistic sense to the writer or because they are so habitual as to be

4. The guesses on tolerable error given here are based upon my analysis of 311 freshman placement essays written in the spring of 1973 at City College and read by two groups of readers, the first group for the purpose of deciding which of three classes the essay belonged to (1—needs to work on correction of errors, 2—no serious problems with error but needs to work on organization and development, 3—needs no work on general composition but probably needs help preparing long academic papers), the second group for a breakdown of the number and types of errors in each essay. Readers in both groups were English teachers, but they were selected for their moderate views on error and encouraged to read as if they were teachers in other subject areas.

untouched by what the student has learned from his teachers. It is the beauty of teaching young adults, however, that matters of great complexity can be made conceptually clear so that the student has a way of thinking about a problem that will eventually generate the correct answer. Cognition in this sense means that he has grasped the nature of the problem but not that he is ready to be right all the time. As in mathematics, the right answer is not always as important as the right route to an answer. Teachers who understand this are less likely to feel discouraged when students who have seemingly understood a lesson and done all the exercises go on to make the same mistakes in their writing. The gap between cognition and practice can be wide—sometimes wider than a semester—but eventually a student can learn to correct in his own writing what he has learned to correct in someone else's. His failure to do so immediately does not necessarily call for a repetition of the lesson but for more opportunity to apply the lesson to his own writing, preferably without any more teacher intervention except for a check in the margin or a general direction to edit the essay for the troublesome feature.

Finally, it is possible that residual traces of a common error will remain in a student's writing far beyond his course in English or even beyond college. It is hard to believe that the world will be much the worse for such an imperfection. And the writer ought to be reassured, if he has not already intuited this for himself, that a common error here and there is not likely to keep an otherwise good writer down—except perhaps in freshman English.

#### *Student motivation and correctness*

The motivation to learn what a teacher has decided ought to be and can be learned has often been considered, along with native intelligence, the equipment a student should bring with him to class: the teacher's job is to help the student learn; the student's job is to want to learn. This comforting formulation of a teacher's responsibility, however, ignores the subtle but pervasive ways in which teaching influences and even generates motivation. Indeed, unless the teacher is able to do so in the work on common errors, he is not likely to make much headway, because students are rarely ready at the outset to commit their long-term energies to the understanding and correction of errors.

There are several reasons for this. Probably the most obvious one is that errors seem to demand more concentration than they are worth.

attempts to master that language. Their motivation to learn the language appears to stem from and be sustained by the desire to identify.<sup>175</sup>

When we remember the ways in which the majority society has impinged upon the lives of most BW students and when we recall the student's distrust of teachers and their language, engendered over years of schooling, it is difficult to see how the desire to identify with the majority culture, and therefore its public language, could possibly have survived into young adulthood. At best we might expect deeply ambivalent feelings about "making it" in a course that teaches what is perceived as an alien dialect. Even the instrumental motive is likely to be weak among students who are not yet in the habit of seeing themselves in careers. Add to this the reckless predictions of futurists (or even administrators who begrudge the expense of skills instruction) who would have us believe that by the time today's students leave college people will be talking on telephones or into tapes or hopping on planes to deliver all their messages, and we see that the motivation to concentrate on writing itself, let alone on the mere correction of errors, needs reinforcement.

If we subtract for these attitudes of mistrust and indifference that students are likely to bring to class, we are left with at least three potential sources of motivation:

1. If students understand why they are being asked to learn something and if the reasons given do not conflict with deeper needs for self-respect and loyalty to their group (whether that be an economic, racial, or ethnic group), they are disposed to learn it. This means that teachers cannot assume that students are fired to write correct English, particularly if the students have reason to believe that the mastery of this version of English cancels out (or ought to cancel out) the language they use with their family and friends. What teachers can assume, however, is that if a case can be made for the mastery of formal written English as the language of public transactions—educational, civic, and professional—and if the phenomenon of dialects and registers can be introduced in such a way as to explain language variety and illuminate for the individual student the nature of his own difficulties with formal English, a student is more inclined to commit his energies to learning it. Students who have been using English all their lives find it difficult to

S. R. C. Gardner and W. E. Lambert, *Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1972), p. 130.

Students who are learning a language for the first time depend upon their teachers to select those features of the language that are important to learn. They are not certain how much they have to know in order to say something intelligible. Native-born speakers of English who are learning formal written English already know that they can communicate in English and this gives them a momentum with the language that makes classroom work on errors drag. Whereas the student learning a second language will stretch his competence with the new language when he writes a short paragraph, incorporating the forms he has just learned, the native speaker learning another dialect of his language (as formal writing might be considered to be) is prepared at the outset to rush into English, scattering as he goes a wide range of variant or erroneous forms. Paradoxically, his knowledge of English enables him to err profusely, and since he has acquired the language without direct instruction, he has more difficulty than the second-language student in looking at what he writes analytically. We might say, then, that for the purposes of correcting errors, our student knows too much to be patient.

To the extent that he is motivated to learn about his common errors, he is usually negatively motivated, that is, he wishes to avoid the punishment of a bad grade, or, more broadly, the social penalty that comes from not being able to use the prestigious dialect. Such motivation carries a student through the beginning of a course but not always to the end of it. If, in addition to this kind of motive, however, the student has a career goal that calls for writing skill or even if he is in a career program that requires a passing grade in writing, however irrelevant that skill seems to him, he usually has the fuel he needs to get through the course. Nonetheless, the strongest learning energies are generated by the desire rather than the obligation to learn something. Gardner and Lambert in their research on attitudes and motivation in second-language learning distinguish between instrumental and integrative motives for learning a language, the first stemming from the recognition of a practical use for the language and the second from an active desire to identify with the cultural group that uses the language. While both attitudes will serve the language learner, the authors conclude that "learners who identify with the cultural group represented by a foreign or second language are likely to enjoy an advantage in

believe that they weren't intelligent enough to learn it, especially when other young adults who appear no more intelligent than they have learned it. What they need to understand is that they *have* learned a variety of English that differs in systematic ways from formal written English and serves them in ways that formal English cannot.

What generally emerges from such an exploration of language variety, provided it is a genuine exploration and not simply a quick pitch for getting on with the job of learning "good" English, is a sense of the students' own ambivalent feelings about their English and about their ability to learn to write well. Invariably students who are asked on the first day to indicate anonymously whether they think they can get an A in the course say they can't, and their reason is usually that they're not "good" at English. When asked to rank a number of passages written in different dialects and registers, they tend to rank passages written in variant forms of English below the passages written in formal English, even when the former is a description by Mark Twain and the latter is a passage obscured by officialese. These responses may well be aimed at pleasing the teacher. Even so, they reflect at least a deeply ambivalent attitude toward written English—when it is said to be good, it usually sounds bad (i.e., wrong-sounding and stiff), and when it sounds bad to others, it is usually good (right-sounding and alive).

Without a clearer understanding of the reasons behind language variations and of the difference between being effective in any dialect and being right according to the conventions of a particular dialect, the student is not psychologically ready to work on common errors in formal English. Readiness implies a respect for one's own linguistic aptitude and a confidence that the act of mastering a second variety of English is neither a disloyal nor destructive act but in fact a claim upon a wider culture, not only to acquire its network language but to improve upon it. We need no reminder of the state of public language nor of the implications this has—not only for a democracy but for less exalted causes such as textbooks that students (and teachers) want to read or letters and instructions that meet the modest criterion of the Admiralty Pilots during wartime: that they be intelligible to a tired man reading in a bad light. I am surely not the first to have sensed, in working with the new students on their writing, a directness and freshness of response that will

eventually strengthen the public language even as it represents them in the larger world.<sup>6</sup>

2. Linguistic data are interesting to students in and of themselves. The detection of patterns, the discrimination among forms, and the application of rules to a range of situations are self-sustaining activities. Like taking machines apart or playing intricate games, they tease and challenge the brain, creating tensions and surprises that need no outside encouragement. What is needed, however, is a teacher who is prepared to expose students to linguistic data and allow them, wherever possible, to observe the phenomenon being studied and arrive through these observations at their own grammatical formulations. This takes time and ingenuity and it is not always the quickest way to get at common errors, but there is probably no more certain way to increase the resourcefulness of a student than to introduce him to linguistic concepts that enable him to see the fragments of his troubles with formal English in a larger frame.

3. The discovery by a student that he can do something he thought he couldn't releases the energy to do it. Students who make many errors feel helpless about correcting them. Error has them in its power, forcing them to hide or bluff or feign indifference but never to attack. The teacher must encourage an aggressive attitude toward error and then provide a strategy for its defeat, one that allows the student to count his victories as he goes and thereby grow in confidence. This means letting the student in on what is happening—setting a reasonable limit to what he needs to accomplish (the reduction of errors per 300 words from fifteen to six in one semester, for example), helping him classify the kinds of errors he makes most often (the discovery that although he has twenty errors he has only five problems is in itself encouraging to a student), and then planning instruction so that success is built into each lesson and the student can see that he is finally beginning to cope with errors.

The alternative course of ignoring error for fear of inhibiting the writer even more or of assuming that errors will wear off as the student writes more is finally giving error more power than it is due. The "mystery" of error is what most intimidates students—the worry that

6. For excellent material on the fallen state of public language, see Hugh Rank, ed., *Language and Public Policy* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974).

errors just "happen" without a person's knowing how or when—and while we have already noted that some errors can be expected to persist even after instruction, most of them finally come under the control of the writer once he has learned to look at them analytically during the proofreading stage of composition. Freedom from error is finally a matter of understanding error, not of getting special dispensations to err simply because writing formal English is thought to be beyond the capabilities or interests of certain students.

#### Suggestions for reducing error

We come finally to the question of how to help students reduce their errors to a level that is tolerable to their readers, and here the individual talents and training of teachers, the learning styles of students, the time allowed in a writing program or department for the mastery of grammatical forms, and a variety of other considerations preclude my recommending *The Way or The Book or The Grammar*. Still, it has been my opportunity to observe over the past seven years a number of successful and some unsuccessful teachers concentrating on the kinds of difficulties I have been describing in this chapter, and these observations, rather than any systematic research on the matter, are the source of the recommendations that follow.

1. Where the intent is to spot and correct errors, grammar (which is used here to mean any effort to focus upon the formal properties of sentences) provides a useful way of looking at sentences. Correcting errors is an editorial rather than a composing skill and requires the writer to notice features of the sentence he would ordinarily have to ignore while composing. "The aim of a skillful performance," Michael Polanyi writes, "is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them."<sup>7</sup> Thus composing requires the writer to forget about the details that a proofreader must scrutinize. When he has finished, however, he needs new eyes that enable him to concentrate upon those formal relationships that, while related to his meaning, have not until this point been at the center of his attention. He must shift his orientation to the foreground. Grammar offers a way of looking at sentences that makes it easier to notice the kinds of details that figure in errors. It reorganizes the sentence along priorities that happen to serve the needs of proofreaders.

7. *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 49.

Like most native speakers, these students have acquired grammatical control of the language without English teachers or grammar books, and the effort to perceive forms rather than meaning, or more accurately, to perceive forms as another kind of meaning, goes against the grain. Time spent at the outset of instruction in clarifying the nature of this shift in perspective is well invested. Students rarely see any connection between the language they use (which they consider ungrammatical) and the grammar they study. One suspects that they think of grammar as a network of rules and prohibitions which exist outside the language and are imposed like laws on errant writers.

Actually, the students themselves are their best sources of information about grammar. Despite their difficulties with common errors, their intuitions about English are the intuitions of native speakers. Most of what they need to know has already been learned—without teachers. They can swiftly unscramble sentences that the foreign-language student would have to puzzle over. Persuaded that they know nothing about the verb-tense system, they are nonetheless able to follow without difficulty a passage such as the following, in which the tenses shift with almost every verb:

She *knows* what I mean because I *told* her yesterday. In fact, I *have told* her a million times that if she *refuses* to listen to me now, she *will be* sorry later. I wish I *had listened* to someone when I *was* her age.

What the students are not in the habit of doing is looking long and carefully at sentences in order to understand the way they work rather than what they mean. This involves a shift in perception which is ultimately more important than the mastery of any individual rule of grammar. Thus although it is the nature of grammar books and handbooks to proceed deductively, with the statement of a principle or rule and then the illustrations of that rule, it is important at least at the outset of grammar study to allow time for inductive learning. And throughout instruction, a student should be encouraged not simply to have the right answers but to have grammatical reasons for what he does, for grammar is more a way of thinking, a style of inquiry, than a way of being right.

One of the best ways to promote this view of grammar at the outset is to isolate the grammatical elements of the sentence from the lexical so that the student experiences the difference. This can be done by hav-