

Error and What to Do About It

Gloria Fisk, City College of New York
Writing Across the Curriculum / Writing in the Disciplines Program

There are no easy answers to the problem of error, but in the following, we offer suggestions stemming from some WAC research as well as the experience of WAC faculty at CCNY.

*Distinguishing between grammar, punctuation, style, and conventional errors can save faculty time and effort—and help to reduce common errors. In the following list, we ask professors to take a minute to **reflect** on what seems to be the simplest of all teaching tasks—marking error. How do you mark error: and how do you define it?*

CONSIDER . . .

Grammar involves those areas of the language for which handbooks of Standard English usage offer little significant variation. These are instances of language use where there is a broad consensus about what constitutes an error. Some of these areas are subject/verb and number agreement, word order (e.g., the article precedes the noun, and the subject usually comes before the verb), verb tense construction, and spelling. Because these kinds of errors often impede reading, and because these are errors on which all disciplines agree, *students benefit from having these errors marked consistently throughout a course.*

Punctuation involves both grammar and style. For example, a common splice—joining two independent clauses with only a comma—is usually classified as a grammatical mistake (though not everywhere: fiction writers often use this construction). However, whether writers should mark short phrases at the beginning of a

sentence with a comma is usually a matter of editorial policies or style-sheets, what we like to call “house rules.” *We recommend that only the most fundamental punctuation errors be marked, especially early in the semester.*

Style issues are more particular to specific audiences. What is concise to readers in one discipline will strike readers from another discipline as under-developed. What is an appropriate mode of discourse in one discipline (the opinion essay in political science) may be inappropriate in another (the opinion essay in a biology lab course). One common example of style error involves the disciplinary use of verb tense. For example, in some classes students must use the present historical tense, while in others, they must use the past tense only. *We recommend that if style issues are marked, they are distinguished from grammar errors.*

Conventions, like styles, are particular to each discipline. Conventions range from voice (should the personal “I” be used?), to specific formatting issues (should a title of an article be in all caps, or underlined?). Conventions are especially difficult for students because in addition to understanding the particularities of academic discourse, conventions are not universal within academia, within disciplines, or even within departments. Often, what seems to be a grammar error is an error of convention specific to a particular discourse community. For example, the *New York Times* and the science magazine *Discover* follow different conventions. One allows sentences to begin with “but,” while the other does not. *Research on error suggests that issues of convention can be taught best by providing students with model papers that display particular house rules.*

Here are some practices faculty have found useful.

- **Mark larger errors first.** In general, when dealing with student error in any of the areas described above, it is important for students to understand that there is a hierarchy of error: certain errors are more troubling to the reader than others. For instance, a comma splice is more important than failing to underline the title of a book. Often, by eliminating the larger errors, the smaller, interrelated errors will disappear.

- **Line-editing may be counter-productive.** Line-editing large swaths of a student's paper is extremely time consuming and, some research indicates, not that helpful to students if different types of errors are not distinguished and defined. If a student's essay is well organized and well argued, then it makes more sense to line edit than if the essay is poorly composed to begin with.

- **Marking conventions and style errors on papers may not decrease error.** What is clear to the instructor ("this is the wrong tone") is often not clear to the student. Issues of style and convention may be directly and effectively addressed through the use of models and other strategies described on this website, such as the assigning of short practice papers.

- **Recognize that faculty use different systems for marking grammar, style, punctuation, and conventions.** The error in joining two or more independent clauses together is cited in research as one of the ten most common errors in college students' writing. However, faculty at CCNY—as is true of handbooks—often call this error by several different names (comma splice, linked sentence, fused sentence, run-on, etc). We have discovered in our WAC program up to 20 different stylesheets for citation in use in general education courses. For instance, in two sections of one core course, we found that one teacher told students to use I since it is used professionally, while another teacher forbade its use in any writing for the class. For these reasons, *it is important that professors who are concerned with*

correctness briefly define the terms they will be using, or provide students with the specific stylesheet to which they can refer. Perhaps as important, faculty can explain to students why particular conventions exist within their disciplines.

- **Identify a pattern of error for the writer.** Some students have problems with fragments; others with using the right style for quoting from sources; and still others with the apostrophe. **Only a minority will have difficulty with all three areas!** If the instructor can identify the pattern of error for the writer (those items with which the writer consistently has trouble), the writer can focus on improving in just those areas and eliminate a good percentage of the errors.

- **Encouraging rough drafts, assigning very short papers, and allowing students to write about course concepts in class all help them to grapple with difficult material before a major essay is due.** Research on university students' composing processes reveals two major themes regarding error. The first is that concentrating too much on error often encourages writers to do less writing. The second is that one major source of error stems from a writer's struggle to understand course material. In struggling to understand content, a writer often makes grammatical or stylistic mistakes that he or she wouldn't make otherwise. Many of the strategies described on this website are designed to help students think about what they are reading, observing, and studying **BEFORE** they have to display knowledge for a high stakes evaluation.