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With So Little Time, Where Do We Start? Targeted Teaching Through Analyzing Error Egregiousness and Error Frequency

Katie Fredrickson
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Katie Fredrickson

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Kristine Hansen, Chair
Brian Jackson
Jon Ostenson

Department of English

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

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Katie Fredrickson

Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

Why do so many students confuse good writing with simply error-free writing, and what can writing instructors do about it? In order to answer this question, the present study first undertakes an exploration of the different meanings associated with grammar and how those definitions have influenced composition instruction. These influences range from an over-emphasis on grammar in the first half of the twentieth century to allowing it to disappear almost completely from the composition curriculum in the second half of the century. However, because research demonstrates that students over this same time period make errors in writing at a fairly constant rate, the present study investigated how writing instructors might target their teaching in order to strategically eliminate or decrease error from student writing while still maintaining composition classes focused on writing rather than grammar. A survey of frequent errors was constructed based on findings from Connors & Lunsford's 1988 study and Lunsford & Lunsford's 2008 study of error frequency; following Hairston's 1981 study, the survey also focused on error egregiousness. The survey was sent to samples from three different university populations: faculty, first-year writing students, and advanced writing students. Faculty's identification of errors and their seriousness is compared to that of students. The results of the survey help composition instructors target what to teach based on what students already know and don't know about error and its relative seriousness. The study offers suggestions for teaching the identified taxonomy of the most frequent, most serious errors; it also calls for more research in order to continue building the data instructors use to justify pedagogy.

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Introduction

When people find out I'm a writing teacher the reaction is always the same. "Oh sorry," they say, "I've never been very good at grammar." It seems they believe that writing is reduced to grammar rules, and, somehow, I instantly embody all that didn't go well in their high school English class. First-year college writing students seem to have a similar outlook on what writing actually is. A new student explaining his or her experience with writing might say something like, "I'm not good at writing. I just can't seem to remember where to put the commas." Again, writing apparently equals grammar and punctuation. How did this happen? How is it possible that so many people equate good writing only with error-free writing?

One reason our students may have arrived at the idea of grammar as writing is because correct, error free writing does matter rhetorically, both in the academy and the workplace. For example, a study done by The National Commission of Writing shows that solid fundamentals (spelling, grammar, and punctuation) are valued by human resource departments as the second most important characteristic of good writing. In fact, solid fundamentals (punctuation and grammar) were ranked above clarity, correct documentation and support, logical writing, concision, and even scientific precision (19). We cannot ignore what employers want from college graduates; we do need to prepare our students to meet these expectations. Not only that, but Larry Beason, in his article "How Business People React to Error," illustrates how errors affect the ethos of a writer in the business world, often causing the reader to judge the writer as hasty, careless, uncaring, uninformed, or poorly educated, just to name a few of the many negative perceptions (49-54). If we don't teach our students the concept of rhetorical ethos and

its connection to grammar and usage, we run the risk of allowing errors to damage our students'
credibility because writers who make errors are judged, rightly or not, as less credible and
persuasive.

Despite the effect that grammar has on ethos, many writing instructors still want a writing
a class that *writes*, and sometimes it feels like grammar and writing cannot peacefully exist in the
same classroom. As a result, composition instruction has often swung between focusing only on
grammar instruction and forgetting grammar instruction altogether. In the early part of the
twentieth century, avoiding errors was, by most accounts, over-emphasized in English
composition courses. Books like John Prince's *Practical English Grammar* were commonly used
to drill students on all the parts of speech and grammar rules. However, after the 1963
publication of the Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer report showing that grammar teaching did
not improve student writing, that approach fell largely into disuse. With the dawn of process
pedagogy in the 1970s, teaching students to avoid error started to have a more proportional
emphasis in classes, as teaching about error was relegated to the editing phase of the writing
process. Sentence level pedagogies, such as sentence combining and imitation, were used to help
students avoid errors and create more syntactically mature sentences. But, as Robert Connors
points out in "The Erasure of the Sentence," after 1980, the field of composition studies
marginalized sentence-level pedagogies as writing teachers and researchers became anti-
formalist and anti-empirical. The pendulum had swung from teaching too much about grammar
to teaching too little.

A few attempts, however, to get the field of composition teaching to focus more
thoughtfully and productively on the teaching of usage and error can be identified in the late
twentieth and early twenty-first century. Two of these attempts are error frequency studies, one

from 1988, conducted by Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford, and the other from 2008, conducted by Andrea Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford. These two studies showed that college students across the nation, regardless of the type of institution they studied at, frequently made the same type of errors—though the 2008 study showed new errors in the top 20 most frequently made errors as a result of widespread use of computers and inclusion of more research writing. Additionally, Maxine Hairston's 1981 study, "Not All Errors Are Created Equal," showed that some errors harm a writer's ethos more than others. These studies suggest that both frequency and egregiousness might be fruitful avenues to pursue in considering how best to teach error; however, to date, almost no additional research has been done.

The current project builds on the two error frequency studies and the Hairston study. It aims to understand how teachers can be strategic when it comes to teaching grammar and usage rules—both in terms of what gets taught as well as how best to teach the concepts. The research project was designed to answer the question: What can we do to help students understand error and how to avoid it, without turning a writing class into a grammar class? In order to answer this question I examined what little research we already had and created a new survey based on both error frequency and error egregiousness. This research project uniquely adds to the body of knowledge by including, for the first time, students' responses to the survey in order to understand where students might be both in terms of their ability to recognize error and their own development of an error hierarchy. Such information is essential as writing instructors seek to understand the students they will find in their classroom and their developmental capabilities for producing error-free writing.

After examining the results of the survey that combines both faculty and students' perceptions of nationally frequent errors, I propose a strategic way for instructors to go about

teaching grammar based on methods that are effective in terms of improving student writing. The strategy that I suggest centers on the idea that we must understand where our students are, both in terms of what they already understand and how they learn, in order to create a curriculum that is precise and offers the most effective grammar instruction while still maintaining the integrity of a writing class. In this way I am responding to calls within the rhetoric and composition field for more data-driven research to support the pedagogical choices that we are making.

<div align="center">Understanding Grammar and Its Pedagogical History</div>

Answering this study's question and understanding the confusion between good writing and "good grammar" must start with an understanding of both "grammar" and "error." As it turns out, defining both terms is not something that can be done simply. Patrick Hartwell, in his article "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" outlines five different definitions of grammar, each having its own implication for how error could be defined. Although there is some overlap between definitions, these definitions are helpful in understanding how we got where we are today and where we should go from here. First, Hartwell, quoting W. Nelson Francis, explains that grammar is the acquired, unconscious ability we have to produce meaningful sentences. Grammar 1, as he calls it, is what native speakers share to create meaning, but Grammar 1 is never taught explicitly to native speakers, who acquire it naturally as they grow up. It is "tacit, unconscious, 'knowing how' knowledge" (Hartwell 111-2). In the case of Grammar 1, an error would be making a mistake that no native speaker would make. Consider, for example, the sentence "Girl pretty has hair red." A native speaker would know, although unconsciously, that adjectives need to go in front of the nouns that they modify and that "the" should precede the first noun phrase. A non-native English speaker, however, who operates under a different set of unconscious language patterns, would be more likely to make this error.

Grammar 2 Hartwell identifies, again quoting Francis, as "the branch of linguistic science which is concerned with the description, analysis, and formulization of formal language patterns" (109). In essence, Grammar 2 is a science that attempts to codify *everything* that Grammar 1 entails; it is a complete linguistic description of the competency of native speakers. Grammar 2, Hartwell argues, is always changing, and is "simply unconnected to productive control over Grammar 1" (115). An error under this definition of grammar could be any dialectical variant that seems to fall outside of the language linguists are trying to describe. For example, "He don't like it" may be correct under the speaker's home system of Grammar 1, but might be incorrect according to the linguists' handbook describing standard English.

Another definition of grammar, Francis's Grammar 3, is "linguistic etiquette" (qtd. in Hartwell 109), or what Hartwell calls simply "usage" (110). It is also interesting to note that Hartwell does not consider this to be grammar at all. It is an arbitrary system that has been created for the sake of standardizing writing conventions. Usage rules would prescribe when to use "who" versus "whom," or "allusive" versus "elusive." An error in this system would be a violation of an arbitrary linguistic etiquette or convention that is in place to make communication more efficient. An example of a violation of Grammar 3 is a student writing "it's for "its." Grammar 4, closely related to Grammar 3, is what Hartwell terms "school grammar" (110). This type of grammar could take the form of a school book that reduces the complete linguistic description of language to a simplified system of rules in order to teach a vocabulary that allows for prescriptions such as "Make the subject agree with the verb" or "Use an 'apostrophe s' to make a possessive." For Hartwell, Grammar 4 is really insufficient because the rules presented "are inadequate to the facts of written language" and require students to know a large vocabulary in order to understand supposedly simple concepts. An error in this system of grammar would be

a breach of the rules commonly found in student grammar handbooks, for example, "Don't write sentence fragments." In order for students to comply with this rule they would have to understand the concepts of subjects, verbs, phrases, subordinate clauses, and main clauses (Hartwell, 120).

Finally, Hartwell terms Grammar 5 "stylistic grammar," but it could also be considered "rhetorical grammar" in the sense that Martha Kolln uses the term (124). Grammar 5 instruction would focus on language activity that enhances metalinguistic awareness, helping students see language as "verbal clay, to be molded and probed, shaped and reshaped, and, above all, enjoyed" (125). It is the intentional manipulation of language, both in content and surface form. With this definition of grammar, error becomes much broader; it could be anything that seems to work against an author's intended purpose.

With so many different definitions of grammar, a composition teacher can feel frustrated about knowing where to start or what to do. It would be fruitless to try and cover all of this information, or teach all of these different understandings of grammar to students and still have time for actual writing. Yet each of these different definitions of grammar and error seems to affect how pedagogy plays out in writing classrooms. During the last century alone, approaches to grammar and error in the composition classroom have changed significantly as our understanding of grammar and error has changed. Early examples of textbooks, such as John T. Prince's 1910 text *Practical English Grammar*, show the focus of an early composition classroom: drilling of correct school grammar forms. Prince's particular textbook is mostly made up of exercises that require students to practice identifying or describing different parts of speech (e.g., students are asked, "In what tense is each of the verbs in the following sentence?" [150]). Students are also asked to look at how sentences are constructed, and at other points in the text

they are instructed to "point out the relative clause in each sentence" (97) or to "analyze each sentence and parse each word" (there are 85 sentences for just this exercise alone) (214). Each of these exercises illustrates a strong belief in Grammar 4: a correct form of English that can be mastered with rules and repetitive exercises. Early composition classes followed this model; grammar instruction was the main focus of the class, though it was merely assumed that somehow this helped students to transfer the knowledge to actual writing. Prince's approach to good English is summarized in his own introduction. There he explains that the

> English language as it is spoken and written is either 'good English' or 'bad English.' English is good which clearly, exactly, and correctly expresses what the speaker or writer intends to say. Correctness of language, which is the main purpose of our present study, means the right construction of sentences, and is gained by following the practices of the best speakers and writers. (3)

Quality writing during this era was often determined by whether or not it followed the rule handbook. This focus on correctness supposedly taught students to master good writing.

Since the 1960's, however, studies have shown us the futility of this approach to teaching grammar in order to improve writing. For example, researchers Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer found that "the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (37-38). Hillocks and Smith's article "Grammar and Usage" also highlights the idea that explicitly teaching grammar does not enhance writing proficiency. They claim that "research over a period of nearly 90 years has consistently shown that the teaching of school grammar has little or no effect on students" (134-141). Clearly,

instructors cannot inundate composition students with lists of terms and rules that will detract from the time students spend developing other writing abilities.

In the last 40 years, likely in response to the drilling mentality and grammar instruction research, approaches to grammar and error in a composition class have changed. Isabella Halstead claimed in 1975 that many composition classes were only teaching error avoidance, not writing at all. She explained that when instructors fixate on error, students do, too. This makes the cognitive load associated with writing too high for young students, and writing becomes an impossible task for these writers. Halstead argues that composition classes and writing instruction must always be based on clear communication; thus "errors are important for only one reason: they interrupt the flow between writer and reader" (81). For Halstead, something like Hartwell's Grammar 5 was the important system, and errors were only important if they obscured an author's meaning.

Mina Shaughnessy, also writing in the 1970's, argues that while attention to teaching correct forms is important, teachers must not adopt one particular program in order to reach all students. Rather, instructors ought to try and understand each student's linguistic sophistication and the individual reasons (e.g., home dialect) behind student errors (40). In other words, Shaughnessy implies that teachers must understand how Grammar 1 works and help students see that the language competency they acquired at home is sometimes at odds with Grammar 3 or 4. From there, an instructor can work to address students' errors through individualized instruction. Shaughnessy also believes that instructors ought to help students see errors as something that impedes communication, hinders ethos, and blocks progress in academics and employment, not something that is inherently bad in and of itself.

Additionally, Constance Weaver, in her 1996 textbook *Teaching Grammar in Context,* offers other alternatives to teaching traditional, formal grammar, or Grammar 4. She suggests that teachers "minimize the use of grammatical terminology and maximize the use of examples," especially by having students read texts that use complex and sophisticated language. Weaver also highlights an inquiry or discovery based methodology that examines and questions correct language use in preference to a system that prescribes correct language use (36-27). Weaver believes that instruction should focus on writing as an act of communication, and that instruction about error should occur within the context of student writing. All three of these writers— Halsted, Shaughnessy, and Weaver—seem to agree that attention must be given first to Grammar 5—style, but that Grammar 3 and 4 could be used to help students succeed with their purpose in writing. They all suggest that the instruction should not be mindless drilling, but that it should focus on the importance of clear communication and on enhancing student awareness of language.

Despite the different approaches to and understandings of grammar and error in composition classrooms, there is one thing that has remained constant. Errors in grammar, usage, and punctuation are still present in our students' writing, and research shows that we find errors in student writing at almost the same rate over time. In fact, four different studies occurring from 1917 to 2006 show that the rate of error has remained much the same: between 2.11 and 2.45 errors per 100 words (Lunsford 800). But what are the *kinds* of errors students make most frequently? In 1988, Robert Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford performed a study to find the most common errors in student writing. After collecting over 21,000 marked papers from teachers across the US, they took a stratified random sample of 3,000 papers written by freshman and sophomore students and marked by the students' teachers. Taking a sub-sample of 300 papers,

Connors and Lunsford counted the most frequent errors in them to create a taxonomy of errors. After identifying the 20 most frequent errors in the sub-sample, they trained 50 raters to use the taxonomy and analyzed the entire sample of 3,000 papers. The results showed the 20 most frequent errors out of all possible errors. Twenty years later, in 2008, Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford replicated the original study, finding that while the top 20 errors students are making has changed somewhat (most likely in response to the more prevalent use of word processors since 1988 and the greater percentage of research papers included in the sample), the rate of error has not changed significantly. The two lists of frequent errors, the first from 1988 and the second from 2008, are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Most Frequent Errors from Two Studies

Connors and Lunsford, 1988*	Lunsford and Lunsford, 2008
1. No comma after introductory element	1. Wrong word
2. Vague pronoun reference	2. No comma after introductory element
3. No comma in compound sentence	3. Incomplete or missing documentation
4. Wrong word	4. Vague pronoun reference
5. No comma in non-restrictive element	5. Spelling error (including homonyms)
6. Wrong/missing inflected ending	6. Mechanical error with a quotation
7. Wrong or missing preposition	7. Unnecessary comma
8. Comma splice	8. Unnecessary or missing capitalization
9. Possessive apostrophe error	9. Missing word
10. Unnecessary shift in verb tense	10. Faulty sentence structure
11. Unnecessary shift in person	11. No comma in a non-restrictive element
12. Sentence fragment	12. Unnecessary shift in verb tense
13. Wrong tense or verb form	13. No comma in compound sentence

14. Subject-verb agreement error	14. Unnecessary or missing apostrophe
15. Lack of comma in series	15. Run-on or fused sentence
16. Pronoun agreement error	16. Comma splice
17. Unnecessary comma with restrictive element	17. Pronoun agreement error
18. Run-on or fused sentence	18. Poorly integrated quotation
19. Dangling or misplaced modifier	19. Unnecessary or missing hyphen
20. *Its/it's* error	20. Sentence fragment

*Spelling was the most common error in this study by three to one, but the authors chose not to include it in the list.

These two studies show that, although the ranking and naming of the error may change a bit, 12 errors remained in the top 20 after twenty years: spelling, wrong word, missing comma after introductory element, vague pronoun reference, missing comma in compound sentence, no comma in non-restrictive element, comma splice, apostrophe error, sentence fragment, unnecessary shift in tense, pronoun agreement errors, and run-on or fused sentence. Some frequent errors that showed up in 1988—wrong/missing inflected ending, wrong tense or verb form, subject-verb agreement, lack of comma in series, and its/it's error—may not have made the most frequent error list in 2008 because of editing software on computers that now helps students avoid these errors. New errors that commonly appeared in 2008—incomplete or missing documentation, mechanical error with a quotation, and poorly integrated quotation—came as a result of more research papers in the papers studied than were included in 1988.

These two error frequency studies, along with recent research on the teaching of grammar and error, suggest that composition teachers can be strategic about the ways we try to teach students about correctness by being mindful of the errors that our students actually make frequently. Rather than bring out the heavy cannons of complete grammar instruction, as John Prince did in 1910, perhaps we can prepare to make more precise surgical strikes in our teaching

by explaining to students what the most common errors are, why these errors matter, and how to avoid them. I believe that by being as strategic as possible, and by understanding best practices of grammar instruction, we can help our students to better avoid error while still maintaining a writing class where students write meaningful papers rather than spend time on drills and exercises that don't improve their writing.

But error frequency alone does not capture all that students might profit from understanding. Maxine Hairston's ambitious 1981 article "Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage," which categorizes and ranks errors in writing, proves that readers perceive certain errors as more egregious than others. As a writer of handbooks for college composition courses, Hairston was interested to know whether some errors might deserve more emphasis because of how serious readers perceived them to be. She compiled a survey that included 41 different errors, several of which are not highly frequent errors, as determined by the Lunsford et al. studies. Hairston administered the survey to a convenience sample of 101 professionals from 63 separate occupations in her community; 83% of the sample returned the survey. Although the respondents rated the items using only three categories—"bothers me a lot," "bothers me a little," and "does not bother me"—Hairston aggregated the results in five categories: "outrageous," "very serious," "serious," "moderately serious," and "minor or unimportant." Although Hairston does not disclose exactly how she determined which rank each error falls into, her overall interpretation of the survey results led her to conclude that professionals had "strong, conservative views about usage," and that despite the reader's ability to understand content, errors do affect the way a reader perceives the writer (799). Although a few of the errors Hairston studied were considered minor (e.g., using a singular verb with "data," or putting a colon after a linking verb), some were so

egregious that Hairston described them as "status markers" (e.g., "Jones has went" and "Calhoun don't think it's acceptable") (796). Hairston's research question has generated other studies that attempt to look at responses to student error, from Larry Beason's study titled "Ethos and Error: How Business People React to Errors" to Margaret Kantz and Robert Yates's conference paper "A Survey of Faculty Responses to Common and Highly Irritating Writing Errors." Each of these articles also confirms the conclusion that error egregiousness depends on the nature of the error, so I concluded that it would be important to include the idea of serious errors along with error frequency in my effort to identify the most strategic way to teach students how to recognize and correct errors.

These two dimensions of error—frequency and egregiousness—combine to show that in order to answer my initial question (What can we do to help students understand error and how to avoid it without turning a writing class into a grammar class?), we need to understand current perceptions and attitudes toward those errors that our students make frequently. Not only that, we need to take into consideration where our students might already be in both their ability to recognize errors and to perceive their seriousness in relation to faculty's perceptions. Prior research on seriousness of errors has never included students in the surveys; the present study adds that significant perspective. I therefore chose to study the perceptions of three different populations toward common errors: first-year writing (FYW) students, advanced writing (AW) students, and university professors. First, I wanted to see if students were able to notice examples of the most frequent errors in order to better understand if they were making errors based on a lack of grammar and usage understanding, or perhaps as a result of not spending adequate time and attention proofreading papers carefully. I also wanted to determine what students'

perceptions of error egregiousness were, since no study as of yet has asked them which errors they find most serious.

Finally, in doing this research I am responding to Chris Anson's call for more data-driven research in English studies. In his article "The Intelligent Design of Writing Programs: Reliance on Belief or a Future of Evidence," Anson shows how writing programs have been and will continue to be critiqued for their lack of data. In order to support best pedagogical practices and to be able to defend our writing programs against such critiques, we need research that brings empirical data. Such data can be used to support choices in a writing program and to show the importance of what we do. Ultimately, this data ought to be RAD research (replicable, aggregable, and data supported), as Richard Haswell explains, in order to build a large body of data that those in English studies can use to further understand writing and use as evidence to support their claims. My research responds to both of these arguments, seeking to add quantitative data to our information storehouse. I believe it is this type of research that can work to make studies in English more relevant to those outside the discipline, since communication is central to what we do as humans.

Methods

Instrument

In order to answer my research question I constructed a survey of 40 sentences, 37 of which had one error each in Standard English usage. In order to design this study, I first turned to the previously described Lunsford & Lunsford study that looked at error frequency. Starting here makes sense because spending class time addressing the most frequent errors should bring a bigger pay off. Although it would be best if each individual teacher considered what errors her or his students are making, I decided to use these nationally frequent errors in order to make my

results as generalizable as possible. In order to determine which errors were the most frequent, Lunsford and Lunsford collected college papers from universities all across the United States and made a coding rubric. To create this rubric, Andrea Lunsford looked at a stratified random sample of 50 student papers from the 1,826 papers that were collected. She marked every formal error that she could find in these papers and recorded them. The top 25 were the start of the coding rubric. In addition, Lunsford added the most common errors from the previous frequency study by Connors and Lunsford (1988) that did not show up in the top 25 errors in the Lunsford and Lunsford random stratified sample. In order to construct a survey that would look at the most common errors in student writing, I turned to the Lunsford and Lunsford coding rubric. This rubric includes all the common errors from the two different studies (Connors & Lunsford and Lunsford & Lunsford), plus a few more.

I also decided to include the most serious errors from Maxine Hairston's study, as I was curious to see if Hairston's most serious errors were also deemed very serious by my respondents. I also wanted to include these items because, in the event that they were again seen as the most serious, I could compare the results from my survey to Hairston's; also, I wanted to be able to determine whether any of the frequent errors were considered very serious to the same degree by faculty. Finally, I included 3 questions that did not have any error to ensure that respondents would not be able to assume that every sentence had an error as they were able to do in the original Hairston study. A breakdown of all the errors in my survey, compared with the Connors & Lunsford, Lunsford & Lunsford, and Hairston study can be found in Appendix 1. I would like to have included more than one example of each error, but I felt the need to keep the survey short in order to get as many responses as possible. The final survey took around 10 minutes to complete. The entire survey is in in Appendix 2.

Participants

The respondents for this survey came from three different groups at Brigham Young University: students from sections of the university's first-year composition class; students in any one of five advanced writing classes; and BYU faculty from all disciplines. Limiting the samples to one campus presents problems for generalizability, but limited time and resources and the small likelihood of getting cooperation from a broader population forced this decision.

The students were not chosen by a completely random method because of the bureaucratic difficulties of getting approval to contact students. Instead, the University Writing Program allowed me to contact students in 30 sections of Writing 150 (First Year Writing) and in 30 sections of Advanced Writing Classes: English 311 (Writing about the Arts and Humanities), English 312, (Persuasive Writing), English 313 (Expository Writing for Elementary Education Majors) English 315 (Writing in the Social Sciences), and English 316 (Technical Writing). This resulted in about 600 students in both first year and advanced writing groups receiving an email requesting their participation. The number of sections of each advanced writing class was chosen proportionately to the number of sections of each course that the university offered in winter 2014. While this procedure did not result in a random sample, I believe the students who responded are likely to be representative of the students enrolled in writing courses at BYU. However, they are not likely to be representative of students across the nation. The student population at BYU is not easily generalizable to all university populations because high school GPAs and ACT scores of entering BYU students are high compared to national norms.

The professors who received an invitation to take the survey came from a random sample of 500 names provided by the University Planning and Assessment Office. They included both full-time and part-time faculty in each different department across campus. While the sample

was random, it is not representative of all professors in the US, and certainly not representative of all professionals. However, it can be argued that faculty from across all disciplines represent an important group of highly literate professionals to consult about errors in writing, since their daily lives include much writing and reading of student writing.

Procedure

After IRB approval was attained, the survey was e-mailed to respondents. In the e-mail I included a brief letter co-signed by me; Dr. Brian Jackson, the Composition Coordinator; Dr. Delys Snyder, the Writing across the Curriculum Coordinator; and Dr. David Stock, the Writing Center Coordinator at BYU. The letter explained the importance of the research and urged faculty and students to participate. (See Appendix 2 for the complete letters.) If respondents accepted the invitation to take the survey and also agreed to the informed consent (see Appendix 3), they were directed to open the survey and read each sentence to determine whether it had an error or not. If they decided that the sentence had an error, they were asked to indicate how serious they perceived the error to be. They were instructed to judge seriousness in terms of how much the error negatively affected either their ability to understand the content of the sentence or their judgment of the credibility of the writer. Participants could select their perception of an error's seriousness based on a four point scale: not very serious, somewhat serious, serious, and very serious.

<div align="center">Results and Discussion</div>

The Qualtrics survey remained open for one month. Statistical Analysis System (SAS) software was used to create cross tabulation tables and produce chi-square tests for each item along with p-values to determine whether any of the results were statistically significant. The results of the statistical analysis are summarized and interpreted below. It's important to note

here that not all respondents answered all questions, but the SAS system was able to compensate for different numbers of respondents on each item. The demographics of the respondents who completed the survey are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of Respondents Who Completed the Survey

	Total	Female *	Male*	College of Humanities	Other Colleges
Faculty	92 (18.4%)	46	45	36	51
Advanced Writing	85 (14%)	45	40		
FYW	82 (14%)	51	31		

*One respondent chose not to disclose gender.

Of faculty who responded, 39% were from the College of Humanities, which may indicate that faculty whose professional lives are focused heavily on language are more likely to respond to a survey on language errors; or it may indicate they feel more comfortable about their knowledge of error; and/or it may indicate that because they were more likely to be acquainted with the signers of the invitation email, these respondents felt more inclined to participate. Whatever the reason, the results may need to be read with some allowance for the preponderance of humanities faculty who responded. However, 61% of the respondents were from other colleges, including the following: Education—4; Family, Home, and Social Sciences—14; Fine Arts and Communications—9; Law School—1; Life Sciences—4; Management—5; Mathematical and Physical Sciences—6; Religious Education—4; Engineering and Technology—2; and Nursing—2.[1] In order to determine whether the high percentage of humanities faculty might have skewed the data, the 87 faculty respondents who disclosed the college they were in were divided into humanities and non-Humanities and chi square analyses were done on their responses. This

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[1] Two smaller colleges, Continuing Education and International Studies, returned zero responses.

analysis showed no significant differences in the answers of humanities faculty members compared to all others.

The first aspect of the data that revealed important information was the three different samples' ability to recognize errors. For every item, respondents could indicate that there was "no error" and move on to the next item. Three of the items (35, 29 and 19) actually contained no error. A clear conclusion, and perhaps an expected one, is that faculty are, on the whole, better than students at detecting the presence of error, as both Table 3 and Table 4 indicate. (AW and FYW students in both Table 3 and Table 4 are lumped together in comparisons against faculty because comparisons of student responses in these two groups showed a significant difference ($p < 0.01$) for only two of the survey items, 6 and 18. So the final column on both Table 3 and Table 4 indicates whether the AW and FYW students together differ significantly from the faculty or not.) Table 3 demonstrates that faculty correctly identified the sentences that were error-free at consistently high levels, but only for item 29 were the faculty significantly better than the students. Although on two items a higher percentage of students than faculty correctly marked "no error," this is by no means an indication that students are better at identifying error free sentences. When Table 3 data are looked at in connection with Table 4 it becomes obvious that students marked "no error" more often than faculty in almost all of the items. Table 4 displays the percentage of faculty, as compared with students, that incorrectly determined a sentence contained an error when it did not.

Table 3. Percent of faculty correctly identifying error-free sentences compared to students

Item number and item type	% of faculty who correctly marked 'no error'	% of AW who correctly marked 'no error'	% of FYW who correctly marked 'no error'	Significance
29. No error	79%	45%	54%	$p < 0.01$
35. No error	78%	84%	85%	NS
19. No error	75%	82%	78%	NS

Table 4. Percent of faculty incorrectly identifying sentences as error-free compared to students

Item number and item type	% of faculty who incorrectly marked 'no error'	% of AW who incorrectly marked 'no error'	% of FYW who incorrectly marked 'no error'	Significance
34. Wrong preposition	38%	77%	75%	p < 0.01
13. Wrong word	30%	52%	68%	p < 0.01
30. Unnecessary comma with restrictive element	29%	43%	51%	p < 0.01
16. Misused colon	28%	40%	49%	NS
20. Missing comma in compound sentence	26%	39%	33%	NS
12. Vague pronoun reference	19%	36%	45%	p < 0.01
31. Unnecessary comma before a quotation	19%	41%	44%	p < 0.01
7. Error in mechanics of quotation	17%	28%	32%	NS
18. Hyphen error	14%	32%	54%	p < 0.01
8. Comma splice	13%	29%	43%	p < 0.01
22. Dangling or misplaced modifier	12%	48%	56%	p < 0.01
33. Missing inflection	12%	16%	23%	NS
3. Missing capitalization	12%	27%	29%	p < 0.01
38. Wrong tense	11%	30%	20%	p < 0.01
10. Missing comma after introductory element	10%	13%	12%	NS
24. Quotation marks misused for emphasis	9%	8%	20%	NS
21. Faulty pronoun-antecedent agreement	9%	47%	62%	p < 0.01
11. Spelling error	8%	27%	28%	p < 0.01
23. Confused homonyms	5%	26%	33%	p < 0.01
25. Faulty subject-verb agreement	4%	14%	18%	p < 0.01
40. *I* as object	4%	14%	30%	p < 0.01
15. Poorly integrated quotation	4%	18%	17%	p < 0.01
9. Its/it's confusion	2%	9%	13%	NS
36. Missing comma in a series	2%	19%	24%	p < 0.01
37. Shift in person	2%	19%	23%	p < 0.01
17. Shift in tense	2%	7%	7%	NS
4. Non-parallel structure	2%	3%	6%	NS
5. Missing comma with non-restrictive element	2%	3%	1%	NS
1. Sentence fragment	1%	4%	13%	p < 0.01
6. Possessive apostrophe error	1%	3%	14%	p < 0.01
14. Faulty sentence structure	1%	2%	12%	p < 0.01

32. Unnecessary comma with coordinating conjunction	1%	8%	7%	NS
27. Double negative	1%	1%	1%	NS
26. Nonstandard verb form	0%	14%	20%	$p < 0.01$
28. Object pronoun as subject	0%	3%	5%	NS
39. Unnecessary comma before sentence object	0%	3%	5%	NS
2. Run-on (fused) sentence	0%	0%	0%	NS

As Table 4 shows, there were five errors that more than 25% of the faculty did not

recognize as such: items 34, 13, 30, 16, and 20. Two of these five errors ranked low on the

seriousness scale for faculty (item 30, unnecessary comma with restrictive element, ranked 32nd;

item 34, wrong preposition, ranked 35th). The other three ranked higher on the seriousness scale

(item 20, missing comma in compound sentence, ranked 13th; item 16, misuse of a colon, ranked

15th; and item 13, wrong word, ranked 20th). These last three errors were apparently more

difficult for faculty to spot, but faculty who recognized them also considered them more serious.

It is interesting that wrong word error ranked first in the Lunsford and Lunsford study for

frequency, and the lack of a comma in a compound sentence ranked third in frequency in the

Connors and Lunsford study. Part of the reason these errors could be so common is that they can

be easily missed in a quick read, even by faculty.

Encouragingly, even though students in both groups are not as successful at recognizing

errors as faculty, students do seem to become more adept at recognizing error as they move from

FYW to an AW class. With few exceptions, there were smaller percentages of AW students than

FYW students not seeing errors that were present. However, both student groups were

challenged by the same errors, with the same 14 errors being missed by 25% or more of both

FYW and AW students.

Table 4 is most important, however, in that faculty were significantly better at identifying

23 of the 37 errors. For each of these 23 items the probability that results were due to chance was

less than 0.01%. This clearly shows that for these certain errors, the faculty have knowledge that the students do not; this difference is statistically not attributable to chance. These items that had significant p-values can be one place where we teachers can focus our instruction in order to help students make progress in reducing error as effectively as possible because we know that the problem for our students is more likely lack of knowledge then mere laziness when it comes to proof reading.

Nevertheless, instruction planning should also consider those errors that are most serious to faculty. Table 5 shows how the three groups compare with each other in rating the seriousness of each error. The items in Table 5 are arranged by how serious the faculty respondents judged the error to be, from most serious to least serious, compared to advanced writing students and first-year writing students. The shading in this table represents where I would draw the lines between five different categories of seriousness; these categories were created by looking at the faculty responses of "very serious" or "serious" in comparison to "somewhat serious" or "not very serious." The cut-off for the "most serious" category was whether 80% or more of faculty deemed the error as either very serious or serious. Between the 80% cutoff and the next category, "very serious," there was a big gap, then a group of errors that 53% to 57% of the faculty marked as "very serious" or "serious." The cut-off for the next category, "serious," was 34% to 48%, which might seem like unusual numbers. However, it was at this point that the errors below were considered either "somewhat serious" or "not very serious" by more faculty than not. The next category, which I called "moderately serious," was formed because at least twice as many faculty saw these errors as either only "somewhat serious" or "not very serious" compared to those who saw them as more egregious. The cut-off was 11%. Finally, the cut-off for the last section,

"minor or unimportant," was whether 10% or less of the faculty saw the error as serious or very serious.

Chi square tests performed on each item in the survey showed that for 14 of the 37 errors there is a significant difference between faculty's and students' perceptions of seriousness, with faculty deeming the error more serious than students at a rate that is statistically significant. This again implies that there are certain attitudes that faculty have regarding error that students do not yet understand. Table 5 illustrates these findings.

Table 5. Hierarchy of Errors

Survey Item Number and Type of Error	% of Faculty Identifying Item as Very Serious or Serious	% of Advanced Students Identifying Item as Very Serious or Serious	% of First-Year Students Identifying Item as Very Serious or Serious	Significance
27. Double negative	89%	85%	83%	NS
28. Object pronoun as subject	87%	65%	62%	NS
26. Nonstandard verb form	82%	52%	42%	$p < 0.01$
2. Run-on (fused) sentence	80%	62%	59%	$p < 0.01$
14. Faulty sentence structure	57%	59%	44%	NS
36. Missing comma in a series	54%	49%	35%	$p < 0.01$
40. *I* as object	54%	28%	20%	$p < 0.01$
6. Possessive apostrophe error	52%	49%	35%	NS
1. Sentence fragment	53%	29%	27%	$p < 0.01$
25. Faulty subject-verb agreement	48%	29%	27%	$p < 0.01$
37. Shift in person	48%	45%	37%	NS
17. Shift in tense	47%	48%	37%	NS
23. Confused homonyms	46%	30%	23%	$p < 0.01$
4. Non-parallel structure	45%	35%	33%	NS
33. Missing inflection	44%	32%	30%	NS

15. Poorly integrated quotation	40%	25%	26%	NS
9. Its/it's confusion	37%	29%	25%	$p < 0.01$
22. Dangling or misplaced modifier	37%	8%	15%	$p < 0.01$
13. Wrong word	35%	30%	44%	$p < 0.01$
8. Comma splice	34%	15%	5%	$p < 0.01$
12. Vague pronoun reference	34%	27%	21%	$p < 0.01$
5. Missing comma with non-restrictive element	33%	41%	19%	NS
11. Spelling error	33%	16%	18%	$p < 0.01$
3. Missing capitalization	30%	12%	7%	NS
39. Unnecessary comma before sentence object	29%	27%	21%	NS
24. Quotation marks misused for emphasis	29%	38%	19%	NS
38. Wrong tense	27%	19%	16%	$p < 0.01$
21. Faulty pronoun-antecedent agreement	24%	5%	4%	NS
32. Unnecessary comma with coordinating conjunction	24%	17%	9%	NS
7. Error in mechanics of quotation	20%	12%	14%	NS
16. Misused colon	15%	7%	12%	NS
10. Missing comma after introductory element	11%	14%	8%	NS
30. Unnecessary comma with restrictive element	11%	8%	3%	NS
31. Unnecessary comma before a quotation	11%	5%	7%	NS
34. Wrong preposition	10%	2%	6%	NS
20. No comma in compound sentence	9%	5%	2%	NS

19. No error	3%	1%	9%	NS
29. No error	3%	11%	6%	NS
18. Hyphen error	2%	2%	4%	NS
35. No error	0%	1%	1%	NS

One of the first interesting findings in Table 5 is that there is not a hierarchy of errors that is similar when the three different groups are compared. Although the rankings seem to start out similar, there is not a decipherable pattern that continues throughout. For example, the top two most egregious errors for all three groups were exactly the same: double negative and object pronouns as subject. However, after this point the two student populations start to more closely resemble each other and to differ from faculty. The FYW and AW students had the same top 10 serious errors, although there is a slight variation in the order; faculty had seven similar items in their top ten, but the order differs markedly. By the eleventh error in the ranking, both student samples' rankings stay closer to each other, but differ more and more from the rankings of the faculty sample. This suggests that students simply have less understanding of the rhetorical effects of error and thus don't judge error seriousness the same way faculty do.

Another interesting result from the comparisons of each item showed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that faculty generally find errors to be more serious than both FYW and AW students. While there were six errors that a higher percentage of AW students thought to be more serious than the faculty did, the differences between perceptions on four of these errors was by 3% or less, which is likely not significant. The two errors that AW students found to be slightly more serious than faculty were quotation marks inappropriately used for emphasis and a missing comma with a non-restrictive element; both these errors were considered serious or very serious to 8-9% more AW students than to faculty. However, the only error that FYW students considered

to be more serious than faculty was the hyphen error, and only by 2%, which is likely insignificant.

Also interesting, and encouraging, was that AW students generally see error as more serious than first-year writing students. There were only 3 errors that a higher percentage of FYW students deemed serious or very serious than did AW students, but the difference between FYW and AW for each of these errors was 4% or less, probably insignificant. This implies that as students move through their university studies they are likely becoming more attuned to the way errors in writing affect both the audience's ability to understand as well as the audience's perception of the writer.

Finally, by and large, faculty do not see the frequent errors from the Connors & Lunsford and the Lunsford & Lunsford studies to be nearly as serious as the status-marking errors from Hairston's study. In fact, there were only six frequently occurring errors (run-on or fused sentence, faulty sentence structure, missing comma in a series, possessive apostrophe error, sentence fragment, and faulty subject-verb agreement) that more faculty in this study identified as serious or very serious rather than somewhat serious or not very serious. The fact that the faculty see the rest of the errors as only somewhat serious or not very serious could be one reason that they occur so frequently in student writing. Students often attune themselves to worrying about the things that are important to their instructors, and they probably worry about errors only as much as their teachers do.

It is one thing to determine how serious errors are perceived by respondents to the present survey. It is another thing to determine whether these perceptions of seriousness have some "real world" validity. One way to check the validity of these perceptions is to compare the present findings about seriousness to those of Hairston's 1981 survey. The major difficulty in making

this comparison is that the two surveys are not identical; Hairston did not use frequency of errors as a basis for deciding which errors to include in her survey, nor did I use the same sentences Hairston did for the same error. However, the errors tested in her survey and the present study are the same or very similar in 24 instances, and there were only 17 errors that Hairston tested that I did not. (Hairston had multiple examples of some types of errors.) By sorting the findings from the present study into five categories of seriousness (as shown by the shading in Table 5), it is possible to compare the judgments of seriousness between the two surveys, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Comparison of Fredrickson's findings with Hairston's

Item type	Fredrickson's Seriousness Ranking	Hairston's Seriousness Ranking
Nonstandard verb form	Most serious	Most serious (status marking)
Double negative	Most serious	Most serious (status marking)
Object pronoun as subject	Most serious	Most serious (status marking)
Run-on (fused) sentence	Most serious	Very serious
Faulty sentence structure (Hairston calls this "predication error")	Very serious	Serious
Missing comma in a series	Very serious	Serious
I as object	Very serious	Serious
Sentence fragment	Very serious	Very serious
Possessive apostrophe error	Very serious	Serious
Faulty subject-verb agreement	Very serious	Very serious (non-status marking)
Shift in tense	Serious	Serious
Shift in person	Serious	Serious
Non-parallel structure	Serious	Very serious
Vague pronoun reference	Serious	Does not specify
Its/it's confusion	Serious	Minor or unimportant
Dangling or misplaced modifier	Serious	Does not specify
Comma splice	Serious	Moderately serious
Missing comma with non-restrictive element	Moderately serious	Serious
Missing capitalization	Moderately serious	Very serious
Unnecessary comma before sentence object	Moderately serious	Very serious
Colon after linking verb	Moderately serious	Minor or unimportant
Missing comma after introductory element	Moderately serious	Moderately serious

Faulty pronoun-antecedent agreement	Moderately serious	Serious
Wrong preposition	Minor or unimportant	Minor or unimportant

The comparative rankings in Table 6 illuminate some interesting findings. First, although this study was not meant to directly reproduce Hairston's 1981 study, it did confirm most of her original findings as far as the most egregious errors are concerned. For example, double negatives, object pronouns used as subjects, and nonstandard past tense or past participle verb forms could again be defined as the most serious errors. For each of these errors, 80% or more of the faculty taking my survey saw the error as either serious or very serious. Additionally, sentence fragments, which were deemed very serious in Hairston's study, were seen by faculty to be in the most serious category in my study; exactly 80% of faculty found this error to be very serious. These four errors were found to be markedly more egregious than the rest of the errors in the study.

However, while most errors in the two surveys match up in the same category or near categories, some of the errors did end up in significantly different categories. For example, *its/it's* errors and the comma splice seemed more serious to my faculty respondents than they seemed to be to Hairston's professional sample. A non-capitalized proper noun, however, was considered less serious by respondents to my survey. The fact that there were differences between findings certainly proves Anson's claim that English departments need to be producing more data-based research that can be used to improve pedagogical practices instead of relying on one study conducted in the past.

Implications for Teaching

The previously existing and rather limited research suggested that we might try to be more strategic when it comes to teaching error avoidance. The present study sought to

understand how we could be the most strategic in our teaching. After examining the data that was gathered and previous error research, I suggest a methodology for being as strategic as possible both in terms of what we teach and how we teach error avoidance.

First, as instructors we must always consider where our students are in terms of the errors they frequently make, their ability to recognize errors, and their own development of an error hierarchy. If we only teach our students to avoid the most serious errors, we will likely miss errors that are actually frequently made. Table 5 of my study shows, for example, that students are actually successful at identifying the most serious errors already; they even agree with faculty that they are indeed the most serious. Yet if we only look at frequent errors without considering egregiousness, we will miss an opportunity to narrow our curriculum and get the most from a limited time for instruction. While all the tables in this study can help an instructor plan for the future, I've determined an important hierarchy of errors related to both frequency and egregiousness based on my results. Instructors at BYU and elsewhere could use this hierarchy as they begin to plan their curriculum; however, all teachers should consider where their own students are individually in terms of the errors they frequently make. The following items in Table 7 should receive attention as they are frequent error items (according to either the Connors & Lunsford or the Lunsford & Lunsford studies) that students were significantly less likely to notice. Also, these errors should receive attention because they are either significantly more serious to faculty than students or in the top three levels of seriousness for faculty. This list is ranked according to what faculty find to be the most serious as demonstrated in Table 5.

Table 7. Hierarchy of Errors to Teach

Error Type	Frequency	Seriousness
1. Faulty sentence structure	Lunsford & Lunsford #10	Very Serious
2. Missing comma in a series	Connors & Lunsford #15	Very Serious
3. Possessive apostrophe error	Lunsford & Lunsford #14 Connors & Lunsford #9	Very Serious

4. Sentence fragment	Lunsford & Lunsford #20	Very Serious
	Connors & Lunsford #12	
5. Faulty subject-verb agreement	Connors & Lunsford #14	Very Serious
6. Shift in person	Connors & Lunsford #11	Serious
7. Confused homonyms	Lunsford & Lunsford #5	Serious
8. Poorly integrated quotation	Lunsford & Lunsford #18	Serious
9. Dangling or misplaced modifier	Connors & Lunsford #19	Serious
10. Wrong word	Lunsford & Lunsford #1	Serious
	Connors & Lunsford #4	
11. Comma splice	Lunsford & Lunsford #16	Serious
	Connors & Lunsford #8	
12. Vague pronoun reference	Lunsford & Lunsford #4	Serious
	Connors & Lunsford #2	
13. Spelling error	Lunsford & Lunsford #5	Moderately serious
	Connors & Lunsford – Most common error, but not on list	
14. Wrong tense	Connors & Lunsford #13	Moderately serious

By using this list when prioritizing classroom instruction time, teachers may be able to have

maximum impact on helping students avoid and reduce errors because these are frequent, serious

errors that students don't seem to be noticing even when asked to look for errors in sentences.

We can also be strategic by considering not just what we will teach but how we will teach

students to avoid these errors. We know that traditional grammar instruction, (and by traditional I

mean terminology-laden, explicit, deductive, and context free), does not help students avoid

errors in their writing, so we need to limit the amount of traditional grammar instruction taking

place in our classrooms. One strategy we can use to limit the amount of traditional instruction we

are giving to our students is to group the decidedly important errors by similar concepts and then

to think about how to teach these errors with the least use of traditional instructional techniques.

Table 8 illustrates one possible way to group the most problematic errors from my study into

four categories—correct word use, simple punctuation, sentence sense, and sentence roles—in

order to plan for strategic teaching.

Table 8. Grouping for Effective Teaching

Correct Word Use	Simple Punctuation	Sentence Sense	Sentence Roles
Wrong word	Missing comma in a series	Comma splice	Shift in person
Spelling error	Possessive apostrophe error	Sentence fragment	Faulty subject-verb agreement
Confused homonyms		Faulty sentence structure	Vague pronoun reference
Wrong tense		Poorly integrated quotation	Dangling or misplaced modifier

After grouping these errors, I've considered different ways to teach the concepts in order to limit traditional instruction. The errors under "Correct Word Use," for the most part, can often be caught by careful proofreading or peer review, as well as computer spelling and grammar checkers. We can help our students to be more successful proofreaders by not marking errors on their drafts, but instead indicating in the margin with a check mark that an error occurs somewhere in the line. This suggestion, found in Richard Haswell's article "Minimal Marking" helps students find and fix their own errors without grammar instruction. In fact, Haswell explains that when his students go back to proofread their paper and fix the errors, "students will correct on their own sixty to seventy percent of their errors" (601). The knowledge that they gain from correcting their own errors can transfer to helping students avoid error in the future. Another way we can help students review their own writing is to follow Jeff Anderson's suggestions in "The Express-Lane Edit: Making Editing Useful for Young Adolescents." Here Anderson suggests making short lists of errors for students to look for as they edit their own papers. When we review one or two items with our students and then ask them to look for only these one or two types of errors in their drafts, we make the editing process easier and more meaningful to our students (40-43). This same strategy can be applied to peer review, where we

ask our students to limit the amount of errors they are looking for in order to focus their attention specifically on certain errors.

In order to make these tools like grammar checkers more useful to students we need to include instruction on how to best utilize these tools. Reva Potter and Dorothy Fuller, for example, describe in "My New Teaching Partner? Using the Grammar Checker in Writing Instruction" how instructors can help students understand and decide between the suggestions made by grammar checker software. They recommend "including activities where learners respond to grammar-check recommendations in small groups, make corrections on highlighted errors without the help of computer suggestions, create sentences to trigger the grammar checker or fool it, and compare rules in the grammar checker to rules in the grammar handbook" in order to help students learn to best use the grammar checker to their advantage (37). If we give our students the direction, grammar checkers can better help our students to avoid error while also helping us to teach grammar without using traditional instruction methods.

The errors under "Simple Punctuation" may take only a few minutes of traditional instruction. In order for students to really start paying attention to these errors, however, it may be helpful to talk about how serious they have been perceived to be by different populations. This can happen as students have in-depth rhetorical discussions about how errors mar ethos. As my study demonstrates, it may be that students, even when they recognize an error, don't see it as affecting ethos or meaning as seriously as their professors do. Therefore, students need to have important discussions and investigations where they can begin to see errors *rhetorically;* that is, errors are not seen as a breach of rules but rather as weak choices for communicating a specific purpose. If students can start to see errors as choices that have a rhetorical effect and that these choices sometime do impede communication, we can help them to avoid error more

effectively than if they think they are trying to understand arbitrary rules that don't inherently mean much to them.

To address the errors under "Sentence Sense," instructors could return to sentence pedagogies such as sentence-combining and imitation exercises. Sentence-combining asks students to take short, simple sentences and combine them, while imitation exercises require a student to write sentences that follow the same structure of model sentences. Robert Connors, in "The Erasure of the Sentence," collects empirical research to show that both of these methods produce better syntactic results in student writing, while imitation even helps students to write "better expository prose with fewer flaws and errors" (102). Both of these exercises increase the grammatical complexity of the student's own sentences in writing. After students start playing around with language and realize how capable they are, there can be some simple, direct teaching of what a sentence is: a group of words that contain both subject and verb. Once students grasp this one concept, each of these items will be much simpler to teach. However, we should also help students to realize that these rules we are teaching can be arbitrary; we can break them to enhance meaning or to try and garner more attention from our readers. Sentence fragments, for example, are a tool that many professional writers use to effectively convey meaning. When our students understand this concept, maybe they will feel less scared of breaking a rule when drafting.

The last section, Sentence Roles, may be best taught with some traditional instruction with individualized follow-up and application to writing. Traditional instruction may work for these most frequent, most serious errors that students detect less well than faculty, so long as we limit our traditional instruction to these few errors and always remember to take the instruction back to the students' actual writing. Weaver suggests that instructors "introduce only a minimum

of terminology" and focus instead on helping students to understand the main concepts (144-145). By keeping these suggestions in mind, our students will be more likely to remember and apply these concepts in their own writing.

Finally, in order to be the most strategic, all of this grammar and usage instruction must occur at critical junctures during the writing process, and must be tied back to the students' own writing. Students must be reminded at the critical editing stage how rhetorically ineffective these errors can be so that students will believe that removing them is worth the extra effort of reading their paper one more time. This methodology follows a suggestion made by Weaver that the timing for teaching important concepts matters, and that it should happen "when students are ready to revise or edit at the sentence level" (145). Having these conversations too early likely will overwhelm a student during the drafting stage of writing. Teachers can also be strategic by limiting the number of errors they teach and grade with each assignment, making the task smaller and more manageable for students.

<div align="center">Limitations of the Present Study</div>

Despite my efforts to overcome the limitations of Hairston's original study, my survey still had limitations. First, there was only one example of each type of error in the survey. I recognize that different sentences with the same type of error may have gotten a different response. Not repeating errors was, I decided, necessary to keeping the survey short so that I could get the number of responses that I hoped for. Regardless of my attempts to construct a short survey, another limitation was that I didn't get the sample sizes I would have hoped for. While I wanted to get responses from at least 100 people in each sample, the survey was not getting enough responses after the initial two requests; after inviting people a third time to take the survey, I had to close it and begin the analysis. When people are invited to take a survey,

there is also the possibility of selection bias. My survey may have attracted certain types of people, for example, those who feel particular adept at grammar and usage. It is possible that a lot of the respondents—perhaps particularly among the faculty—were those who are interested in writing or think they are good at it and want to offer their opinion. I had wanted to compare responses from faculty in different colleges, but some colleges had so few faculty respondents that I could not produce any generalizable conclusions.

Another limitation from the survey is that I can't be certain that the error I purposefully put into the sentence was the error the respondent was seeing when they judged the seriousness of the error. The only way to resolve this limitation would have been to have the respondents mark where they saw the error in the sentence. Not only would this have added a lot of time to the survey, but it would also have made it very difficult for the survey to be administered on a computer. It would also create an extreme amount of data to sort through on each question. I tried to overcome this limitation as best I could, however, by being certain that there was only one error in each sentence and by writing sentences that were as unambiguous as possible in content.

Finally, the last limitation was suggested by Joseph Williams, who argued that as instructors we are harsher critics when it comes to errors in student writing than we are when it comes to reading other material, because when we look for error we are likely to find it. Because the survey I administered does ask people to read looking for error, it is likely that they spotted more errors than they would have otherwise. This is also a limitation that Hairston recognized in her own study, and she suggested that the data be interpreted in light of this idea. I tried to respond to this limitation as best I could by including a few sentences that did not have an error in them. Although this doesn't totally overcome the limitation, it does soften the pressure to read

looking for errors. Still, despite the fact that the data may represent higher responses to errors than would actually occur in a different setting, I don't think we ought to say, especially in our field, that there is no way to get purely accurate data, so there is no reason to try to get data at all. Despite the limitations, the data presented here can help us to understand important perspectives from both faculty and students that can work to help us create stronger pedagogical practices.

Future Research

Because of the limitations of this research both in its design and in its generalizability, it is important that additional research be done to build a reliable body of knowledge about error and error instruction that writing instructors can use to improve curriculum. I recommend that this study be replicated at campuses across the country, but with different sentences to see if each type of error maintains a similar status of egregiousness. For example, I was the most surprised by item 36, missing comma in a series. I wondered if the reason this error was deemed as serious as it was had anything to do with the sample sentence in my survey, which ran authors' names together, instead of another type of serial list. (This item was number 36 in my survey and read "My favorite authors are Twain Steinbeck and Dickens.") Other research directions could study the effectiveness of teaching serious, frequent errors before any other error. Does this strategy actually help students to improve?

Not only do we need more studies that reproduce our results to make them more reliable, but we also need current writing instructors to keep these ideas in mind as they are teaching their classes. Instructors should constantly be assessing what is happening in their classroom as well as what is expected of their students when they leave the classroom. As we use our time, both in research and in teaching, to perform, understand and apply empirical research in composition

studies, we can be more confident that we are giving our students the instruction they need to

perform as writers who can produce both strong content and an error-free presentation.

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Appendix One: Comparison of Frequent Errors Identified to those Studied in Surveys of Egregiousness

Connors and Lunsford, 1988 (Ranked from most frequent to least)	Lunsford and Lunsford, 2008 (Rank of error frequency is given in parentheses)	Hairston, 1981 Study of Error Seriousness	Fredrickson, 2014 Study of Error Seriousness
Spelling was the most common error in this study by three to one, but the authors chose not to include it in the list.	Spelling error (including homonyms) (5)	Homonym error (affect-effect)	Spelling error Homonym error
No comma after introductory element	No comma after introductory element (2)	No comma after introductory element	No comma after introductory element
Vague pronoun reference	Vague pronoun reference (4)	Vague pronoun reference	Vague pronoun reference
No comma in compound sentence	No comma in compound sentence (13)		No comma in a compound sentence
Wrong word	Wrong word (1)		Wrong word
No comma in non-restrictive element	No comma in non-restrictive element (11)	No comma in non-restrictive element (2x)	No comma in non-restrictive element
Wrong/missing inflected ending			Missing inflected ending
Wrong or missing preposition		Wrong preposition (2x)	Wrong preposition
Comma splice	Comma splice (16)	Comma splice (3x)	Comma splice
Possessive apostrophe error	Unnecessary or missing apostrophe (14)	Missing apostrophe (2x)	Missing apostrophe
Shift in tense	Shift in tense (12)	Shift in tense (2x)	Shift in tense
Shift in person		Shift in person	Shift in person
Sentence fragment	Sentence fragment (20)	Sentence fragment (4x)	Sentence fragment
Wrong tense or verb form			Wrong tense or verb form
Subject-verb agreement		Subject-verb agreement (6x)	Subject-verb agreement
Lack of comma in series		Lack of comma in a series	Lack of comma in series
Pronoun agreement error	Pronoun agreement error (17)	Pronoun agreement error	Pronoun agreement error
Unnecessary comma with restrictive element			Unnecessary comma with restrictive element
Run-on or fused sentence	Run-on or fused sentence (15)	Fused sentence	Run-on or fused sentence

Dangling or misplaced modifier		Dangling modifier (2x)	Dangling or misplaced modifier
Its/it's error		*Its/It's* error	*Its/It's* error
	Incomplete or missing documentation (3)		
	Mechanical error with a quotation (6)		Mechanical error with a quotation
	Unnecessary comma (7)	Unnecessary comma before sentence complement	Unnecessary comma before a quotation; Unnecessary comma before coordinating conjunction joining compounds; Unnecessary comma before sentence object
	Unnecessary or missing capitalization (8)	Missing capitalization (3x)	Unnecessary or missing capitalization
	Missing word (9)		
	Faulty sentence structure (10)		Faulty sentence structure
	Poorly integrated quotation (18)		Poorly integrated quotation
	Unnecessary or missing hyphen (19)		Unnecessary or missing hyphen
		Double negative (2x)	Double negative
		Nonstandard verb form (3x)	Nonstandard verb form
		Object pronoun as subject	Object pronoun as subject
		I as object	*I* as object
		Lack of parallelism (2x)	Lack of parallelism
		Colon after linking verb	Colon after linking verb
		Whoever/whomever confusion	
			Quotation marks misused for emphasis
		Missing quotation marks (2x)	
		"Most unique"	
		Predication error (2x)	
		Confused verbs (sit/set)	

		Run-on sentence with too many "ands"	
		Adjective-adverb confusion	
		Question mark with indirect question	
		Missing comma (2x)	
		Relative pronoun choice	
		"this kind" vs. "these kinds"	
		Missing subjunctive mood ("If I was" vs. "If I were")	
		Missing parenthesis	
		Pronoun case (2x) (with gerunds and linking verbs)	

Appendix Two: Instrument

Below are 40 sentences that may or may not contain an error. First, using your current knowledge—don't look in a handbook or ask someone—decide whether you think the sentence has an error in grammar, usage, punctuation, spelling, or mechanics.

If you think it has no error, check the first box and move on to the next sentence. If you think the sentence does have an error, indicate how serious you perceive the error to be. Think about seriousness in terms whether the error (1) impedes your ability to understand the content of the sentence, and/or (2) lowers your estimation of the writer.

Please consider these sentences as if you had encountered them in student writing and respond to them as honestly as you can. Your candid opinion is going to be crucial to improving writing instruction for students across campus.

1. The small rural towns are dying. One of the causes being that most young people move away to find jobs.
   □There is no error
   There is an error and I consider it
   □ not very serious
   □ somewhat serious
   □ serious
   □ very serious

2. My roommate stayed up all night studying she didn't sleep one hour.
   □There is no error
   There is an error and I consider it
   □ not very serious
   □ somewhat serious
   □ serious
   □ very serious

3. Mary majored in spanish, and her husband majored in italian.
   □There is no error
   There is an error and I consider it
   □ not very serious
   □ somewhat serious
   □ serious
   □ very serious

4.   I like jogging, swimming, and to play tennis.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

5.   A convicted felon no matter how much he has changed will have trouble finding a job.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

6.   The universitys ranking in the annual survey was disappointing.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

7.   In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth asks, "What are men to rocks and mountains? (154)."
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

8.   Never tell Gloria your secrets, she will repeat them to others.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

9. Its wonderful to see Wilson back at work.
   □There is no error
   There is an error and I consider it
   □ not very serious
   □ somewhat serious
   □ serious
   □ very serious

10. Although the candidate is new to politics she has a very good chance of winning the election.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

11. Becky wore a Halloween costume to the dance, desparate for attention.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

12. The cake pan was empty, but we were tired of eating it anyway.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

13. Katie, a perspective medical student, waited to learn her score on the entrance exam.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

14. In order to set up a rollover of your accounts for you, there are a couple different ways you could do this.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

15. In Donne's Sonnet 72 he says, "though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so" and points out death's insignificance.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

16. Three causes of air pollution are: fine particulate matter, automobile exhaust, and temperature inversions.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

17. The reporter paid attention to faculty but ignores students.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

18. The driver made a left hand turn.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

19. The manager gave his employees a detailed handout that complemented his oral presentation.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

20. Congress passed a bill to fund the government for two years and the president signed it into law.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

21. In the scientific experiment, each rat quickly learned where their food came from.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

22. After bowling a perfect game, the bowling alley hung Jack's photo on the wall.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

23. Changing the way you eat will often effect your health.
□There is no error
There is an error and I consider it
□ not very serious
□ somewhat serious
□ serious
□ very serious

24. We will "never" forget what you've done for our family.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

25. The whale shark, the largest of all sharks, feed on plankton.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

26. Joe should have went to Boston for Christmas.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

27. There has never been no one as rich as Bill Gates.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

28. Him and Jones were the employees of the month.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

29. Each of our dogs gets a treat every day.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

30. The fireman, who rescued Dana's kitten, was one of three who responded to the call for help.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

31. The writer of Ecclesiastes concludes that, "all is vanity."
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

32. Improved health care, and more free trade were two goals of the Clinton administration.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

33. You are suppose to clean the kitchen after you use it.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

34. Your hat is different than mine.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

35. The cashier asked, "Would you like to super-size that?"
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

36. My favorite authors are Twain Steinbeck and Dickens.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

37. When one first sees a painting by Jackson Pollock, you are impressed by a sense of power and stillness.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

38. By the time Tom arrived, Jill died.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

39. Becky explained, that she would not be able to finish grading the papers before Tuesday.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

40. Please follow John and I.
    □There is no error
    There is an error and I consider it
    □ not very serious
    □ somewhat serious
    □ serious
    □ very serious

Demographic Questions

Please select the option the best describes you.

I am _____.
□a BYU student in a Writing 150 class.
□a BYU student in an advanced writing class.
□a BYU faculty member

If you are a faculty member, in what college do you teach?

□ Business
□ Continuing Education
□ Education
□ Engineering and Technology
□ Family, Home and Social Sciences
□ Fine Arts and Communications
□ Humanities
□ International Studies
□ Law
□ Life Sciences
□ Nursing
□ Physical and Mathematical Sciences
□ Religious Education

Gender:
□Male
□Female

Age:
□18-25
□26-35
□36-45
□46-55
□56-65
□66+

Appendix Three: Recruitment Emails

Email to Faculty Participants

Dear Professor,
We know you are busy, but we'd really appreciate your help. We are trying to improve our grammar instruction for students.
In order to determine where we should focus our instruction in grammar and usage, a graduate student, Katie Fredrickson, has created a **10 minute survey** based on common errors in student writing. Would you help us by taking the survey?
Your responses will be valuable to both us and Katie as we work to improve writing instruction across campus. Please click the link to take the survey.
Sincerely,

Dr. Brian Jackson
Coordinator of University Writing

Dr. Delys Snyder
Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum

Dr. David Stock
Coordinator of University Writing Center

Email to Student Participants

Dear Student,
I know you are busy, but I'd really appreciate your help. My name is Katie Fredrickson and I'm a graduate student in English at BYU. I'm doing research that looks at the seriousness of common grammar and usage errors.
I want to use my research to understand how English teachers can best approach teaching grammar in order to help students become powerful communicators. Will you please help me by taking the following **10 minute survey**?
Sincerely,
Katie Fredrickson
Your responses will be valuable to not only me, but these faculty members that work to improve writing instruction across campus.

Dr. Brian Jackson
Coordinator of University Writing

Dr. Delys Snyder
Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum

Dr. David Stock
Coordinator of University Writing Center

Appendix Four: Informed Consent

This research on the seriousness of common errors is being conducted by Katie Frederickson, a graduate student in English at Brigham Young University under the supervision of Professor Kristine Hansen, from the Department of English. You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are either a professor or a student at BYU. This research will improve the teaching and tutoring of writing at BYU.

Your participation in this study will require the completion of the attached survey. This should take approximately 10-15 minutes of your time. Your participation will be entirely anonymous and you will not be contacted again in the future. You will not be paid for being in this study. This survey involves minimal risk to you. The benefits, however, may impact society by helping increase knowledge about how to teach students about grammar and proofreading.

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer for any reason. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

 We will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem you may contact Katie Fredrickson at ms.katiefred@gmail.com or Kristine Hansen at kristine_hansen@byu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the IRB administrator at A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; irb@byu.edu; (801) 422-1461. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

The completion of this survey implies your consent to participate. If you choose to participate, please click the link below. Thank you!