

## Typology of Errors

### Types of errors

- Errors that affect the reader's understanding:
    - Verb phrase structure;
    - Subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement;
    - Basic sentence structure (fragments and word order).
  - Errors that usually do not cause misunderstanding; they are typically not rule-bound and require more practice in reading and writing for noticeable improvement:
    - Tense shifts;
    - Coordination and subordination patterns;
    - Prepositions and articles;
    - Word choice;
    - Punctuation and mechanics.
  - Socio-linguistic errors - rooted in lack of rhetorical awareness and English usage conventions:
    - Formal/informal usage and academic diction;
    - Plagiarism cases (mimicking of language and diction).
- Obviously, errors that impede the reader's understanding or are stigmatizing have the highest priority.

### List of specific errors to work on in order of priority

(specifically tailored to Merrimack's students and their language backgrounds and needs)

### For students at lower proficiency levels

(students who you find make a lot of different errors and also struggle with speaking)

- Spelling
  - priority because spelling errors are very stigmatizing (makes the writer look uneducated)
  - also, a certain portion of the errors can be easily fixed by making use of technology (MS Word tools)
  - see handouts on spelling and on using technology
- Word forms and word formation (i.e. systematic patterns of how nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are formed by adding prefixes and suffixes (paradigm), e.g. to educate (V), education (N), educational (Adj.), educationally (Adv.) etc.)
  - priority
  - Chinese students, in particular, but also some Arabic-speaking students seem to lack an awareness of the fundamental principles of word formation, which works very differently in their languages
  - see handout on spelling

- Agreement, Tense & Number Marking
  - priority
  - subject-verb agreement: 3<sup>rd</sup> person *-s* on verbs
  - verb tenses: Simple Present *-s* and Simple Past *-ed*
  - number marking: Plural *-s* on nouns
    - these are lumped together here because they all involve dropped endings, students know the underlying rules and can correct their own errors once they are pointed out to them, and hence these errors are rather easy to fix
    - errors can lead to serious misunderstandings (how many? when? etc.)
    - particularly important in academic writing for summarizing and analyzing texts: Simple Present *-s* in MLA and Simple Past *-ed* in APA
  
- Tenses:
  - simple tenses (Simple Present & Simple Past) that are important in academic writing
  - consistent tense use throughout the paper (Simple Present in MLA, Simple Past in APA)
    - these two should have priority over other, more complex tense forms
    - see Agreement, Tense & Number Marking above
  
- Sentence Structure, with focus on Simple Sentences
  - fragments
    - priority
  - run-ons & comma splices, with focus on breaking them up into smaller/simple sentences
  - no *and* or *or* at the beginning of a sentence (*but* and *so* are acceptable because they don't create fragments)
  - word-order fundamentals (SVO: Subject – Verb – Object)
    - priority
  - see handouts on sentence fragments and on run-on sentences
  
- Verb phrase structure
  - *be* + present vs. past participles (adjectives with *-ing* vs. *-ed*)
    - priority because it creates funny situations when someone means 'I am bored' or 'I am excited,' but says "I am boring" or "I am exciting"
  - infinitives and gerunds (basics)
  - modals (basics)
  - see handout on *-ing* vs. *-ed* participles/adjectives
  
- Punctuation:
  - commas vs. periods; quotation marks
    - Explain that commas occur within sentences and periods at the end of sentences.
    - see handout on run-on sentences
  
- Mechanics
  - capital letter at the beginning of a sentence
  
- Errors that MS Word would automatically correct or at least flag as possible errors have high priority because these can be easily fixed by actually making use of what technology offers.

## For students at higher proficiency levels

Students at higher proficiency levels may still have problems with some of the above errors, but they generally have grasp of sentence structure basics. Sentence fragments with missing subjects, missing verbs, or incorrect non-finite instead of correct finite verb forms are less common.

- Spelling
- Word forms and word formation
- Agreement: overall, with emphasis on Subj+V, but also noun-pronoun agreement
- Tenses:
  - compound tenses
  - tense sequencing; tense shifts
- Verb phrase structure
  - verbs followed by gerund vs. to-infinitive vs. bare infinitive
  - modals
  - passive voice
- Sentence structure:
  - Coordination/subordination principals
  - Run-ons; comma splices; mixed constructions (e.g. *although* and *but* in one sentence)
  - Word order – emphasis on modifiers and transitions
  - Clauses in complex sentences: relative/adjective clauses (priority), noun/subject/complement clauses, adverb/adverbial clauses (vs. introductory/transition phrases)
  - Modals – pragmatic aspects
  - Sentence variety – syntactic permutation patterns
  - Participial phrases as alternative to subordinate clauses
- Pronoun reference and sexist language (e.g. “in the US, you can talk to your professor and get help from him”; “you might like something but your wife, son, or brother don’t like it”)
- Punctuation:
  - Comma; semi-colon; other marks.
- Style (very low priority)
  - Not using *I* in academic writing
  - Not starting sentences with *but* or *so* and using a transition word or phrase instead
- Errors that MS Word would automatically correct or at least flag as possible errors have a high priority because these can be easily fixed.
  - See tech helpsheet.

## Very low priority and only for students with very high English proficiency

(often graduate students, students with native languages related to English)

- Tenses: overall, with emphasis on tense shifts in academic writing
- Conditional sentences
- Adverb placement
- Prepositions
  - very difficult for Spanish speakers
  - require a lot of experience in English

- Articles (the vs. a vs. Ø)
  - extremely difficult for Chinese speakers and speakers of other languages without articles
  - virtually “unteachable” (Maria Zlateeva, Director of L2 Writing, BU)