

Responding to Error: Policies and Strategies for Teachers Across the Disciplines

With this brief review of research on error as background, we now face the pragmatic question of what instructors across the curriculum should do about errors in their students' papers. The remaining pages of this chapter present my own answer to this question, based on what I believe the research recommends.

Help Students Appreciate That Unintentional Sentence-Level Errors Will Harm the Rhetorical Effectiveness of Their Writing

Faculty members across the disciplines might consider conveying to students a message something like this: "It is socially unacceptable to submit written work with an annoying level of error. You may damage yourself irrevocably in business and professional life if you do so. You might as well learn the habits of careful editing and proofreading now while you are in college."

Many students think that only English teachers care about sentence errors. Therefore I like to make my students aware of the research of Beason (2001) and Hairston (1981), both of whom studied the reactions of business professionals to sentence errors in business prose. Both studies reveal that business people are bothered by errors, sometimes quite heatedly. Beason's study, based on interviews with fourteen business professionals, showed how errors hurt the ethos of writers. According to one of Beason's respondents:

If this [piece of business writing] was something important that [the writer] wanted me to read . . . and had a lot of these little sloppy errors, then that would probably affect the way I thought about that person and how important that proposal was to them as well [p. 51].

Another respondent had a similar reaction to error:

What [these errors] say is that if a person doesn't care more about themselves than to not present themselves in the best possible light, how in the world can you expect them to care about you and your business? [p. 51]

Beason's analysis reveals three ways that business professionals categorize "sloppy" writers: they are hasty or careless, they are not

trustworthy or dependable as business colleagues (not detail persons, poor thinkers), or they are persons who might harm a company's image.

Likewise, Hairston's research showed that business professionals indeed recognize sentence errors and react strongly against many of them. She divided the errors into status-marking errors (errors that tend to indicate the writer's social, educational, or ethnic status, such as "them apples" or "he brung it") and non-status-marking errors of various levels of seriousness. Status-marking errors received the strongest negative reactions from her respondents, followed by non-status-marking errors in the categories she labeled "very serious" and "serious." I list these here.

Status-Marking Errors

Nonstandard verb forms in past or past participle: *brung* instead of *brought*, *had went* instead of *had gone*

Lack of subject-verb agreement: *we was* instead of *we were*, *he don't* instead of *he doesn't*

Double negatives

Objective pronoun as subject: *him and Richard were the last ones hired*

Very Serious Errors

Sentence fragments

Run-on sentences

Noncapitalization of proper nouns

Non-status-marking subject-verb agreement errors

Would of instead of *would have*

Insertion of comma between the verb and its complement

Nonparallelism

Faulty adverb forms

Use of transitive *set* for *sit*

Serious Errors

Verb form errors

Dangling modifiers

I as object pronoun

Lack of commas to set off interrupters such as *however*

Lack of commas in series

Tense switching

Use of a plural modifier with a singular noun: *these kind of errors*