

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-

theless strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals 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 dialects at home and never successfully reconciled the worlds of home and school, a fact which by now had worked its way deep into their feelings 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 one 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 their 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 studies nor guides, nor even suitable textbooks to turn to. Here were teachers trained to analyze the belletristic achievements of the centuries 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-

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 platitudinous 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-

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.¹

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:²

Start 1

Seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to infant.

Start 2

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

Start 3

I agree that seeing and hearing is something beautiful and stronge 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 panthers 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, grew, grown), 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; hypercorrections 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 errors, 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 encouragements 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-

getting gestures or grimaces, or he can play upon the social responsiveness of his listener; the listener, in turn, can query 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.