

NOTES TOWARD A HIERARCHY OF ERRORS

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First Level: Sentence-Level Errors

These are the most serious mechanical errors students can make:

- ❖ *Sentence fragments.* Here we mean groups of words without complete subjects, predicates, or complete thoughts, groups that obviously were not stylistically intentional fragments. While all skilled writers occasionally employ fragments for special effect, unskilled writers will often write fragments without knowing it. A good writer has an innate sense of a sentence, and when students unknowingly write fragments they show a lack of this innate sense.
- ❖ *Sentence garbles.* Essentially, a garbled sentence is a group of words that makes the reader say, "What?" and try to reread it. A garble may be caused by the student's use of two incompatible sentence structures in the same sentence; by some other twisting of normal syntax (word order) or diction (word choice); or, in certain cases, by some twisting of logic that defies clear understanding. Some garbles can be corrected by reading the sentence aloud, changing the parts that clash with the other parts; others just won't "sound right" and can be repaired by revising until they do "sound right."
- ❖ *True run-on sentence.* A true run-on sentence is a sentence that is too long to be easily processed in the reader's short-term memory. Such a sentence breaks down because the reader can't keep all its constituent bits of information straight and thereby fully understand the sentence. Some sentences are called run-on when all that is wrong is a missing or incorrect mark of punctuation; these kinds of sentences seldom give readers much trouble. But true run-on sentences (that is, run-ons caused not by simple punctuation omission but by runaway wording that overloads the reader's circuits, causing breakdown in communication) confound readers and demand revision.
- ❖ *Frequent breakdown in parallel structure.* Longer sentences that make poor use of parallelism should be recast. Parallelism is an important characteristic of clear syntax, especially in long sentence structures.

Second Level: Errors in Agreement, Reference, and Diction

These errors are typical in the efforts of many writers can often be avoided by the person's learning to be a more careful writer or a more skilled proofreader. Though they create bothersome problems for attentive readers, such errors rarely impair communication seriously and usually pertain more to carelessness than lack of skill. . .

- *Agreement.* Sentence subject and verb do not agree in number, or pronoun and antecedent do not agree in number or gender.
- *Reference.* Pronoun does not have clear antecedent.
- *Diction.* Strictly speaking, the word *diction* refers to word choice--whether or not a word or group of words fits the context in which it appears. We include in this category wordiness, redundancy, jargon, and low-level ambiguities--statements that, for whatever reason, either are unclear or have more than one possible meaning. These *errors* in diction include the following:
 - Usage errors (for instance, "except" is written when "accept" is meant)
 - Imprecise word choices ("Taxation was a *sensuous* [rather than *sensitive*] issue in the community.")
 - Wordiness ("at this point in time" instead of "now")
 - Redundancy ("The sky was blue *in color*.")
 - Jargon ("Betsy and Al *achieve interface* [rather than *agreed*] about the Ramsay account.")
 - Low-level ambiguity ("I cannot recommend this product too much.")

Third Level: Spelling and Punctuation

These are among the least problematic yet the most constant mechanical errors. We recommend a hierarchy within this level that your students should take seriously:

- *Most important: end punctuation.* Periods, question marks, and exclamation points are the marks that end sentences. When they are not in evidence, the reader is quickly and needlessly confused; quickly, because there's no marker to indicate a sentence boundary; needlessly, because their omission is nothing but carelessness and lack of proofreading.
- *Next most important: internal punctuation.* The most important internal punctuation marks are commas and semicolons. When they are missing or misplaced, they can cause the reader to stumble and have to reread. Constant comma and semicolon problems (especially comma splices) should be called to the writer's attention and, if not remedied or at least improved over time, should eventually result in grade penalty (no more than a letter grade). Of less importance but to be handled similarly are apostrophes, colons, dashes, and hyphens. In all cases, errors of this sort should never be ignored, and students should work to improve their understanding and use of punctuation.
- *Spelling.* Never ignore spelling problems. Never let students off with the all-purpose excuse "I'm just not a good speller." . . . Chronic bad spellers who seem to make no effort to improve should see their grades dropped by a letter. You should encourage them to use dictionaries, make lists of words they most often misspell, and use other aides, such as computerized spell checkers.

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