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## **Ethos and Error: How Business People React to Errors**

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Errors seem to bother nonacademic readers as well as teachers. But what does it mean to be “bothered” by errors? Questions such as this help transform the study of error from mere textual issues to larger rhetorical matters of constructing meaning. Although this study of fourteen business people indicates a range of reactions to errors, the findings also reveal patterns of qualitative agreement—certain ways in which these readers constructed a negative ethos of the writer.

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**A**dhering to conventions for mechanics and usage is just one part of writing, yet this sub-skill has long been the subject of debate—especially since the 1970s when researchers and teachers such as Mina Shaughnessy challenged the significance of error-free writing. In 1975, Isabella Halstead suggested errors should be important only in the sense that they can impede the communication of ideas (86). Not all teachers share Halstead’s perspective, but this position certainly appeals to many researchers and teachers alike. Years after Halstead’s suggestion, Susan Wall and Glynda Hull asked fifty-four English teachers to name what they believed to be the most serious errors and to explain why they were serious. Nearly three-quarters of the responses indicated

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the errors were serious “because they got in the way of effective communication of meaning” (277), a justification consistent with Halstead’s position.

Perhaps this is the way it should be, with errors being relatively low-level concerns unless they impede understanding of a text. But do nonacademic

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readers respond in this fashion? We teach writing for many reasons, but if one goal is to prepare students to write effectively once they leave college, we should consider nonacademics’ responses to error. Our effectiveness, perhaps our ethos, can be impeded if we stress matters that other professionals

see as trivial—or if we trivialize points they deem consequential. This is not to say that teachers must always mirror other people’s responses to error, but we at the very least need to know if the messages we send students will be reinforced or negated by how other professionals read errors.

Put another way, I do not believe students can understand error unless they and teachers alike better comprehend error in terms of its *impact*—not just textual conventions defining errors, not just categories or rankings of errors, but the ways in which errors manage to bother nonacademic readers. We must understand the experiences of readers as they encounter error, for errors are created in the mind as much as in the text. To assist in this understanding, this study attempts to define major variables associated with negative reactions to errors appearing in business writing.

Researchers have examined how business professionals react to errors, but mostly in terms of how serious or benign errors seem to be. In one of the most comprehensive studies, Donald Leonard and Jeanette Gilsdorf investigated how 133 vice presidents in business and 200 members of the Association for Business Communication ranked forty-five types of errors. The survey shows, on the one hand, that the severity of an error is shaped by the reader’s context; for instance, executives were not as bothered by errors as were academics. On the other hand, the rankings indicate much agreement among readers in diverse situations about the relative seriousness of certain errors, a finding supported by Maxine Hairston’s survey almost a decade earlier.

Such large-scale surveys show that errors are often bothersome in the workforce, but we do not fully understand *why* they are disturbing. If Halstead’s stance were to be extended beyond classroom situations, nonacademics would perceive errors as problematic only when they are obstacles to communication

of meaning. This position, although reasonable in some educational contexts, does not take into account the judgments that people—rightly or wrongly—make about writers who create errors. Indeed, even Wall and Hull’s aforementioned study found that 11 percent of the teachers’ reactions to errors focused not on the readability of the text, but on the teachers’ belief that errors indicated a shortcoming with the writer’s education (277). Such a concern is understandable when education is a daily concern, but what might account for nonacademics’ reactions, such as how business people see errors as evidence of the writer’s ethos? I believe most teachers and students would acknowledge that errors can both interfere with comprehension and harm a writer’s credibility, but if our students go on to write for various business communities, we need a better understanding of these problems as they are manifested in these contexts.

**Errors must be defined not just as textual features breaking handbook rules but as mental events taking place outside the immediate text.**

In particular, we need to understand more completely how a reaction to error is, as Joseph Williams has indicated, a matter of interpretation that can vary greatly from reader to reader. If there is substantial agreement among professionals’ interpretations, we might know which errors to focus on and why these should be avoided. If interpretations vary widely, there might be little we can do to prepare students—except tell them that each reader has his or her own pet peeves. The present study reveals neither complete accord nor complete chaos in how readers react. Despite a disconcerting amount of disagreement, patterns of agreement can be seen, but only if teachers and students alike keep in mind that errors involve more than perceived flaws in a text. Errors must be defined not just as textual features breaking handbook rules but as mental events taking place outside the immediate text. Defining error as simply a textual matter fails to forefront the “outside” consequences of error, especially the ways in which readers use errors to make judgments about more than the text itself. By considering these types of interpretation, we can in fact locate areas of agreement about which students should be aware if they are to write effectively.

To study this interpretative process at the level of the individual reader and to explore the variety of elements constituting a person’s reaction to error, I examined how fourteen business people responded to errors. That is, I focused on a few individuals so that I might investigate a highly individualistic process. But I found that readers’ interpretations of error were not so idiosyncratic that there were *no* similarities at all. Despite frequent variation in some

regards, this study revealed recurring elements of interpretation among these readers. Certain types of reactions were common even though these might not occur with the same error or to the same degree. After discussing quantitative results in both aggregate and individual forms, I offer a synthesis of these individual reactions to indicate that, while there are no quantitative formulas for anticipating a reaction to error, there seem to be principal qualities that account for people's negative reactions to errors in business discourse.

### **Subjects**

This research is based on fourteen subjects—an arbitrary number, but one that proved manageable yet large enough to allow me to consider individuals in various businesses. Although part of my research involves a questionnaire, I should emphasize that overall this study is intended to generate variables associated with error response—not to quantify comprehensively the reactions of a population. This study, in other words, does not involve an extensive number of subjects; instead the focus is on a few people whose individual reactions I examined in some depth.

I did not use stratified sampling, despite my first impulse to select subjects with varying ethnic backgrounds. Such sampling would be appropriate for a larger survey, but, given the sample size, I wanted to avoid generating data that might be misconstrued as indicating that certain ethnic groups respond one way, others another way. Determining such correlations would call for a different study with a sample large enough to represent diverse ethnic groups. Subjects for this study come from one ethnic group, white Americans from two regions of the US. Halfway through this study, I accepted a teaching position across the country. Consequentially, seven subjects are from Spokane, Washington, and seven are from Mobile, Alabama (each subject lived most or all of his or her life in these respective locales). As noted later, geographic distribution had little effect on the results despite notable dialect differences between speakers from these two regions. Nonetheless, I believe all results should be interpreted keeping in mind the demographic constraints as well as the need to determine what role—if any—ethnicity, locale, and other individual characteristics play in people's reactions to error.

Using purposive sampling (Merriam 48–49), I selected fourteen subjects who engaged in both daily reading of business documents and frequent (daily or almost daily) writing in connection with their organization. I asked colleagues and acquaintances to suggest possible subjects, resulting in a list of males and females in various roles. All were in the private sector, and I stayed

**Figure 1: Subjects****Spokane subjects**

- Betty: Human Resources Partner for a regional water/power company (deals with benefits, hiring, conflict resolution).
- Daryn: Vice President of Investments and Branch Manager for a national investment firm.
- Donna: Community Relations Person and Administrative Assistant to District Service Manager for a national banking corporation.
- Eric: Regional Manager of Corporate Communications for a national automobile club.
- John: Computer Programmer Analyst for a local software company.
- Martin: Lab Manager of Analytical Services for a gold-mining company.
- Susan: Assistant Regional Manager for a regional banking corporation.

**Mobile subjects**

- Charles: Senior Agent for an insurance company.
- Dee: Accountant for a worldwide distributor of religious music.
- Jan: Vice President and Branch Manager for a regional banking corporation.
- Jean: Assistant Administrator for Human Resources Office at a health-care institution.
- Lee: Assistant Vice President and Branch Manager for another regional banking corporation.
- Nick: Digital Graphics Specialist for a graphics and publishing company.
- Ralph: Real Estate Broker and Manager of a real estate office.

with this realm rather than broadening the study to include organizations such as charities, social action groups, and the government. Seven of the suggested subjects agreed to participate, and seven others did not because they lacked time (four individuals) or no longer wrote or read much as part of their job (three individuals). However, these latter seven suggested colleagues who agreed to participate and who met the criteria. Finance (banking and investment) is represented more than any other calling, but the subjects' duties varied sufficiently to avoid duplication. Using pseudonyms, Figure 1 describes all subjects.

**Procedures**

For the first phase of this study, fourteen business people completed a questionnaire to rank twenty errors. For the second phase, I individually interviewed each subject to obtain an in-depth account of the subject's reactions.

Using the questionnaire, subjects first indicated the extent to which they were bothered by each error, thereby gauging the error gravity of twenty pre-selected errors. Each error was set off with boldface so subjects could rank it using a 1–4 scale, with 1 being the least bothersome. This format results in a limitation often found in the related research (e.g., Greenbaum and Taylor; Hairston; Leonard and Gilsdorf; Long). Any questionnaire that focuses respondents' attention on gauging error gravity or on individual sentences known to contain errors can alter readers' natural responses. Certainly, a naturalistic design requiring subjects to locate the errors for themselves could provide useful results, but I chose to boldface errors for two reasons. First, a pilot version of this study indicated respondents needed to understand my focus was not on testing their own proficiency with usage, grammar, or writing. Such apprehension and self-consciousness can produce unnatural results, as well as make respondents less willing to engage in further discourse during follow-up interviews. Boldfacing errors helped subjects understand that my purpose was not to test them, but to understand their viewpoint. Second, the primary goal for using the questionnaire was to provide a tangible mechanism by which I could explore these subjects' reading processes. Barbara Tomlinson describes the misleading information that writers can provide when they attempt to generalize about their writing processes instead of describing recent, specific instances (434–36). Readers, too, can face problems when researchers ask abstract questions about how they react to texts, so I used the questionnaire to focus the interviewees' attention on recent encounters with specific errors. Boldfacing the errors provided a concrete, as well as nonthreatening, means by which the subjects and I could engage in this dialogue.

To create the questionnaire, I revised a business document to produce five versions, with each version containing four examples of one type of error. In case the ordering of the versions might affect responses, I varied the sequence in which subjects responded to the versions. The five types of error are misspellings, fragments, fused sentences, unnecessary quotation marks, and word-ending errors (see Appendix A for a sample of one complete version; see Appendix B for a list of all errors). Given my intent of offering a more complete definition of what it means to be bothered by errors, I did not base my choice of errors on any one criterion, though frequency was especially important. Rather, I wanted subjects to consider a range of error types, so these errors reflect various combinations of frequency, gravity, and form.

Seeking to avoid the unfamiliar or bizarre, I chose four categories appearing in Connors and Lunsford's list of the twenty most frequent errors in

college students' writing. However, these four hold various positions within their list: misspellings (apparently the most common error at the time of Connors and Lunsford's study), word-ending errors (a combination of two categories Connors and Lunsford called "wrong/missing inflected endings" and "wrong tense or verb form," which were ranked Nos. 6 and 13), fragments (ranked No. 12), and fused sentences (which the researchers collapsed with run-on sentences near the bottom of the list at No. 18) (403). My fifth error—unnecessary quotation marks—is an intentional outlier in that it did not appear even four times in Connors and Lunsford's initial analysis of 300 papers (as discussed later, I found this error received a distinct reaction not because it was uncommon but because of certain implications associated with quotation marks).

Few studies have measured the relative gravity of errors made by native speakers of English. Still, I chose errors that appear to reflect different levels of severity. Surveys indicate nonacademics and academics deem fragments and fused sentences to be especially bothersome (Hairston 797; Kantz and Yates; Leonard and Gilsdorf 145; Long 6).<sup>1</sup> Misspellings receive mixed reactions yet often fall in a middle range. Two studies found that homophone errors, the only misspellings the researchers examined, generally did not stand out one way or the other (Leonard and Gilsdorf 146-47; Long 7). Two other surveys found that certain homophone errors, such as "you're" for "your," were particularly bothersome; however, other misspellings, such as "recieve" for "receive," were usually only mildly irritating (Hairston 801-06; Kantz and Yates). Teachers in Wall and Hull's study listed the three most serious errors found in a sample text containing various errors, including misspellings, and only 1.4 percent of the responses referred to misspellings (276-77). Despite the time and money spent on spell checkers, dictionaries, and spelling instruction, surveys therefore suggest that misspellings are usually only moderately bothersome, except with certain homophone errors or in job application documents such as resumes (Monthei 39). Few handbooks give much attention to errors involving word endings and, in particular, to unnecessary quotation marks, indicating both are relatively innocuous.

Although an error can easily involve several aspects of language all the way from phonology to semantics, the definition of an error usually hinges on one particular linguistic feature. The five errors were accordingly selected to reflect different linguistic features. Typically, misspellings are orthographic matters concerning individual letters, while word-ending errors go a bit further by involving morphological omissions or misuses at the end of words. In

contrast, fragments and fused sentences involve entire phrases and clauses—syntactic matters of creating and combining sentences. Unnecessary quotation marks are again a special category in that they deal most directly with punctuation, rather than words or groups of words per se.

The purpose of including a breadth of error types was not only to represent more fully the spectrum of errors that exist but also to acknowledge the possibility that reactions to error depend on error type. Within each of the five categories, the four examples accordingly reflect additional differences. For example, the misspellings consist of a homophone error (“they’re”), two misspellings so glaring they could be typographical (“aboutt” and “metods”), and one misspelling many people might easily produce or overlook (“recomendations”).

The subjects typically completed all five versions in six to eight minutes. At this point, I interviewed each business person for some forty-five minutes using a semi-structured format (Merriam 73–74) to elicit reactions to a few standard questions before probing subjects’ responses. These interviews form the core of this study and focused on each subject’s reactions to errors from the questionnaire, though the conversation would naturally broaden at times. All questions were primarily designed to uncover the reasons why subjects did or did not find the sample errors bothersome. Understanding why a person reacts one way or another is difficult if not impossible to determine absolutely. In particular, interviewees might simply say whatever they believe they are expected to say, so I followed normal interview practices (e.g., Kvale 124–35) to help create a relaxed atmosphere conducive to forthright, honest communication. The tone of the interviews was so relaxed that subjects themselves did not strictly adhere to conventions of formal English, as excerpts presented later reveal. To avoid encouraging subjects to distress over an error more than they would normally, I limited my probing of any particular error to two questions (generally, requests for clarification). Nonetheless, the interview results are artifacts of a discussion and cannot be taken as absolute proof of what goes on in readers’ minds. Dialogues with individuals about their reactions offer one means of exploring both the possibilities and probabilities behind the numbers, but any self-reporting has its limits.

After the interviews were transcribed, I first analyzed each transcription for its major themes and later considered how these might be refined and synthesized. Essentially, I read each transcription for dominant themes; larger categories of responses emerged when subjects’ reactions frequently overlapped. This approach to analyzing transcripts reflects what Kvale refers to as “mean-



ing condensation” and “meaning categorization” in interview research (192; also see Merriam 133–36).

**Questionnaire results**

The sample size is too small for statistical comparisons or large-scale generalizations about error gravity based on mean averages. However, it is important to note certain levels of agreement and disagreement found in the questionnaire results, for these shed light on how a mean average can mask individual differences within a population—differences with important ramifications for preparing students to write in the business sector.

To illustrate this point, I wish to discuss first the overall averages. As seen in Figure 2, fragments seem particularly bothersome among business people, as Leonard and Gilsdorf (154), as well as Hairston (797), found. Not surprisingly, unnecessary quotation marks are least bothersome, while fused sentences appear less bothersome than might be expected relative to misspellings and word-ending errors. Nonetheless, all averages fall between the “somewhat bothersome” and “definitely bothersome” reactions.

An inherent problem with such averages is that, in condensing individuals’ variation into a single score to represent a population, averages are conducive to a monolithic perspective. A standard deviation can indicate variation, but this single statistic can be difficult to appreciate. By considering individual responses to particular errors, we can better understand the diversity with which readers approach errors, for the raw scores make it clear that two types of substantial variation exist: (1) among different readers’ reactions to a specific instance of error, and (2) among one reader’s reactions to errors of the same type. Figure 3, for instance, reveals how each subject responded to misspellings. (Subjects in Figures 3-7 are arranged according to highest to lowest averages, with names alphabetized in cases of equal averages.) As seen within each vertical column, the first form of variation is reflected in the range of reactions to any given error. Every misspelling received three of the four scores from the subjects, with the scope for

**Figure 2: Overall reactions to error types**

Fragments:	3.00
Misspellings:	2.70
Word-Ending Errors:	2.59
Fused Sentences:	2.48
Quotation Mark Errors:	2.30
All Error Types:	2.61

  

KEY:	1	2	3	4
	Not bothersome at all	Somewhat bothersome	Definitely bothersome	Extremely bothersome

the first two errors extending from 1 to 4—a range supporting the argument that error gravity depends on who is reading a text. For example, most subjects gave the homophone error “they’re” a “definitely bothersome” ranking, but two deemed it “not bothersome” and three “extremely bothersome.” Only one misspelling (“they’re”) received even a simple majority in terms of the most common score it received.

The second form of variation can be seen by focusing on each horizontal row. In Figure 3, some readers (e.g., Dee and Donna) were fairly consistent, almost categorical, in how they reacted. A misspelling is a misspelling, it would seem. Other readers, such as Eric, apparently evaluated each misspelling individually. He was the most bothered by the two misspellings that appear to be typographical mistakes (he later explained this reaction was not based on whether the misspellings were mere slips but whether they would “sound odd” if read aloud). In such cases, error gravity does not simply depend on *who* is reading, but *what* they are reading.

**Figure 3: Reactions to misspellings**

	<i>recomendations</i>	<i>they're/their</i>	<i>metods</i>	<i>aboutt</i>	Subject average
Dee	4	4	4	4	4.00
Betty	4	3	4	4	3.75
Eric	2	3	4	4	3.25
Jan	2	3	3	4	3.00
Nick	2	3	3	4	3.00
Susan	2	4	3	3	3.00
Donna	2	3	3	3	2.75
Lee	1	3	4	3	2.75
Martin	2	4	2	2	2.50
Daryn	2	3	2	2	2.25
Jean	1	3	3	2	2.25
John	1	3	2	2	2.00
Ralph	1	1	3	2	1.75
Charles	1	1	2	2	1.50
Error average	1.93	2.93	3.00	2.93	2.70

  

KEY:	1	2	3	4
	Not bothersome at all	Somewhat bothersome	Definitely bothersome	Extremely bothersome

So can we safely say Eric and certain other readers will react to errors based on the particular nature of each error? Indeed, Eric's reactions to fused sentences and unnecessary quotation marks continue to indicate that he considers each error separately rather than categorically, as seen in Figures 4 and 5. Figure 6, however, shows unusual consistency for Eric: Each word-ending error was extremely bothersome to him. Three other subjects (Susan, Jan, and Ralph) similarly show little variation in their scorings of word-ending errors, despite having mixed reactions to misspellings. Such readers, then, appear to defy generalizations—even when we generalize by claiming that these readers themselves do not generalize and react instead to errors on a case-by-case basis. At the most, we can hedge by assuming these readers *usually* approach each instance of an error on an individual basis.

To complicate matters, a few readers are much more consistent than Susan, Jan, or Ralph—a finding leading to generalizations requiring less hedging.

Figure 4: Reactions to fused sentences

	<i>Error 1</i>	<i>Error 2</i>	<i>Error 3</i>	<i>Error 4</i>	Subject average
Susan	4	4	4	4	4.00
Betty	3	3	4	4	3.50
Daryn	3	3	3	4	3.25
Dee	3	2	4	4	3.25
Jan	3	3	3	3	3.00
Eric	3	2	1	4	2.50
Martin	1	3	2	3	2.25
Donna	2	2	2	2	2.00
Jean	3	2	2	1	2.00
John	3	1	1	3	2.00
Lee	2	2	1	3	2.00
Charles	3	2	1	1	1.75
Nick	2	1	1	3	1.75
Ralph	2	1	1	2	1.50
Error average	2.64	2.21	2.14	2.93	2.48

Refer to Appendix B for the wording of each error.

	1	2	3	4
KEY:	Not bothersome at all	Somewhat bothersome	Definitely bothersome	Extremely bothersome

In Figures 3-7, the scores for Dee and Donna, for instance, show little variation within a given error category, although Dee does vary her reactions to fused sentences. Safe generalizations can also be made on the basis of other subjects' responses to one error in particular, fragments (see Figure 7). True, each fragment received three of the four scores, but it is the only category that never received a "not bothersome" score from anyone—an additional indication that fragments can be the most serious of errors. Perhaps the most notable pattern with fragments, though, is within each individual's responses: Nine subjects gave the same score to each fragment (usually a 2 or 3), and only one subject gave three different scores to fragments (Jean, who continued her pattern of varying her responses within a category). Additionally, the average scores for three of the fragments is the same (3.07), a surprising result considering these averages derive from fourteen individuals whose other scores exhibit consid-

Figure 5: Reactions to unnecessary quotation marks

	<i>Error 1</i>	<i>Error 2</i>	<i>Error 3</i>	<i>Error 4</i>	Subject average
Jan	3	4	4	4	3.75
Susan	4	4	4	3	3.75
Dee	4	4	4	2	3.50
Eric	2	4	4	2	3.00
Donna	3	2	3	3	2.75
Jean	3	3	3	1	2.50
Lee	2	2	3	2	2.25
Betty	2	3	2	1	2.00
Charles	2	2	2	2	2.00
Nick	2	2	2	2	2.00
John	2	2	1	1	1.50
Daryn	1	2	1	1	1.25
Martin	1	1	1	1	1.00
Ralph	1	1	1	1	1.00
Error average	2.29	2.57	2.50	1.86	2.30

Refer to Appendix B for the wording of each error.

	1	2	3	4
KEY:	Not bothersome at all	Somewhat bothersome	Definitely bothersome	Extremely bothersome

erable variation. Fragments, then, seem especially likely to be treated in a categorical fashion.

Nonetheless, such clear patterns in the subjects' reactions are rare. Each subject's average score for a category reveals yet another way to see the general inconsistency despite an occasional tendency. Ralph and Charles are usually among the least bothered by the errors, while Dee and—to a lesser degree—Susan are likely to be among the most bothered. However, it is difficult to make further generalizations about other subjects' comparative tolerance. John, for example, is among the most tolerant in terms of misspellings, fused sentences, and misused quotation marks, yet he stands in the middle of the rankings for word-ending errors and is among the most bothered by fragments. Compared to other readers, Betty reacts in a clearly negative way to three errors, but other reactions place her in an intermediate position with both fragments and unnecessary quotation marks.

**Figure 6: Reactions to word-ending errors**

	<i>Error 1</i>	<i>Error 2</i>	<i>Error 3</i>	<i>Error 4</i>	Subject average
Eric	4	4	4	4	4.00
Dee	4	4	4	3	3.75
Jan	3	4	4	4	3.75
Betty	3	3	4	3	3.25
Susan	3	3	4	3	3.25
Martin	3	3	2	4	3.00
John	2	4	3	2	2.75
Daryn	3	2	2	3	2.50
Donna	2	2	2	2	2.00
Lee	3	1	2	2	2.00
Nick	2	3	2	1	2.00
Jean	1	3	2	1	1.75
Ralph	1	2	1	1	1.25
Charles	1	1	1	1	1.00
Error average	2.50	2.79	2.64	2.43	2.59

Refer to Appendix B for the wording of each error.

	1	2	3	4
KEY:	Not bothersome at all	Somewhat bothersome	Definitely bothersome	Extremely bothersome

Despite a few tendencies that require qualifying, these numbers reveal widespread inconsistencies—from type of error to type of error, from person to person, and even among the responses of an individual person to errors of the same kind. These quantitative results indicate how difficult it is to predict the way a given reader, much less a group of readers, will react to errors, but the interviews point to agreement in other ways—qualitative agreement.

**Interview results**

The interviews suggest that the inconsistencies and two forms of variation discussed above are likely created by two broad categories of variables: *textual* and *extra-textual* features of discourse. Before discussing particulars of the interviews, I wish to summarize this finding, which is important in its own right but also clarifies my focus for the remainder of this article.

**Figure 7: Reactions to fragments**

	<i>Error 1</i>	<i>Error 2</i>	<i>Error 3</i>	<i>Error 4</i>	Subject average
Susan	4	4	4	4	4.00
Eric	4	4	3	4	3.75
Dee	3	4	4	4	3.75
John	3	4	4	4	3.75
Jean	2	3	4	4	3.25
Betty	3	3	3	3	3.00
Daryn	3	3	3	3	3.00
Donna	3	3	3	3	3.00
Jan	3	3	3	3	3.00
Martin	3	3	3	3	3.00
Lee	2	3	3	2	2.50
Charles	2	2	2	2	2.00
Nick	2	2	2	2	2.00
Ralph	2	2	2	2	2.00
Error average	2.79	3.07	3.07	3.07	3.00

Refer to Appendix B for the wording of each error.

	1	2	3	4
KEY:	Not bothersome at all	Somewhat bothersome	Definitely bothersome	Extremely bothersome

First, the interviews indicate error gravity is easily mitigated or exacerbated by unique textual features that create or surround each instance of error—linguistic variables such as word choice, syntax, punctuation, or the location of these variables within the text. Below are examples of how such features seem to have led readers to give different evaluations to errors of the same type:

- Lexical complexity (e.g., several subjects referred to this variable when explaining why “about” is more bothersome than “recommendations.”)
- Syntactic complexity (e.g., three subjects noted that an error within a sophisticated sentence was especially bothersome because the sentence was difficult to understand even without the error.)
- Position within a paragraph (e.g., one subject said that a fused sentence at the end of a paragraph was not bothersome because the meaning of the paragraph was clear by this point in the passage.)

Second, error gravity is affected by extra-textual features that more directly go beyond the language of a text.<sup>2</sup> These include aspects of the communication situation, such as whether a document is a formal letter from an executive or a sticky-note to a colleague. Extra-textual features also include the reader’s interpretative framework—the way in which each reader encounters the text having unique experiences and expectations that affect his or her interpretation of errors, as Williams and Lees have argued. Perhaps readers judge the same error differently because the uniqueness of each person’s life has formed a singular set of assumptions, memories, and preferences—some of which are relevant to the reading of errors. Indeed, the interviews suggest that extra-textual features produce even more variation than a standardized questionnaire can uncover. For example, any given pair of readers who scored the same error as “extremely bothersome” still reacted differently in terms of what it meant for each of them to be so bothered, a difference that the questionnaire alone could not indicate.

Although textual aspects of error are important, it is especially crucial to understand extra-textual features. Too many students, if not teachers, view errors simply in terms of “breaking rules”—a failure to adhere to textbook dictums for producing a text. By considering how forces beyond the text shape the reader’s reactions and by considering how errors in turn shape the writer’s ethos perhaps students can better understand that writing means more than the production of texts, more than adhering to abstract guidelines removed

from the needs, biases, and intentions of readers. The remainder of this article, therefore, will elaborate on extra-textual issues. In particular, I concentrate on what the interviews illuminate the most: the ways in which readers apparently use errors to construct the writer's ethos within the context of the business community.

To clarify this notion, I must first identify the most pervasive theme found in the interviews, what I call the "meaning/image" theme. This theme is the bottom line as to why errors bother readers: Errors create misunderstandings of the text's *meaning*, and they harm the *image* of the writer (and possibly the organization to which the writer belongs). Image, as I will explain shortly, involves several extra-textual issues, but I want to stress that *all* subjects drew on *both* ways of reacting to an error, indicating the extent to which these concepts—textual meaning and the writer's image—are fundamental to any definition of error gravity. Each subject noted that some errors were definitely confusing (especially the syntactic errors) or, more commonly, momentarily interrupted the flow of reading enough to slow communication. Charles said of one fragment: "It slows me down and confuses me; I have to go back and do it again, and then I have to say, 'What are they really trying to tell me?'" As noted earlier, some readers consider these meaning-hampering errors to be the most serious, perhaps the only ones worthy of much concern.

But the interviews indicate such errors are not the only types leading to negative reactions. The subjects frequently accounted for even the most negative

**The interviews suggest . . . that the extent to which errors harm the writer's image is more serious and far-reaching than many students and teachers might realize.**

scores *not* by discussing their confusion as readers, but by commenting on the image the error creates of the writer. Even though the questionnaire consisted of five versions of the same document, making it easier for readers to interpret the meaning

of the document, concerns about the writer's image arose so often and emphatically that it clearly seems a determinant of error gravity for these subjects.

The interviews suggest, in fact, that the extent to which errors harm the writer's image is more serious and far-reaching than many students and teachers might realize. At times, the subjects stated in very general terms that errors affect a person's credibility as a writer or employee. More often, though, the subjects noted specific image problems, which I have synthesized into three major categories and eleven subcategories. These interrelated categories focus on extra-textual features of communication, but in varying degrees, mov-



ing from the writing skills of one person, to concerns about that person beyond his or her writing skills, to global issues affecting the organization and others. (My order of presenting the three categories reflects this movement; within each category, though, the subcategories are discussed in an order that merely facilitates comparisons and contrasts.)

On one level, these categories add yet more inconsistency, for readers discussing the same error often formed different images of the writer. Although I will note a few exceptions, a particular image problem was usually not associated with just one category of error, again suggesting difficulties in predicting responses to error. On another level, however, the following images occurred so frequently throughout the interviews that I believe these categories reveal consequential qualitative similarities among business people's reactions to error, implying similar ways of making meaning through reading errors and through reading much more than we might suspect into these errors. Space limitations prohibit me from exploring these images fully, but I believe the following offers a more complete understanding of what it means for a writer's credibility to be jeopardized by errors.

### ***Category 1: writer as a writer***

The first major category is based on the writer's credibility as a writer—not a professional writer, but someone whose job includes some writing. This overall image problem arose frequently and with all errors. It contains four subcategories, the first three of which are especially interrelated.

#### *Writer's image as a writer*

- 1.1 Hasty writer
- 1.2 Careless writer
- 1.3 Uncaring writer
- 1.4 Uninformed writer

#### **1.1: Hasty writer**

First, errors can create the image of someone who writes too hastily. This theme was one of the most common, as each subject at some point spoke about the errors in terms of time demands or the lack of time the writer gave the sample document. Usually, the subject indicated the writer was hasty as a whole in writing the document, did not take time to proofread in particular, or rushed to meet a deadline. The subjects were often sympathetic to the time demands

faced by an employee; several noted how they themselves make mistakes in the rush to accomplish extra work in an environment of fierce competition or stressful downsizing. Despite this compassion, most subjects reacted negatively. That is, a subject might appear both understanding (“I know how rushed people are”) and disapproving (“These errors still bother me even though I sympathize”). Indeed, a few subjects indicated that having to rewrite or reread error-filled documents cost them valuable time of their own, making them less likely to be forgiving. While subjects occasionally tempered their negative reactions by acknowledging that errors often result from huge demands on an employee’s time, these errors also suggested the writer lacks the ability to handle these incessant demands on business people who must write as part of their job.

### 1.2: Careless writer

A closely related subcategory is the image of a careless writer, one who is inattentive or neglectful when writing. This image was also one of the most common throughout the interviews. Subjects often used the terms “careless” and “hasty” jointly, but the former was more negative and frequent, in addition to implying the error did not result from a lack of time. Raising his voice and gritting his teeth, John said: “This stuff really bothers me! It’s not so much even that you are in a hurry but that you are extremely careless to do these kinds of sentences.” Betty discussed how she refused the services of certain student

**At times, the subjects moved beyond the writer’s caring about the document itself; they often stated that the writer did not care about the reader or whatever exigency prompted the document.**

interns whose errors indicated to her that they would not proofread carefully. Errors eliciting the “careless writer” image clearly bothered subjects, for these mistakes indicated the writer has the ability to avoid errors but did not focus on doing so. Indeed, subjects such as Dee frequently used the harsher terms “lazy” and “sloppy”: “I guess it’s lazy—all you have to do is click that button to run spell check.”

When making such comments, subjects generally did not assume the employee to be careless in *all* duties, just in terms of writing or writing one particular document. As will be noted shortly, other comments indicate there are times when errors do suggest more widespread carelessness (see subcategory 2.2).

### 1.3: Uncaring writer

At times, the subjects moved beyond the writer’s caring about the document itself; they often stated that the writer did not care about the reader or what-

ever exigency prompted the document. The major difference between this third subcategory and the previous two is the extent to which the reader personalized a mistake, blaming it neither on time nor a careless habit as much as on an inappropriate attitude toward something or somebody. Though this subcategory was the least frequent within category 1, the ramifications of being uncaring can be just as serious in business discourse as in academic writing, perhaps more so. For example, Lee said, “If this was something important that they 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.” Charles said that any sort of error on application materials in particular could elicit this image: “What they 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?” In such ways, errors can evoke the image of a writer who is not merely careless but detached, disrespectful, or even unmotivated.

#### **1.4: Uninformed writer**

So far, I have discussed three subcategories of image problems dealing with a person’s writing ability, and each concentrates on errors perceived as accidents—as problems resulting not from a writer’s failure to understand certain conventions, but from haste, carelessness, typographical mistakes, or apathy. With this next theme, however, errors suggest an uninformed writer, one who lacks relevant *knowledge* (almost always, a knowledge of conventions for formal English).<sup>3</sup> Taking three forms, this fourth subcategory was particularly widespread. First, some subjects assumed the writer lacks knowledge about one error or type of error. Lee, for instance, suggested that the person who wrote “they’re” instead of “their” is simply unaware of the difference between the two. Other times, interviewees assumed that the writer lacks a larger understanding of usage, spelling, or punctuation. After discussing fused sentences, Susan concluded: “Possibly, the writer just does not understand how to deal with punctuation.” Finally, on rare occasions this image of an “unknowing writer” referred to the knowledge of the topic of the document. Jan, for example, said that the sample errors made her question whether the writer understands the material being covered; for Jan, the errors indicated that the writer struggled with language for something to say, as a result of not really comprehending the issue under discussion.

As a group, the subjects alluded to each source of error—accidents versus insufficient knowledge—at roughly an equal rate, but they did not clearly

agree on which errors were associated with which source. As noted, I chose the misspellings “methods” and “aboutt” because they seem to be typographical mistakes, and almost all subjects gave this explanation. However, there was no such pattern of agreement with other errors.

**Error gravity is not necessarily determined by whether an error is perceived as an accident rather than a knowledge problem.**

One might well wonder if readers treat knowledge-based errors more severely since these stem from what some people view as ignorance (indeed, some subjects phrased the problem this way). Long’s study of academics’ reactions led him to conclude that errors of carelessness are more tolerable (10), but while some of my subjects were lenient with what they deemed accidents, others viewed these as *more* bothersome because the writer, in these readers’ estimation, essentially decided to ignore a problem that could have been easily fixed. Thus, error gravity is not necessarily determined by whether an error is perceived as an accident rather than a knowledge problem.

***Category 2: writer as a business person***

All subjects indicated errors can harm one’s image by reflecting not just writing ability but other traits, skills, or attitudes important for someone in business. This second category has five subcategories.

*Writer’s image as a business person*

- 2.1 Faulty thinker
- 2.2 Not a detail person
- 2.3 Poor oral communicator
- 2.4 Poorly educated person
- 2.5 Sarcastic, pretentious, aggressive writer

**2.1: Faulty thinker**

The most commonly mentioned of these five subcategories involves what could be called a “thinking problem.” Several subjects speculated or firmly asserted that a given error resulted from faulty thinking abilities—not a deficient knowledge of language (see subcategory 1.4), but limited reasoning skills. This image developed almost exclusively with errors connected more with syntax (fragments and fused sentences) than with individual words or punctuation (misspellings, quotation mark errors, word-ending errors). When explaining possible causes of a fused sentence, Susan stated: “Well, again, I think it shows

a lack of ability to understand what a complete thought is. . . . So I guess I would be very fearful if this were in an application.” Ralph believed the sample fragments were likely caused by “not having complete thoughts.” Readers did not associate syntactic errors with *only* this one image. Daryn, in fact, associated the author of the fused sentences with four problems: “They lacked some basic writing skills or education, and they didn’t think very logically, and they didn’t proofread it.”

While I want to avoid “correcting” the subjects’ personal reactions, it is highly questionable that the sample fused sentences and fragments represent incomplete thoughts in the context of the document in which they appeared. Possibly, the occasional use of the term “complete thought” was influenced by teachers and traditional handbooks that define a complete sentence as a complete thought, but other language choices suggest subjects perceived, correctly or not, a poor or incomplete reasoning process. Ralph, for example, went on to say that the faulty sentences reminded him of someone struggling to think through an issue: “Most of the time on a rewrite, when you go back and formulate what you are trying to say, you can always put it in a better and more complete thought structure. But this, this was not thought out well.” Still, the use of “complete thought” is one indication that subjects’ reactions to error might not be accurate or fair—an observation I will return to later.

## **2.2: Not a detail person**

Similarly, some subjects saw errors as indicative of someone who struggles with details, but this image problem was not limited to syntactic errors. Some subjects assumed that writers who do not notice the accidental errors discussed earlier might overlook other (and often more important) details connected with their job. This concern did not arise frequently, but interviewees involved in banking and investment, despite their different job duties, were especially alarmed when they perceived the writer could not handle details. Daryn, a vice-president with a brokerage firm, said:

There is a lot of written communication that goes out to our clients, and we want it to be as accurate as possible. It’s somewhat bothersome because if someone makes an error in writing a word, are they going to make an error in typing a number? In our business, we work with money, and a small error with a digit can make a big difference to a client.

Only one other image problem (subcategory 3.2) is so clearly linked to the particular nature of certain professions. As noted earlier, finance was best represented among the subjects (four bankers and one investment broker).

Additional research might be needed to determine if people in other professions are especially sensitive to particular errors.<sup>4</sup>

### **2.3: Poor oral communicator**

This theme was associated with various errors from the questionnaire, even though only the word-ending errors would normally be considered problems in speech (a fact none of the subjects noted). This image problem was the least mentioned of all found in this study, yet a few subjects were concerned that the writer who commits errors in writing might commit many errors in speech as well. Subjects generally did not posit a cause/effect relationship between errors in speech and those in writing; they simply noted the patterns of error would likely be reflected in the writer's speech. A few subjects even assumed the errors hint at more than just problems with usage and grammar in speech. Betty, the human resources administrator, feared that the writer would struggle with the important negotiation and conflict-resolution skills needed in day-to-day discussions.

### **2.4: Poorly educated person**

With the next image problem, subjects cast doubts on the writer's education, usually in terms of writing instruction but sometimes a more general doubt about the writer's overall education. In general, this concern was related to a knowledge problem, primarily in terms of having learned appropriate linguistic forms (see subcategory 1.4). Other times, though, subjects indicated that the educational shortcoming seems to have involved more than merely a failure to acquire knowledge—such as failing to care about one's work in school or not having been taught to proofread carefully.

**Subjects indicated that the educational shortcoming seems to have involved more than merely a failure to acquire knowledge.**

Whether the “blame” was placed on the writer as a student or on the educational system, the majority of subjects at some point connected errors with the lack of a successful education (for no clear reason, male subjects from Mobile were unlikely to offer or emphasize this image problem). Most subjects, possibly out of concern they might somehow offend me, indicated the problem was with the writer's inability to learn, not ineffectual teaching. Usually, they assumed the writer as a student failed to acquire the knowledge of grammar and the English language that, they believed, would have prevented many errors. A few subjects seemed to blame the educational system, espe-

cially public education (again, perhaps because of the interview situation). Martin referred to the errors in the sample document by seeming to critique all educational levels as well as the newly graduated professional:

Those are glaring—that’s junior high. Why do so many kids get out of school without a minimum level of skills? When I got out of high school, they tested you. . . . I fail to see how people can graduate with a four-year degree in electrical engineering with something like this.

## **2.5: Sarcastic, pretentious, aggressive writer**

This theme might initially seem odd, for it concerns the image of the writer as sarcastic, pretentious, or aggressive. Most subjects offered comments falling into this subcategory but did so only with one error: unnecessary quotation marks. Although a few subjects saw some of these as inappropriate strategies for emphasizing words, comments such as Betty’s were common: “I rated that a 3 because I felt like there was some sarcasm in making fun of somebody at their expense. . . . I am in judgment of the writer because the writer is in judgment of this party they’re referring to.” Jean went further by suggesting that the writer “is probably aggressive, probably likes to be noticed.” Ralph stated that the image was so distracting that it hampered communication, indicating how these two issues (image and meaning) are not necessarily disconnected: “That’s pretentious to me. What is your intent by putting unnecessary quotation marks? Why did you do that? This is just throwing up a roadblock. It’s keeping me from reading this clearly.”

As noted, a particular image problem was rarely associated with only one type of error. Subcategory 2.1 is an exception, and the quotation mark errors are another. These exceptions illustrate an additional layer of complexity: An error can contribute not only to the broader image problems noted previously (and subsequently), but also to distinctive image problems associated primarily—or exclusively—with that error. Unnecessary quotation marks might, for example, foster the image of a hasty reader who did not take time to ensure judicious use of punctuation (subcategory 1.1); other mistakes might contribute to this same image. But the same readers might see these quotation marks errors as also creating a “tailored” image problem, one fitting just this type of error. One error, unfortunately, can contribute to diverse problems as well as to problems associated with just that error.

**One error, unfortunately, can contribute to diverse problems as well as to problems associated with just that error.**

**Category 3: writer as a representative**

Up to this point in my taxonomy, the ethos problems have been principally associated with possible *causes* of errors (such as carelessness or inappropriate attitudes) and have focused on images of only the writer. With the final major category, the image problems grow out of the *effects* of errors on a group of people. Just as errors reflect on the individual, the individual reflects on the organization. This category did not appear as often as the first two, but subjects were emphatic when these concerns arose, as demonstrated by their gestures and the length at which several would elaborate (one subject even asked me to stop recording for several minutes while he explained the embarrassment for the company because of usage errors produced by one high-placed executive).

Certainly, all image problems falling into the other two major categories can affect the credibility of an organization. However, subjects often did not settle for merely implying that errors harm the company's image; they explicitly stated that they saw the writer as a poor representative of the company. Many times, subjects did so by making a general observation. Jan, for example, told me, "Errors tell what your company's like." Just as often, subjects focused on two specific ways in which errors evoke the image of a representative who can be an organizational liability.

*Writer's image as organizational representative*

## 3.1 Representing the company to customers

## 3.2 Representing the company in court

**3.1: Representing the company to customers**

First and most obviously, the writer can represent the company in ways that harm customer relations and sales. In particular, the writer might cost the organization customers by representing it as unprofessional, ineffective, or in terms of any of the problems falling under categories 1 and 2. For instance, Daryn said that clients might not want to do business with a brokerage firm whose employee sends a "sloppy" letter containing errors, and Jan went beyond her general comment noted above:

The banking industry is more or less thought of as being a perfect industry. . . . And we try to do everything right, and I guess it bothers me if we present something on a piece of paper that is not . . . as near perfect as it can be. If I'm going to write you a letter, then my image went out in that letter, or my company's image.



My bank's image needs to be as nearly perfect, and a grammatical error, I think, would be offensive to some of my customers.

### 3.2: Representing the company in court

This theme might be less obvious to teachers and students, for litigation is not yet a frequent concern in most classrooms. For several subjects, the errors indicated the writer would not be an

asset as a representative of the company in legal disputes. This concern was brought up only by subjects in professions frequently involving contracts or litigation—

real estate, insurance, health care, and (to a lesser extent) banking. Frequency, though, can belie the importance of some issues. These subjects were usually emphatic in discussing this problem. Jean commented:

**Readers in business not only draw on their own individual ways of interpreting a text, but also make guesses as to how other people inside and outside the organization might be bothered by errors.**

And how is the company going to be represented when this is presented as evidence to a legal forum? Because the worst thing that can happen is for the opposing attorney to turn around and say that this person cannot write, cannot spell, has atrocious grammar. How can they have the education and knowledge to supervise that person?

Even Charles, whose survey results suggested he was among the least agitated by errors, was emphatic about how the writer might represent the company in court.

You go into court, okay? Whatever your writing is, they blow it up [onto a screen] the size of a wall! [He waves his arms.] The opposing attorney goes through whatever you have up there word by word. And if it doesn't look good to a jury or to anybody else, and if you have anything up there that's not right. . . . they're going to use that against you. Opposing attorneys try everything in the world to make you look bad!

When making comments about the writer as a representative, subjects were primarily concerned about how *other* people might react to errors; on a few occasions, subjects would state, in fact, that they might not make certain judgments, but they knew other people would. This guesswork might partly account for the diverse reactions subjects often had to the same errors. Readers in business not only draw on their own individual ways of interpreting a text, but also make guesses as to how other people inside and outside the organization might be bothered by errors. As seen throughout this study, a reader re-

acts to errors not merely by comparing the text to linguistic rules or conventions—a relatively simple act that only *seems* to constitute the process of responding to errors. A reader reacts as well by considering extra-textual issues, such as making assumptions about how, in a courtroom, other people (such as lawyers) might exploit errors while portraying the company to yet another set of people (such as a judge and jury). Such extra-textual entanglements are rarely as rich in students' academic writing, a condition that might partly account for the traditional focus in the classroom on only the textual aspects of error.

### **Implications for teaching**

This study drew on a small population to describe the interpretative processes of business people and how they arrive at error gravity—not to create a hierarchy of error gravity or to quantify reactions. Looking beyond mean averages,

**We should not imply that errors that seem minor to some people (e.g., to the writer or the teacher) are not worth much attention.**

we see subjects offering a surprising range of evaluations, often by considering each error individually rather than generically. Because of this range, I suggest teachers send a prudent message about error gravity.

ity. On average, some types of errors might appear egregious and serious, with others seeming minor. The key word, however, is “average”—an abstraction that emphasizes commonality and minimizes disparateness. It is equally important for students to appreciate that some readers can deviate greatly from the norm, and we should not imply that errors that seem minor to some people (e.g., to the writer or the teacher) are not worth much attention. Kantz and Yates found that teachers across the college campus can also have notable disagreements about specific errors despite some larger patterns of agreement, so students must realize that these tensions—general hierarchies of error disrupted by specific instances of disagreement—are not limited to just one communication context.

The interviews shed light on the negative effects of error and why we cannot assume the only serious errors are those hampering communication of textual content. Although errors can impede meaning, a more complex and equally important problem is how readers use errors to construct a negative image of a writer or organization. Again, students must realize the variation among readers' responses. For some readers, simple accidents or certain errors have little impact, while other readers see the same errors and create a damning portrait of the writer. Despite this variation with individual errors,

this study has uncovered categories of problems that better define “negative image” and what it means to be bothered by errors. Students—if not teachers—who perceive errors as unimportant might consider these themes in order to appreciate the impact of errors on nonacademic readers. By understanding the myriad ways in which a writer’s ethos can be unnecessarily endangered by errors, many students should be better motivated to avoid mistakes that careful proofreading would prevent. Indeed, Haswell found in one analysis that the clear majority of his students’ errors were essentially proofreading mistakes they could easily correct (601).

**By understanding the myriad ways in which a writer’s ethos can be unnecessarily endangered by errors, many students should be better motivated to avoid mistakes that careful proofreading would prevent.**

Some students perceive errors to be minor concerns and teachers who think otherwise to be “picky” (i.e., inconsequential). In some ways, these students are right. As a composition teacher, I might be annoyed or momentarily confused by errors, but if it were not for the vital fact that I could decide to lower the student’s grade, the way in which I personally react to errors might not really matter. In the nonacademic workforce, errors can affect people and events in larger ways. Most subjects recounted occasions when errors had detrimental consequences—an indication to me that errors truly bothered them and that their negative responses were authentic. I refer to more than loss of revenue for a company. Errors in some contexts can even be health hazards. Jean, a health-care administrator, described an incident in which a patient was given twice the normal dosage of a complex medication because of written instructions containing a misplaced modifier and garbled syntax. This situation is not typical, but one implication of this study is that students should beware of basing language choices on the “typical” reaction of readers. Instead, students should understand the diverse ways errors can affect a particular reader in a given situation.

While it is tempting to end on that note, I cannot in good conscience do so. At the risk of complicating the implications of this study, I have two final caveats.

First, we should be uncomfortable with any “easy out” for paying stricter attention to grammar and usage, for this mindset could lead teachers and students alike to obsess over one aspect of writing while giving less attention to other significant concerns. Indeed, practically all subjects commented on the importance of matters such as logic, organization, and conciseness—even though my questions centered on mechanics. Lee summed up his attitude to-

ward errors this way: “I would just go ahead and get to the point rather than dwell on the errors.” This study focuses on defining the components of negative reactions to error, and most errors in the questionnaire did appear bothersome to a degree, even for Lee. Still, I do not wish to imply the subjects were so intolerant that students should worry that one slip in language will lead

**Error avoidance, I submit, should have a presence in the composition curriculum—but but without overpowering it.**

business people to make all of the judgments covered in this study. A person’s ethos is established by a network of extra-textual and textual features, error being but one. In a previous study, in fact, I found various categories of *positive* images that are especially appropriate in business and created through certain textual features of business communication (Beason). Whether we believe it to be the optimum situation or not, errors have an impact on the writer’s image and communicability. Error avoidance, I submit, should have a presence in the composition curriculum—but without overpowering it.

Second, we should also be uncomfortable with stressing any aspect of writing based on what might be inaccurate generalizations, which I believe are too much with us already. Despite the work of Shaughnessy and others, some teachers still make erroneous generalizations about students’ linguistic aptitude based on dialect-based “errors” that in truth reflect valid grammatical systems, and I do not wish to support these or other unjustifiable judgments made within and outside our profession. Teachers should not ignore one finding of this study: Errors are conducive to a business person’s making judgments about the writer’s credibility and capabilities. Yet if we as teachers stress error avoidance simply because of this fact, are we giving credence to stereotypes? A few subjects themselves realized their generalizations about, say, a writer’s thinking ability might be unfair. Susan, one of the harsher readers, said: “A lot of my stereotypes about people who make those kinds of errors have proved unfounded.” Such subjects were honest enough to qualify their judgments, yet they were still willing to offer more generalizations.

We should, then, help students understand the depth and significance of this all-too-human response to errors. While discussing negative images created by errors, teachers should not sanctify the ways in which people make hasty generalizations about writers’ unconventional language choices. In helping students avoid errors, we help them avoid being victims of such generalizations. But in offering this assistance, we should also teach this next generation of professionals that errors in formal writing do not necessarily reflect a person’s overall personality, demeanor, or competence.

## Appendix A: Sample questionnaire

### *(Fragments)*

Definition: A fragment occurs when the writer punctuates a group of words so that it appears to be a complete sentence, when in fact it cannot stand alone as a complete sentence.

This report presents the results and recommendations of the task force.

**Which was appointed to study the most efficient method of storing all shipments of purchased materials.** After evaluating four methods, the task force recommends the Stacker method as the most feasible. \_\_\_\_\_

Two years ago, a similar study was done by members of the accounting department. However, their study was negated. **Because it was based on outdated estimates of the costs involved.** \_\_\_\_\_

We examined four storage methods most frequently used in our industry: (1) Trax, (2) Stacker, (3) Wide-Aisle Racking, and (4) Floor Storage. These methods were evaluated according to the following criteria. **Space requirements, initial investment costs, and yearly operating costs.** \_\_\_\_\_

The attached table summarizes the data gathered about the four methods. The company comptroller supplied us with estimates of prices. The following section is a brief description of the pros and cons of each of the four options. **Based on the criteria listed above.** \_\_\_\_\_

In the spaces provided, use this scale to indicate how bothersome you find each error.

	1	2	3	4
KEY:	Not bothersome at all	Somewhat bothersome	Definitely bothersome	Extremely bothersome

## Appendix B: Errors embedded in questionnaires

### *Misspellings*

1. recomendations
2. they're (for their)
3. metods
4. aboutt

### *Fragments (see Appendix A also)*

1. Which was appointed to study the most efficient method of storing all shipments of purchased materials.
2. Because it was based on outdated estimates of the costs involved.
3. Space requirements, initial investment costs, and yearly operating costs.
4. Based on the criteria listed above.

***Fused sentences***

1. The task force evaluated four methods the task force recommends the Stacker method as the most feasible.
2. Two years ago, a similar study was done by members of the accounting department however their study was negated because it was based on outdated estimates of the costs involved.
3. We examined four storage methods they are the most frequently used in our industry: (1) Trax, (2) Stacker, (3) Wide-Aisle Racking, and (4) Floor Storage.
4. The attached table summarizes the data gathered about the four methods the company comptroller supplied us with estimates of prices.

***Unnecessary quotation marks***

1. After “evaluating” four methods, the task force recommends the Stacker method as the most feasible.
2. However, “their” study was negated because it was based on outdated estimates of the costs involved.
3. These methods were evaluated according to the following criteria: “space” requirements, initial investment costs, and yearly operating costs.
4. The following section is a brief description of the “pros and cons” of each of the four options based on the criteria listed above.

***Word-ending errors***

1. Six years ago, the company had **chose** to adapt this method but then decided otherwise.
2. Two years ago, a similar study was **suppose** to have been done by members of the accounting department.
3. These methods were evaluated according to the following criteria: space requirements, initial investment costs, and **year** operating costs.
4. In our analysis, we believe we have treated each option **fair** and concluded that the Stacker method is the best.

**Notes**

1. These studies use the term “run-on sentence” to refer to two independent clauses having neither punctuation nor a coordinating conjunction separating them. I use the other common term used to refer to this error (“fused sentence”) because teachers and textbooks sometimes use “run-on sentence” to refer to other mechanical or even stylistic problems.
2. Although subjects discussed textual features such as those identified here, I am not suggesting there is no overlap between textual and extra-textual aspects of discourse. Some subjects themselves indicated that textual features such as word length are not necessarily a factor in error gravity for all readers or in all situations.

Bradford Connatser found that readability formulas based on word length and other textual features fail to predict how readers respond to a text. He concludes that “text difficulty” is a perception of a given reader and cannot be objectively measured through counting textual features (280–81), demonstrating the essential link between textual and extra-textual aspects of discourse. Still, subjects’ remarks in this study indicate a distinction between textual and extra-textual features, and it can be useful to forefront one or the other.

3. Category 2 also includes responses distinguishing between accidental and knowledge-based errors, though the subcategories are not as neatly identified with just one or the other source of error. For some time, several researchers, especially in second language acquisition (e.g., Corder), have used the term “mistake” to refer to accidental slips of the tongue (or pen) and saved “error” for problems stemming from insufficient knowledge of a linguistic system. I typically follow the convention in composition of using “error” to cover both categories. Bartholomae (263) and others explain how these two categories reflect the Chomskyian notions of *competence* (internalized rules of a language) versus *performance* (the actual—often flawed—application of these rules).

4. Anecdotal evidence suggests this is the case. Two of my relatives in the computer industry have urged me to encourage students to proofread carefully if they plan to enter this field, for if students cannot catch their writing errors they will likely be unable to detect tiny yet costly mistakes in computer codes. In addition, writing teachers well know their own errors can create significant image problems for people in their profession, but these perils are especially keen for those of us who write about error. During the submission process for this study, one reviewer (who agreed this feedback might warrant a footnote) commented on my own errors in a way that might be considered harsh (“illiterate” was one term used), but this was a far gentler image and more civil language than what I selected to describe myself and my mistakes. Perhaps the nature of people’s profession can affect not only error gravity and the images evoked of others, but the way in which people view *themselves* upon finding their errors.

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