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Common Errors of Two Contemporary Classrooms: A Capstone

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Common Errors of Two Contemporary Classrooms: A Capstone

By

Helen M. Cauley

A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the

Department of English in the

College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University
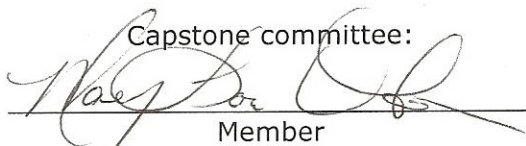
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College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the committee
For the capstone requirement for the Master of Arts in
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At the **May 2012** graduation

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Chapter One: Introduction
"Dude, where's my car going?"

Imagine merging onto a crowded interstate at rush hour, en route to distant destination with your friends. Within a few minutes of starting out, the first off-ramp whizzes by, unmarked by an exit sign. A bit farther along, cars start zigzagging across the unmarked tarmac. There are no indications of speed limits. In fact, this highway has no signage at all: no "slower traffic keep right," no mileage markers for the next exit. Your passengers begin to squirm. "We're very confused!" they cry. "Where is this highway taking us? And how will we know when we're there?"

Anyone who has successfully navigated a congested highway knows that signage is key. It tells us when to speed up, slow down, take caution, get on, get off, and avoid problem areas. Learning to read and correctly interpret those signs is a skill that takes years of practice to perfect. In many ways, creating clear, comprehensible prose is similar to taking that drive to an anticipated destination. Both the writer and her readers are excited about making the trek, but the journey is often fraught with unease. The source of this anxiety can also be traced to missing signage - a lack of standard grammar, punctuation, and usage that clearly tells the reader when to speed up, slow down, and pay close attention to the point. Without these road markers, readers easily lose their sense of direction and end up not knowing exactly where they are going, where they have been, or when the trip ends.

A year of working with students in the Kennesaw State Writing Center, followed by three semesters in my own English composition classrooms, brought a myriad of these signage issues to my attention. Students continually wrestled with audience, voice, and cohesiveness, but the problems that plagued them the most revolved around grammar, punctuation, and usage. As a writer with a deep appreciation for language and

communication and as a non-traditional student who had been out of the university for thirty-two years, I arrived in the English Department with the preconceived idea that college writers possessed a clear understanding of basic grammar and punctuation principles, such as comma placement and subject/verb agreement. I expected to work with students on style, organization, and research methods without having to explain pronouns and homonym distinctions. Instead, I found an inordinate number of students whose abilities to write with clarity were hampered because they did not have a firm grasp of the fundamentals.

The reasons students gave for not having mastered the basic tenets of English writing were as different as the students themselves. Many claimed never having been introduced to foundational concepts. Others said they were taught, but teachers throughout their high school careers did not hold them to any standard in their papers, so errors went uncorrected; lessons went unlearned. They never "understood" commas, so they ignored them completely. As apocryphal as the reasons were, they nonetheless were the most common explanations. Now, faced with the expectations of producing university-level papers, they struggled to create writing that was clear, effective, and full of meaning.

The same difficulties hampered students in my first composition classes. Designed to introduce writers to the world of academic discourse, these courses challenge students to move beyond the five-paragraph composition frequently taught in high school to lengthy, scholarly research and argumentative papers. But the task of learning the language of the university was often stymied by the lack of basic grammar and usage concepts needed to support the process. I found my student writers possessed an array of problems, ranging from confusion about simple sentence structure (subject, verb, object) to more complex issues of parallel construction and misplaced modifiers. In between was a litany of errors: pronouns

with no links to nouns, poor or missing punctuation, erroneous use of the objective case, subject/verb agreement. They were prone to mixing up its/it's and they're/their/there while frequently selecting words that were not only imprecise but, on occasion, inappropriate. (The substitution of the word "infamous" for "famous" remains one of the most common.) Did noticing these mechanical errors mean I had joined the ranks of those snooty grammarians who demand perfection for perfection's sake? I sincerely hope not. What concerned me most was that these problems interfered with the ultimate purpose of the prose: They sabotaged the writer's meaning. Without the directional signs, readers found it difficult to follow and understand the points the author wanted to drive home.

While discussing grammar knowledge and its effects on the quality of first-year writing with other teaching assistants and faculty members, I discovered that the problem was not unique to my own classrooms. Most of my colleagues wrestled with papers sporting the same problems, but no one claimed to have discovered a particular approach that guaranteed results. Based on the scholarly research we had explored, many of the teaching assistants favored only minimally marking only the most egregious errors on papers; others distributed handouts produced by the Writing Center when they saw the need to address a common issue, such as commas. Other instructors approached grammar on a case-by-case basis, explaining individual errors as they arose, but not devoting any specific instruction time to general grammar and usage principles. Usually, our discussions of how to address the problem ended with a sigh and shrug. No one had a process that produced positive changes in student writings, but at the same time, they agreed that poor grammar was a problem. After observing first-hand the problems faced by students who came into the Writing Center, I felt there was a need to address the issue of grammar teaching head-on. I was also buoyed by my

first graduate class, in which the professor presented weekly style and grammar explanations to help struggling writers. It was clear that it was not just first-year writers who were having problems writing effectively.

As part of the syllabus for my first English Composition 1101 classes, I designed brief grammar and usage lessons based on the most common errors I had addressed with students in the Writing Center. Once in the classroom, I stressed attentive and comprehensive revision, with a particular focus on the recurring mistakes. I worked with students one-on-one and in small groups to improve their grasp of grammar. No one approach proved most - or lastingly - effective. It was much like a random roll of the dice: Some students caught on immediately and were able to apply the lessons to their own writing, others got it eventually, and some never sorted out the situation at all. In addition, it was clear that a many were eager to learn the mechanics and apply them, while others threw up their hands and cried, "I'll just never understand commas!"

In my second semester of teaching English Composition 1102, the lack of clear writing skills played a significant role in the final grades: Only four of forty-five students earned As, and thirteen earned Bs. Of those who received C grades or lower, the vast majority had produced papers that were rife with grammatical and usage errors that created confusion. Going into my second year of teaching, I wanted to design a lesson plan that took a more determined approach to teaching grammar that included not only lessons, but also exercises and revisions. At the same time, I was curious to see if such an approach could have a measurable impact on student writing.

In searching for effective ways to teach grammar, my research revealed that the debate on the topic has been going on almost from the day pen was put to paper. Between

1915 and 1934, reams of pages in articles and books were devoted to the subject (Connors).
Contemporary researchers have been weighing in since the 1960s, and many, like myself, are
often surprised to find that grammar instruction continues to be a lingering, controversial
issue.

In the opening paragraph of his 1985 essay, "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching
of Grammar," Patrick Hartwell writes that he thought the decision not to teach formal
grammar had been laid to rest in 1963. He points out that "the grammar issue is a
complicated one. And, perhaps surprisingly, it remains controversial with the regular
appearance of papers defending the teaching of formal grammar or attacking it" (105). A
more recent review of current composition journals turns up numerous articles discussing
approaches to tackling grammar in the classroom. It continues to be an issue in contemporary
society where we encounter written communication on a daily, minute-by-minute basis.
Writing is no longer reserved just for books, periodicals, or scholarly journals; it is a key
component of everyday life, extending to e-mails, blogs, text messages, and tweets. Even in
these venues of casual writing, the lack of a grammar framework often leads to errors that
distort the meaning or, in some cases, change it completely. In a world where so much
depends on the written word, clarity is of the utmost importance, and without solid signage,
the meaning is easily muddled.

In 1988, several years before the birth of the Internet and social media as we know it
today, two composition professors faced with similar concerns about their students' writing
devised a study to identify the most common writing errors. Robert J. Connors and Andrea A.
Lunsford compiled their findings into the essay, "The Frequency of Formal Errors in Current
College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research." They were drawn to the study with the

same concern I had: "Errors are not merely mechanical...but rhetorical as well" (396).

Connors and Lunsford were also drawn by their own historical perspective that showed there

had been no significant study of actual college writing since before the Second World War.

As the two noted, they wrote not as "torch bearers of some new truth, but as two more

in the long line of people applying their contemporary perspectives to a numbering and

ordering system and hoping for something to use from it" (Connors and Lunsford 396). Their

exhaustive research involving hundreds of student papers was subsequently followed by a

second study, completed twenty years later by Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford and

detailed in their article, "Mistakes Are a Fact of Life: A National Comparative Study." A

side-by-side comparison of the two reports shows that the majority of the errors noted in the

original study continued to be made by first-year writers two decades later.

Table 1: Top Twenty Errors, 1988 vs. 2008	
Error or Error Pattern, 1988[1]	**Error or Error Pattern, 2008[2]**
1. No comma after introductory element	1. Wrong word
2. Vague pronoun reference	2. Missing comma after an introductory element
3. No comma in compound sentence	3. Incomplete or missing documentation
4. Wrong word	4. Vague pronoun reference
5. No commas in non-restrictive element	5. Spelling error (including homonyms)
6. Wrong/missing inflected endings	6. Mechanical error with a quotation
7. Wrong or missing preposition	7. Unnecessary comma
8. Comma splice	8. Unnecessary or missing capitalization
9. Possessive apostrophe error	9. Missing word
10. Tense shift	10. Faulty sentence
11. Unnecessary shift in person	11. Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element
12. Sentence fragment	12. Unnecessary shift in verb tense
13. Wrong tense or verb form	13. Missing comma in a compound sentence
14. Subject-verb agreement	14. Unnecessary or missing apostrophe
15. Lack of comma in a series	15. Fused or run-on sentence
16. Pronoun agreement error	16. Comma splice
17. Unnecessary comma with restrictive element	17. Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement
18. Run-on or fused sentence	18. Poorly integrated quotation
19. Dangling or misplaced modifier	19. Unnecessary or missing hyphen
20. It's/its error	20. Sentence fragment

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[1] *Connors, Robert J. and Andrea A. Lunsford. "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research." College Composition and Communication (39) 4 (Dec. 1988): 395-409. Web. 04 April 2011.*

[2] *Lunsford,, Andrea A. and Karen Lunsford. " 'Mistakes Are a Fact of Life': A National Comparative Study." College Composition and Communication (59) 4 (Jun. 2008): 781-806. Web. 04 April 2011.*

Though students appeared to have a somewhat stronger grasp of complete sentences, hyphens, and pronouns by 2008, they were still stymied by commas, apostrophes, verb tenses, and homonyms, as well as documentation issues.

Three years later in my 2011 classrooms, I was ticking off the same errors on students' papers. Why was this car still veering out of control? The question led me to the work of this Capstone project: investigating the mistakes made by writers in two contemporary classrooms and comparing them to the work of the previous two studies. How would the writings of my students in 2011 stack up against the researchers' results? Would there be new or different issues to address? Beyond the basic recording of errors, I was also curious to discover whether the frequency of those mistakes could be lessened by systematic introduction of and emphasis on grammatical concepts throughout a fifteen-week semester. Could specific lessons directed at correcting the most common mistakes produce positive results? I hoped to find that they would, but at the same time, I had no way to gauge how well those lessons might be received. Still, I believed that once taught, students could master the concepts and incorporate them into their own writing. My belief could be proved or disproved by measuring the errors in my own students' papers.

Whereas both previous studies established the grid of what constituted the most common errors, the researchers completed their work without any discussion of how to eradicate them. They concluded that teachers have a myriad of reasons for marking or overlooking errors, including "how serious or annoying the error is perceived to be and how difficult it is to mark or explain" (Connors and Lunsford 404), said teachers who have been applying those reasons with fervor since the first contemporary studies on student errors appeared at the beginning of the penultimate century. But the researchers did not venture into

the realm of how the cycle can be broken. No matter what backgrounds the students brought to the 2011 classroom, my goal was to ascertain whether or not their writing could be improved through consistent grammar instruction.

In addition, these two previous studies worked with papers that ranged from a few paragraphs to more than twenty pages, produced by students from across the country. What would an analysis of errors look like if compiled from the same writers in one semester, working on increasingly longer and more complex drafts while receiving specific grammar lessons? I set out not necessarily to discover new truths, but to extend the existing research by examining the problem on a small scale and evaluating the effectiveness of various teaching approaches on the results.

Before designing this study, I spent a semester delving into the literature about grammar, punctuation, and usage and how it has historically been viewed in the classroom. A review of that research is incorporated in Chapter Two, which also discusses various methods instructors have employed to improve grammar comprehension and revisits the reasons why some scholars have argued for and against that teaching. I also uncovered numerous essays from the last ten to fifteen years that explored success with grammar teaching; these offered tips such as creating memory tools and grammar games as well as motivating students that proved particularly useful in designing my own lessons.

A review of the methodology followed in this project is laid out in the third chapter. It explains the process of gathering, grading, and compiling that went into establishing the most common errors of two contemporary classrooms. It also explains how this project extended the analysis of Connors, Lunsford, and Lunsford by connecting those common errors to grammar lessons given over a fifteen-week semester.

Chapter Four looks at the results of error tracking in the first set of papers turned in by KSU first-year students in 2011. It also compares those frequencies to the two previous Lunsford studies. Chapter Five extends the comparison, including the students' second, longer set of papers; Chapter Six tallies the errors from the final and longest project. The last chapter offers an overall analysis of the tabulations, as well as an evaluation of the teaching methods and their impact on the results.

Chapter Two: Literature Review
What expert drivers say: Lessons from the road, 1988 to 2011

Before diving into my own research, I explored what the field's experts had already discussed about the grammar conundrum. I discovered a wealth of studies, reports, analyses, and personal anecdotes that weighed heavily in favor of not teaching grammar in the classroom. Those who declared themselves in favor of grammar lessons, and who often shared their own successful strategies for doing so, were among the most contemporary contributors to the discussion. But nowhere did I uncover a clear explanation of why the errors tracked by Connors and Lunsford were still showing up on my students' papers. One thing was clear: Teachers continued to notice the same problems I did but had few solutions for eradicating them.

The Connors and Lunsford "Ma and Pa Kettle" essay pointed out that teachers have been keeping lists of grammar errors and systematically categorizing them since 1910. They reference a study conducted in 1938-39 by John C. Hodges, who collected 20,000 student-produced texts and found enough fodder to fill his *Harbrace College Handbook.* Mina Shaughnessy revisited the issue in the 1970s, when her reports about the deficiencies of basic writers were considered shocking. Clearly, Lunsford continued to be nagged by grammar errors because in 2008 her co-authored work updated the original study. "Mistakes Are a Fact of Life" created a new list of Top Twenty errors that went beyond grammar and usage to include documentation. Lunsford still uncovered a plethora of mistakes: the papers reviewed were rife with many of the same points that had appeared on the 1988 list. What did change was the frequency with which various errors occurred. For instance, in 1988, wrong word errors ranked in fourth place; twenty years later, they were heading the list. Homonym confusion soared from last place in 1988 to fifth in 2008. Ironically, both those changes may

reflect the growing influence of   computerized editing systems. Students who allow spellcheckers to automatically make corrections out of context, or who randomly pick a word from the automated thesaurus, often do so with detrimental results. Alternatively, in 2008, the word programs may take credit for doing an excellent job of catching sentence fragments: That problem fell to last place, down from the twelfth spot on the original list.

One of the most pressing problems of those earliest grammar studies was the inconsistency of the definitions applied to the errors – a problem contemporary grammar experts still wrestle with today. In reading through the literature produced since the 1990s, it's clear that there is still much debate over what constitutes an official "error." The biggest schism comes in defining precisely what constitutes "grammar" versus "usage," and figuring out when to talk about which. Three articles I reviewed offered excellent historical backgrounds to the many facets of the issue: a multi-authored piece in the *British Educational Research Journal*; Karen Spear's "Controversy and Consensus in Freshman Writing: An Overview of the Field;" and Patrick Hartwell's "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar."

Hartwell declared that "seventy-five years of experimental research has for all practical purposes told us nothing" (106), and though he thought the subject was closed years ago, it was still a hot-button topic for teachers when he composed his essay in 1985 (105). The opposing camps, which he separates into grammarians and anti-grammarians, still cannot reach an agreement on whether or not explicit grammar instruction has the power to change students' writing. The grammarians label research that goes against their convictions as "suspicious." The antis declare that the same research vindicates their position. Hartwell cites a plethora of studies manipulated by both sides to make points, then he wades into the

fray by trying to establish a framework for the discussion, parsing out just what grammar is and categorizing it into four levels, from the least important mistakes that have little impact on the quality of writing up to "Grammar 4," the basic rules, and onto "Grammar 5," stylistic grammar that relates to elegant sentence and paragraph formation. Yet in the end, he declares that "it is time that we, as researchers, move on to more interesting areas of inquiry" (127). It would appear even he is bored with the lack of definitive direction.

In "The Effect of Grammar Teaching on Writing Development," eight authors reveal the results of an international study on the question in the *British Educational Research Journal*. Published in 2005, the work opens with an historical overview then delves into a massive project of reviewing student writings. Their conclusions hold out little hope for the grammarian camp, claiming that an extensive review of papers by five- to fourteen-year-olds shows "the teaching of syntax appears to have no influence on either the accuracy or quality of written language development" (51). However, the authors also note that different methods may have been used to obtain the results, which opens the door for repudiation.

Karen Spear's 1997 treatise in *The Review of Higher Education* offers considerable background on the history of composition courses, then segues into her concerns about how feedback is absorbed, or not, by students. Her summation claims that the way most teachers respond to student papers – namely, by marking all the mistakes – is highly ineffective. Instead, she posits, students should be led to a logical understanding of their mistakes. I agree with Spear that there is nothing to be gained by marking errors simply for the sake of correction. The primary goal must be to help students develop writing that is clear, fluid, and direct in its meaning. This is the discourse that fascinates most contemporary writing scholars, even those who have come to agree with findings that point to the ineffectiveness of direct

grammar instruction. As Hartwell himself acknowledged, research and writing on the issue had not produced a definitive solution or direction, and much of the literature shows a similar ambivalence. Yet even those who don't endorse explicit grammar instruction recognize the need for some way to introduce the concepts.

That theme comes across in the book *Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers*, co-authored by four experienced and respected professors, including Martha Kolln, who want to make instructors comfortable with the concepts. This slim, 120-page work declares that grammar became disconnected from reading and writing when the emphasis shifted to the process of writing and then was further forgotten by students with varying backgrounds and language skills who transformed writing by incorporating their familiar street slang and abbreviated text talk. The authors also point out that many writing and English teachers themselves have not mastered grammar's intricacies, and the numbers who do feel competent to offer instruction and correction are small. But they offer several practical, engaging suggestions to help teachers increase their confidence levels, and they present a variety of well-explained exercises (even old-school diagramming) based on the students' own work to reinforce a broad range of topics, from correct capitalization to rhetorical effect.

Since my own research set out to explore the most common errors of two contemporary classrooms as well as practical and effective ways of correcting them, I delved into the writings of professionals who have preceded me with some success. A wealth of literature in this area exists, though much of it is anecdotal: Success stories are shared, but overall, there is no measuring device by which to gauge how effectively students absorbed and applied the lessons. Connors and Lunsford took the first step by identifying the mistakes, but where was the evidence that they could be reduced?

Practical and engaging suggestions for teaching grammar can be found from experienced professors and linguists, as well as beginning high school English teachers. Much of the inspiration is now coming from the ESL classroom, where teaching grammar is a key component of the curriculum, but one that is frequently taught through readings. One of the strongest voices on the issue comes from Rod Ellis, a professor with an extensive ESL background whose work appears regularly in the *TESOL Quarterly* and who continues to explore practical ways to teach grammar to non-native speakers (in New Zealand, no less). In addition, there are reams of writing that offer one approach, one lesson, even one memory trick that a teacher hails as having changed the way students think about and employ grammar guidelines. Jeff Anderson writes about his success in "Zooming in and Zooming out: Putting Grammar in Context into Context." Other tips come from "Grammar Rants: An Alternative to Traditional Grammar Instruction" by Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia Dunn. Stephen Tchudi and Lee Thomas came up with a wealth of instructional ideas in "Taking the G-r-r-r Out of Grammar." I was particularly delighted to find that many of these essays were humorous, imparting a sense that the author approached the subject with enthusiasm and imagination. One of the best examples of this is "Serious Playfulness: Setting the Tone for Teaching Language and Grammar," in which author Pamela Sussi Carrol, a professor at Florida State University, culled from middle-school teachers their most successful ways to make grammar playful, without the drudgery and boredom brought on by rote methods. Among her suggestions were the "Word Play du *Jour*" games of puzzles, teasers, palindromes, and idioms that highlight oxymorons, clichés, and humorous misplaced modifiers taken directly from the headlines ("Red Tape Holds up New Bridge") (110). But Carrol's final word on the subject is that such engaging wordplay does not replace "more

structured grammar study" (112), but it does serve to bring attention to the flexibility of the language.

Another engaging essay on ways to bring grammar instruction into the classroom came from Nancy Laurel-Pettersen, who in 2006 penned "Grammar Instruction in the Land of Curiosity and Delight." To improve her students' grammar, she emphasizes context, particularly the difference between how language is spoken and written – what she categorizes as "grammar book" versus "street." She also challenges her students to beat her at her own grammar game, "Whup the Teacher": When it's time to line-edit papers, students form teams and work to find every possible error, scoring points for those they catch and losing points for any the teacher notices.

The list of good grammar-teaching essays and books is extensive, but the enormous selection only leads me to conclude that, as was the case with Harwell's contemporaries, today's instructors still have no single, productive way to approach the issue.

Chapter Three: Methodology
Mapping a route to the contemporary classrooms

My goal in this project was twofold: to compare the two lists of the twenty most

common errors as tracked in the "Frequency of Formal Errors" and "Mistakes Are a Fact of

Life" with papers produced by first-year writers in my English Composition 1101 class at

Kennesaw. More importantly, I wanted to evaluate those errors in light of specific grammar

instruction incorporated into the lesson plan. That last element added a new aspect to the

study that the two previous investigations did not have the luxury of exploring: how students'

errors change, or not, over the course of the one class that introduces them to academic

discourse. It also gave me the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of various grammar-

teaching methods.

Another deviation from the original studies involved the types of

writers producing the papers under scrutiny. In the first project, Connors and Lunsford

received samples written by college freshmen and sophomores from around the country,

while my study was limited to first-year writers largely from the greater Atlanta metropolitan

area. In the second study, Lunsford and Lunsford also worked with papers submitted from

around the country, but they confined the collection to end-of-term papers from first-year

students in varying levels of writing classes. There was no way to analyze the characteristics

of the students who participated in the original studies, since the submissions came from

teachers across the United States, and there was no way to categorize the individual writers.

The profile of participants in my study fell in line with those of the university's total student

body that identifies itself largely as White, Non-Hispanic (68 percent). The three leading

minorities at Kennesaw are Black Non-Hispanic (15 percent), Hispanic (6 percent), and

Asian (4 percent) (Kennesaw State). Most of my writers were traditional freshman, coming

to college directly from high school, and a significant number of them came from the northern arc of Atlanta's metropolitan area, where middle- and upper-middle class schools are not disadvantaged, either in terms of educational opportunities or socio-economic status. In addition, with one or two exceptions, the writers in my study were not English as a Second Language (ESL) or non-traditional students. This is significant to note because it indicates that the participants were not members of groups usually identified as having greater difficulty with academic writing, such as second-language learners, those from underprivileged schools where additional language resources may not have been available, or non-traditional students returning to the classroom after an extended absence. If those demographics had been a factor among participants, they may have led to an expectation of frequent, common errors.

The authors of the previous studies point out that this type of error compilation is rare; the works they reference were undertaken well in the past, as far back as 1919 and 1930. A search for more recent similar approaches results in a selection of seemingly related studies, but they are drawn from ESL and learning disabilities classrooms, not mainstream writing courses. Authors who do take on error problems generally limit their scope to specific mistakes such as pronouns or agreement. In a less scholarly fashion, writing centers and English departments at various universities have compiled and posted online collections of "top" mistakes based on the problems uncovered in the writings of their own student bodies; Georgia State, Rutgers, and Stanford universities are among the most notable ("Top 20," "Top Ten," "Top Twenty"). Given the intensity of the 1988 and 2008 lists, they form the most solid basis for comparison.

Judging from the papers I had marked during my first two semesters of teaching, there was not one specific error that I believed should have been removed from either list. Given the advancements in technology, and the propensity for almost every student to compose on a computer equipped with Spellcheck and other automated correction programs, I expected to find fewer spelling errors, but other issues such as comma usage and pronoun reference are often overlooked by the computerized grammar programs and would probably occur. Would students in 2011 follow the lead of the writers in the 2008 study and have fewer or more common errors after a semester with grammar instruction?

In 1988, Connors and Lunsford noted subject-verb disagreement, missing prepositions, tense shifts, incorrect tenses, sentence fragments, and its/it's confusion among their top twenty errors. In her second study, "Mistakes Are a Fact of Life," Lunsford discovered a few new items. Incorrect capitalization, poor quote integration, and missing documentation errors were also tracked, though I would argue that the last two are more closely related to correct research formatting and are not elements of grammar. It was possible that a review of common errors from my students would uncover new ones that the studies did not evaluate twenty-three and three years ago, respectively, but those studies were so comprehensive, I had no idea what new mistakes might look like. For the purposes of this research project, I worked with these two Top Twenty lists as a single guideline to create grammar lessons for my own classes.

I began teaching classes grounded in argument and research during the academic year 2010-2011, and based on a previous year of working in the KSU Writing Center, I planned on including an element of grammar instruction. Long before I came across Lunsford's Top Twenty study, I saw those errors in the papers produced by students who had arrived at

college without a firm grasp of grammar concepts. First-year writers in particular possessed an array of problems, ranging from subject/verb agreement and poor punctuation to understanding when to use the nominative or objective case. They confused its/it's and they're/their/there, while frequently employing words that were inappropriate or inexact. These issues obscured the writer's intent and diluted meaning.

When it came time to design my own lesson plan, one of the first steps I undertook was to create a series of short grammar lessons that would be introduced daily for the first few weeks of class. The first set was nicknamed "OMG" for "One Minute Grammar," keeping with the idea that one minute is about the attention span a student has when faced with a grammar lesson. OMG lessons explained the multiple uses for commas, differentiated when and why to employ colons or semicolons, showed the difference between plurals and possession, and clarified the use of dashes. The second short lesson series was "60-Second ER," or "60-second English Rules," which provided tricks and tips on how to use words that are often sorely abused in papers: its/it's; affect/effect; they're/there/their; I/me/myself/; who/which/that; number/amount; fewer/less; who/whom and other nominative/objective differences. (Copies of these lessons are included at the end of this chapter.) The OMG and 60-Second ER files were posted on the class homepage, so they were available at all times for reference. As the semester progressed, lessons expanded to include verb tenses, misplaced modifiers, and parallel construction. Short free-writes were also part of the daily class routine, so students had their own writing to refer to and adjust. For review, students worked through online exercises from the Owl Purdue Writing Center and TheOatmeal.com.

Based on the results I received from my first year of teaching, I made some adjustments to my lesson plan for the Fall 2011 semester, knowing that I would be using

student papers for this project. While keeping to the presentation of OMG and 60-Second ER, I also incorporated ten readings and formal responses into the coursework. Students selected an editorial from a mainstream publication such as *The Washington Post* or *Newsweek* that was not only edited for writing errors but also vetted for accuracy. They read it, evaluated its argumentative style, and wrote a brief (usually 150 words) response to its structure and content. The objective was threefold: First, it required students to read well-written works in the genre they were studying; second, the reading was followed by a posted response that exercised their own writing skills; and third, it provided the chance to evaluate the argument, suggest ways to improve cohesion and clarity, and to subliminally reinforce good grammar. I read each student's selected editorial to ensure that it was from a credible source then reviewed each post and commented first on the evaluation and then on any glaring grammar missteps, referring them to the OMG or 60-Second ER folders if they needed additional explanation.

After the first assignment was turned in and graded, I met individually with each student to review and discuss his/her individual writing issues. Those sessions gave students a chance to speak about their individual writing process and to identify their weakest areas. At the end of the meeting, each student received a short "Action Plan" – a list of specific items to work on, be it comma issues, spelling, sentence structure, or organization. In addition, each student was given a copy of the "Twelve-Step Program for Better Papers," a list of a dozen tips to improve clarity and flow that was compiled from the most common errors in the first set of papers. (A copy of this list is also included at the end of this chapter.) The objective was to increase student awareness about common errors and identify specific areas where they needed improvement. The errors discussed did not to serve as a baseline for

this project; that level was established with the second assignment the students completed a few weeks later.

Another addition to my Fall 2011 approach happened before students turned in the major assignments. On the day each paper was due, just before I collected them, students had one last chance to perform a reverse edit – working from the last sentence backwards to the beginning - to catch any grammar problems previously overlooked. I had used this system before to good result with students in the Writing Center; it forced them to consider the mechanical issues on a line-by-line basis after global revisions were completed. It also worked well with my own students, who looked critically at their own writing in the hopes of catching an error before I did. Without fail, they captured a variety of mistakes during that last read-through. Finally, on each paper I returned, there was a short list of issues the student still needed to address, and after the papers were returned, I spent class time reviewing the most common errors I had uncovered.

The last change I made in the Fall 2011 semester was to incorporate about halfway through the semester specific grammar exercises into the class time. These took up, at most, twenty minutes, but drew students' attention to a myriad of problems. The exercises included reworking sentences taken anonymously from their own papers; discussing corrections to sentences I created; and going online to various grammar sites that had interactive games. One of my favorite remains TheOatmeal.com, an eclectic site that covers a variety of topics but also features several very funny grammar quizzes on issues such as the most misspelled words on Twitter, how to use semicolons, and the difference between i.e. and e.g. Whether or not these tactics improved student errors might be determined by tracking the mistakes that showed up in their papers that semester.

In the 1988 Connors/Lunsford study, the authors collected more than 21,500 papers from which they pulled 3,000 samples. They further culled that number down to 300. My project had a considerably smaller scale: To begin with, I had a total of fifty students in two sections of first-year English 1101 Composition who were assigned four major papers. For the purposes of this study, I restricted the evaluation to the second, third, and fourth assignments. Each one represented a different length and complexity. The second assignment consisted of two to three pages; the third, three to four; the fourth, four to five. This was a crucial distinction between my research and the previous works: Whereas the first two studies worked with single papers from a cross-section of students and only produced a list of common errors, my project focused on the sequential works produced by the same students over the course of one semester. This distinction, I believed, would certainly produce a list of mistakes students made, but more importantly, would track how those mistakes increased or decreased over the course of a semester.

To ensure student privacy, the guidelines established by Kennesaw State's Institutional Review Board (IRB) were strictly adhered to. Three months before the data collection commenced, I spent several weeks working through KSU's online IRB certification and learning the particular parameters this type of study would fall into. Following those guidelines, at the end of the semester, the study was presented to the students, who were assured that participation would in no way affect their grades in the class. The last objective was easily achieved, since the evaluation process began in December only after the final grades were issued. Each student was asked for signed permission allowing me to review the last three papers and to include the findings from those papers in this study; every member of both classes agreed. (Some were even curious to read the results!) Papers

were securely stored in my home office where no one had access to them, and at no time were they reviewed by anyone other than myself.

After the semester ended, the rating process began. The first step involved removing from the study any student who had not completed all three papers. I believed that having a complete set from each participant was critical to creating a clearer comparison of progress throughout the term. The end result was a total of ninety-three papers from thirty-one students.

The evaluation process was repeated three times on each set of papers. The first step was to read carefully through each paper, noting errors of any type. I let a few days pass before reading through the papers a second time to make sure no errors were overlooked. The next step was to create a tabulation sheet based on both of the Top Twenty lists. Then going back through each paper a final time, I began counting. All of the errors I found fit into one of the categories the first two studies encompassed, with one exception: I specifically tracked semicolon and colon errors because they were so many.

While it is certainly possible that some mistakes went unflagged, I am confident that my ability as a professional writer and editor, supported by three semesters of reading student papers, created a comprehensive list. In addition, I believe having only one person as the error rater offers more reliable results: The previous two studies employed a small army of volunteer coders who may or may not have been attuned to catching every mistake, or whose conception of what constituted a mistake may have varied one to the other. My decision on selecting errors was consistent with the instruction I had offered throughout the term.

Addenda to Chapter Three: *Handouts for Fall 1101 Composition*

Twelve-Step Program for Better Papers

1. Read paper out loud and rework sentences that have "filler" words, repeated words or phrases, or unnecessary auxiliary verbs (*in order to, help to, etc.*).
2. Check commas: between complete sentences joined with a conjunction; in a list of three or more; setting off an introductory or closing phrase.
3. Check semi-colons: Are they replacing a conjunction or separating a long list?
4. Check colons: Are they making an announcement or starting a long list?
5. Possession: Do apostrophes correctly indicate possession (*'s, s'*)?
6. Are nominative and objective nouns/pronouns in the right place (*I, who for nominative; me, whom for objective*)?
7. Are verb tenses active and consistent in each sentence and paragraph as well as the entire paper?
8. Do subjects agree with their verbs?
9. Are pronoun references clear (*to whom do they refer*)?
10. Are there any inconsistencies in style (i.e., last name on second reference, initials used after identification)?
11. MLA style: Is the paper formatted correctly (margins, typeface, headers, etc.)? Are citations clearly referenced to the Works Cited page? Does the Works Cited page clearly reference in-text citations? Is the Works Cited page arranged alphabetically with all relevant information for each entry?
12. SPELLCHECK!

Not hints, not clues, but SPECIFIC GUIDELINES to make your writing powerful

1. Know the difference between:
   - affect vs. effect – see 60-second ER
   - fewer vs. less & number vs. amount – see 60-second ER
   - semicolons & colons – see OMG
   - who vs. that vs. which – see 60-second ER
   - like (for comparisons) vs. as if or such as (for examples)
   - between (only two people) vs. among (three or more people)
   - lead (present tense) and led (past tense)

2. Write in active voice with active verbs. Limit the use of "to be able, in order to, helped to, planned to" etc. Pick an active verb and use it.

3. Use tenses consistently. If you start in the past, stay in the past. If you start in the present, stay in the present.

4. Keep tenses simple. There is nothing wrong with the plain past tense (-ed).

5. Use could, would, and should only if you really mean it.

6. Substitute other words so you are not using the same ones over and over and over – especially when that word ends a sentence and then starts the next one.

7. Eliminate filler words that don't add to your point: Obviously, clearly, even, very, only, every, really, truly. Ditto for their evil twins: As I said, In summation, To recap, In conclusion, etc.

8. Cut out clichés.

9. Follow MLA guidelines for formatting and mechanics (numbers, titles, etc.).

Argument pointers

1. Avoid generalizations, assumptions, and biases (everyone, obviously, who doesn't know, you would agree, etc.).
2. Ask yourself: How do I know this? Then back up your statements with evidence you can document.
3. Assume the reader has no clue about your subject.
4. Clearly identify sources by title and/or position. This gives them credibility.
5. Introduce cited material so it supports your point. Don't leave it out there on its own.
6. Cite only credible sources.

A quick look at Colons

- to introduce a detailed list
The guests at the opening included: Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes; three Hollywood directors and their wives; and a bevy of up-and-coming Hollywood actors.
- to make an announcement
I'm only going to say this once: Don't have drinks near the keyboard.
- to make an emphatic point
According to poet Joyce Kilmer, only one person can make a tree: God.

A quick look at Semicolons

1/ between closely related, independent clauses without a conjunction
I not only ate the pizza; I made it myself.

2/ with "transitional" expressions (Hacker, p274)
Many students have dreamed of the day KSU will have a football team; next year, it will be a reality.

3/ to break up a detailed list
The dinner featured salad with ranch dressing; an assortment of cheeses; spaghetti with meatballs and mushrooms; and pie, cake, and ice cream for dessert.

COMMA BASICS

Break up a series:
I ate pizza, hot dogs, and fries for lunch.

Before a conjunction* connecting two *complete* sentences:
I ate pizza and fries for lunch, and then I grabbed two cookies to eat on the way to class.
*For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So (FANBOYS)

After an introductory phrase:
After I ate pizza and fries, I wolfed down two cookies.
Since I was late, I missed the movie's first scene.

Separate city and state or country:
I attend university in Kennesaw, Georgia, but I want to study in Paris, France.

To set off a quotation:
Oscar Wilde said, "I have spent most of the day putting in a comma and the rest of the day taking it out."*

*no comma needed! Why?

COMMAS, The Sequel

Avoiding run-on sentences and comma splices

Run-ons are those long sentences with two complete thoughts that are not linked by a connecting word (a conjunction) or proper punctuation. There are often difficult to read and comprehend.

As a refresher:
- An independent clause is a sentence in its own right. It has a subject and verb.
- Independent clauses are linked by conjunctions best remembered by the acronym FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.
- Independent clauses can be divided by proper punctuation such as a semicolon, period, comma, or even a colon.

Incorrect: *Writing Center tutors do not criticize you, they help you write better papers.*

Correct: *Writing Center tutors do not criticize **you**. They help you write better papers.*

Correct: *Writing Center tutors do not criticize you, **but** they help you write better papers.*

COMMAS, Encore

WHAT IS A COMMA SPLICE?
When a writer connects two independent clauses with a comma but does not use a coordinating conjunction (remember FANBOYS?), the result is called a comma splice.

Comma splice examples:
      Incorrect: *He enjoys exploring ancient ruins, he often runs into trouble during his adventures.*
      Correct: *He enjoys exploring ancient ruins, **but** he often runs into trouble during his adventures.*

      Incorrect: *Jim spends his time playing video games, Bill uses his time to study.*
      Correct: *Jim spends his time playing video games, and Bill uses his time to study.*

      Incorrect: *The car down the street is for sale, Sarah is going to test drive it tomorrow.*
      Correct: *The car down the street is for sale, so Sarah is going to test drive it tomorrow.*

COMMAS, The Final Frontier

1/ A comma separates information inserted into the main sentence.
     My paper, which may or may not receive an A, was turned in today.

2/ A comma separates words that interrupt the sentence.
     It was not clear, however, what the teacher thought.

3/ Use a comma to set apart two adjectives attached to the same noun.
     I wrote a heartfelt, moving essay.

4/ Place a comma around nouns or noun phrases that link with another noun.
     The tutors at the most helpful spot on campus, the Writing Center, were wonderful.

5/ Use a comma to set off an emphatic point.
     Her editorial won the Pulitzer Prize, the highest award in journalism.

Possession
to show ownership, just add
's

Jane's car / Tom's bed / Hank's hat

even if the name ends in
"s"

Sherlock Holmes**'s** methods

PLURAL POSSESSION
My parents**'** house
The animals**'** food
The students**'** cafeteria

Is it IT'S or ITS?

IT + IS = IT'S
It's not raining today.

ITS = possession
The dog buried its bone.

Is it more than or over?

More than = a number above a certain threshold
There are more than six books in my bag.

Over = action
I jumped over the log.
He drove over the dog.

ME, MYSELF and I

Me, myself and I are all first person, singular pronouns that refer to the same person (you), but which word you choose depends on the context of the sentence.
Remember: The basic design of a sentence is *subject + verb + direct object*.

IT IS I!
When you are the subject performing the action, use "I."
>   *I* made cupcakes for the entire class.

Note: Even when there is someone with you performing the action, "*I*" is still correct: *Jane and I drove to the mall for lunch.* If you're not sure, write the sentence without "*Jane,*" and you'll see that "*I*" is the right choice.

"I" isn't always "acting." Sometimes, "I" expresses feeling or receives the action of the verb.
>   *I* become bored watching you play World of Warcraft.
>   *I* was given a free iPod.

Freakish but true grammar fact: The predicate nominative

This one is rarely used correctly, because, in conversational English, the use of "*I*" following a form of the verb "to be" sounds stilted. OK, snooty. But if you aspire to proper, eloquent grammar, follow this rule: The correct pronoun to follow forms of "to be" is "*I*," or a predicate nominative.
>   *It **was I** who called you.*   *Who's there? It **is I**.*   I

WHAT ABOUT ME?
Direct Object

The direct object is generally what "receives" the action of the verb. Nouns that receive the verb's action are considered to be in "objective case." The objective form of "*I*" is "*me*."
>   *Hank **beat me** in the race, but just wait until next time!*

Object of the preposition

Nouns that follow prepositions are also considered to be in the objective cases. So the correct word to follow prepositions (*in, as, on, over, with, to, from,* etc.) is "*me*."
>   *Paul awarded first place **to me**.*

Reflexive Pronouns

Reflexive pronouns refer back to a noun already mentioned, or can also used for emphasis. In both cases, the correct reflexive pronoun to use is *myself* when you are referring back to yourself in a sentence in which you already used *I* or *me*.
Reflexive Pronoun, Direct Object: *I accidentally hit **myself** on the head.*
Reflexive Pronoun, Indirect Object: *I give **myself** credit for sticking with my dreams.*
Reflexive Pronoun, Emphasis: *I myself cooked this dinner!*

There, their, they're

THERE = location

I'll meet you there.

THEIR = possession by more than one person
(note the *HEIR*)

Their house is in Marietta.

THEY'RE = They + are
(the apostrophe replaces the A)

They're moving to Kennesaw.

WHO, THAT, WHICH

WHO
This may be the easiest of the three. Who always refers to people who are the subject of a sentence. In the example below, *who* follows a person, Dr. Doright, the subject.

> *Dr. Doright, **who** teaches Composition 1101, has a terrific sense of humor.*

THAT
This is the word that refers to objects or places. It introduces an important descriptive or informative phrase that adds color and detail to a sentence.

> *The book **that Dr. Doright left in the dining hall** showed up on his desk today.*

Note how *that* precedes essential, important information. Without it, the rest of the sentence is vague.

> *The book showed up on his desk today.*

This sentence leaves readers wondering: What book? Whose book? Where did it come from?

WHICH
This versatile word can fill two functions in a sentence. First, it introduces information that is not necessarily key or essential to understanding what the writer wants to say.

> *Dr. Doright left the book, **which was a birthday gift**, in the dining hall.*

Remove the information about the birthday gift and the reader still gets the important information.

Which can also be used when *that* has already been included, and the writer does not want to be repetitious.

That book which he left in the dining hall was a special birthday gift.

FEWER vs. LESS

Use FEWER when referring to nouns that can be counted.
*There **are fewer boys** than girls in this class.*
*I have lots of ones, but **fewer five dollar b**ills.*

Use LESS when referring to nouns that cannot be counted.
*I have **less money** this month than last.*
*This class has **less homework** than most.*

NUMBER vs. AMOUNT

Use NUMBER when the noun can be counted.
*I have a **number of friends** at KSU.*
*There area **number of dollar bills** in my wallet.*

Use AMOUNT when the noun cannot be counted.
*I have an enormous **amount of homework** tonight.*
*The storm did a significant **amount of damage**.*

AFFECT vs. EFFECT

Affect is a verb.
A verb is an action word.
Think "a" to show "action."
Having a football team will affect student morale at KSU.

Effect is a noun.
A noun is a subject or object. *The effect of having a football team will be improved student morale.*

Effectively is an adverb.
He stormed out of the room, effectively ending the argument.

Effective is an adjective.
Some say capital punishment is an effective deterrent to crime.

-- DASHES --

add an extra thought, a punch line, an aside

He raised his bat, swung - and missed.
Basic needs - food, housing, clothing - are becoming expensive.

... ELLIPSES ...

denote words left out or a pause in thought

Dr. Papp addressed the student body saying, "Football is a choice...one in which the students will have say."

"And the winner is ..."

Chapter Four: Analysis of the first set of errors
Drivers' Ed 1101

The first set of thirty-one student papers was turned in on August 29, 2011. The assignment called for a two- to three-page position paper with supporting evidence that defended the writer's nomination of "The Best Movie Ever." The thirty-one papers used for this analysis provided a total of 76 double-spaced pages.

By the end of August 2011, students had written a preliminary paper of two pages and had received specific feedback; specifically, I met with each student individually and presented them with an "Action Plan" listing the areas they needed to develop to produce clear, meaningful prose. Depending on the student's weaknesses, I included a handout from the KSU Writing Center that addressed specific issues (e.g., commas, semicolons, etc). We also reviewed the first paper together until the student indicated an understanding of the noted errors. (Note: The review, as with all of the feedback offered on student papers, did not limit itself to grammar issues but also covered cohesion, transitions, introductions, closings, and other style elements not included in this study.)
Based on the class's overall performance in the first assignment, I selected grammar exercises that explained in detail the most common errors.

Using Lunsford's 2008 Top Twenty Errors as a guide, I reviewed each page for errors and noted every item, adding two from the original list as well. Both "subject/verb agreement" and "no comma with a series" did not make the 2008 list but showed up with enough frequency in the KSU papers to be tracked. The high instances of incorrect colon and semicolon usage also created a separate category. A comparison of the 2008 Lunsford list and the first set of KSU papers it indicates that KSU students were definitely making the same mistakes in their writing. The most frequent errors Lunsford tracked were "wrong word"

and "no comma with an introductory phrase," two issues that also landed in the KSU top-five. The most significant deviation from the original study is that the KSU errors were top-heavy with commas; the first, third, fourth, and fifth most-common mistakes involved that piece of punctuation. "Wrong word" wound up in second space. While these writers appear to have a firmer grasp of pronouns, spelling, and documentation requirements, they are less adept at separating clauses, phrases, and compound sentences.

One major difference should be noted: The 2008 study differed from the original by recording the number of mistakes relating to citation: Poorly integrated quotations and incomplete or missing documentation were listed as separate errors ten years later. I do not believe that the second Lunsford study should have ventured into this particular category when the focus was largely on reviewing errors that relate to punctuation and usage. For many students, correctly documenting sources comes down to a formatting issue; they grapple with getting the parentheses, identifications, page numbers, and periods in the right place, but their ability to do so does not impede the readers' understanding of the writing. Because of the emphasis this university places on ethical research, the attention it is given in our text books, and the willingness of the Academic Integrity officer to speak to my classes, I believe my students had a heightened awareness of their responsibility to acknowledge the sources they referenced. This resulted in only seven citation errors on the first set of papers. Overall, the incidents of KSU students failing to provide proper documentation have been few. A study of this issue could have been the basis for a separate project; it certainly seems out-of-place in Lunsford's list.

It is clear from the preponderance of comma errors that students have a hard time figuring out where and why the marks fit into a sentence. Anecdotally, I have heard reasons

from the most common "I was never taught how to use them" to the most lackadaisical: A highly-intelligent chemical engineering student I taught at the Georgia Institute of Technology admitted that he'd never gotten a firm grasp of commas, so his tendency was just to "sprinkle them in." The analogy that refocused his attention was simple: Would he risk sprinkling chemicals into his experiment without knowing their particular purpose or the effect they might render? (Thankfully, his attention to commas improved during the semester.) In the same vein, many students in my Composition 1101 classes began to get a stronger grip after the OMG presentations, exercises, and corrections in their own writings. Where they continued to make the most mistakes was in sentences with a single subject and two verbs, particularly when the verbs are separated:

> *- Too many people looked past the core of the movie, and got distracted.*
>
> *- You can immerse yourself in cultures unknown on earth, and learn how to think   on a universal level.*

The second most common error of KSU writers was "wrong word." According to Lunsford, many of these mistakes involve homonyms – its/its, their/there. Most of my writers made more complicated incorrect choices, opting for "where" instead of "when," "then" instead of "than," and one I most frequently encounter, "lead" instead of "led." Other incorrect word choices included "affect/effect," "between/among," "fewer/less," "number/amount," "like/such," and "who/whom." This mistake also indicated a student reaching for the right word and not quite making the connection: "heart-reaching" for "heart-wrenching" or "infamous" for "famous." Unfortunately, having a spellchecker is no guarantee of proper word selection; most of us have had the experience of these systems making a change that is completely erroneous, given the context. So the student who wrote,

"That is the epitome of adolescents," may have had her meaning muddled by a system that did not recognize a reference to the teen years, not the teenagers.

One of the errors tracked in the 1988 Connors and Lunsford study was spelling. Since the time of that compilation, students – and writers in all areas – have become increasingly dependent on automated spelling and grammar checkers to correct errors. Because of that technological advance, I expected to find few spelling mistakes, which was the case. However, the spelling problem was replaced by the aforementioned issue of incorrect words – substitutions most likely made by a spellchecker that did not fit the context of the sentence. A study of language-checking software accuracy led by Dennis Galletta, a professor of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh and Temple University, described the inability of these programs to make distinctions and points out the responsibility of the writer to made the correct judgment call: "There needed to be a fit between the task, the technology, and the person" (Galletta 83). The authors point to previous research that explored how most computer users view their machines as infallible; users leave spelling and grammar corrections to a technological brain they deem superior, when in fact, it is only as competent as the human programmer who designed the system. For many first-year writers, this creates a perfect storm: They are unsure about the spelling to begin with, so they defer to the expertise of the computer that, without context, makes an erroneous choice. So while the word is spelled correctly, its usage is out of sync with the sentence.

After reading all thirty-one of these papers, one particular trend began to emerge. No matter what the error category, it was frequently filled with mistakes made by a minority of the students. For instance, the writer without any concept of how to incorporate commas with compound sentences often accounted for the largest portion of errors in that category. Still, in

the case of commas in particular, there were enough mistakes made across the board to see that no one writer was completely to blame.

Another aspect of these papers that comes into play in the next two chapters involved the type of sentence structure the students employed. For the majority of these writers, this assignment was only the second college-level English paper they had produced, and the writing generally lacked intricacy and depth. Most relied heavily on simple sentences that frequently repeated previous information in the same words or phrases. Creating longer, more complex sentences was still in the future, where more intense challenges to their grammar knowledge awaited.

Table 2: KSU Top Twenty First set of errors 76 pages	
1. Unnecessary comma	108
2. Wrong word	82
3. No comma, restrictive	65
4. No comma, introduction	61
5. No comma, compound sentence	53
6. Hyphen error	39
7. Missing, needed capital	23
8. Faulty sentence	23
9. Incorrect colon, semicolon	18
10. Subject/verb agreement	14
11. Missing, needed apostrophe	11
12. Mechanical error with quote	11
13. No comma, series	11
14. Missing word	9
15. Verb tense shift	9
16. Poorly-integrated quote	9
17. Sentence fragment	9
18. Run-on	7
19. Missing/incomplete docu	7
20. Vague pronoun reference	7

Chapter Five: Analysis of the second set of errors
Drivers' Ed, Part II

The second set of papers was produced from an assignment turned in on October 19, 2011. The guidelines called for students to craft a three- to four-page proposal addressing a situation they would like to change, with suggestions on how to do so. The thirty-one writers turned in a total of 102 pages.

As with the first set of writings, this second tally of errors lines up with the previous Top Twenty lists with "wrong word" and "no comma with an introductory phrase" appearing in the top five. Overall, the KSU compilation still shows the preponderance of errors to be comma-related, particularly with introductions. These errors increased from sixty-one to seventy-six and could not be attributed to longer, more complex sentences; they were strictly a matter of writers not recognizing the need to segregate an opening phrase from the main body of the sentence:

- *Since 1988 the BCS has picked national champions accurately.*

- *If you continue to discipline your children through spanking it may result in long-term consequences.*

Writers also had difficulty remembering to use a comma to separate two independent clauses in a compound sentence:

- *I am a freshman and I love eating at the Commons.*

- *The computer froze and Jane declared that it was fried.*

Unnecessary commas cropped most frequently around prepositions and conjunctions:

- *The cars, in the traffic jam, block the view of drivers.*

- *…have cut the average hours of time in traffic from fifty six a year, to forty four.*

- This is especially upsetting when I have an assignment to complete, or a research

paper to work on.

In a few cases, comma usage was so random, it was difficult to determine what the writer was considering when he/she made the choice:

- What most people do not know is that recycling, can help people…

The most common error from this set of papers had nothing to do with punctuation. There were ninety instances of "wrong word," a slight increase from the eighty-two that occurred in the first set of papers. Many usage errors that appeared in the first set were present here: "effect/affect," "fewer/less," "their/there," "then/than," and "where/when." There was also a growing list of adjectives misused as adverbs, such as bad for badly, good instead of well. Several problems certainly can be attributed to spelling (i.e., "intermural" instead of "intramural") or typing errors ("your may think…"). But by reading the entire sentence where these errors occurred, it is clear that the majority of mistakes happened when the writer had a sense of the correct word but was unable to pin it down – an error that frequently happens with Spellcheck and other computerized editing systems that automatically make substitutions without a complete sense of context, as noted in the last chapter:

- *An example would be to change the hot foods available at On the Fly each day,*

   *since that **subsistence** have [sic] the most limited diversity.*

- *This does not give us **efficient** time to eat our meals.*

Occasionally, it appears the writer relied too heavily on the automated thesaurus and randomly selected a word whose nuance did not exactly fit the context, as in this sentence discussing dining options on campus:

*- The number of individuals that [sic] **exploit** the food chamber would not drastically increase.*

The most surprising category that looms large at fifth place is one that did not exist on the first tally: pronoun agreement. There are two reasons most students struggle with matching a noun with the correct pronoun: The first is the awkwardness of employing the slashed he/she for proper single nouns and his/her for possessives. While writers and speakers have increased gender-awareness and shied away from defaulting to the masculine whenever possible, there are many, particular novice writers, who are uncertain about the correct selection. They know they do not want to say "he," but at the same time, they are not quite comfortable just saying "she," and they are tripped up by the he/she or s/he options. Add possessive pronouns to the mix, and it's even more complicated. The quandary sends most writers directly to the neutral, but incorrectly plural, "they" and "their," even when it is clear the writer knew the gender of the subject:

- A customer came in with items to sell. Unfortunately, they had items we were unable to accept.

- No one can accomplish their task.

- Anyone who sees you alone will take their chances and try to rob you.

It was not just masculine and feminine nouns that were poorly connected; the neutral plural was often mistakenly substituted for entities as well:

- The art department deserves to have their pieces displayed safely.

- Georgia State is about the size of Kennesaw State[sic] and they have different places that have a different assortment of fresh fruit all day.

With the number of vague pronoun references clinging to the penultimate space with just three errors, it would appear that students are clear to whom the pronouns refer; they just opt for the easiest way out of the he/she quandary. When references are vague, the results are usually rather humorous, as in this sentence that actually refers to vandalized student artwork:

- *Teachers get angry, too, when we find them on the ground torn and not fixable.*

The most encouraging result from the second list is that, even as the number of pages increased from 76 to 102, the overall numbers of errors did not spike accordingly. In fact, the use of unnecessary commas went down, from 108 in the first set to eighty-one in the second; commas errors with restrictive clauses dropped dramatically from sixty-five to thirty-one. There were no run-on sentences in the second set at all, compared to seven in the first. There were somewhat more instances of compound comma errors, with fifty-eight up from fifty-three. Capitalization errors also increased from twenty-three to thirty-three. Comma splices, like pronoun agreement, appeared on the second list but not the first; in this case, splices held the tenth slot with nineteen mistakes.

Table 3: KSU Top Twenty			
First set of errors/76 pages		**Second set of errors/102 pages**	
1. Unnecessary comma	108	1. Wrong word	90
2. Wrong word	82	2. Unnecessary comma	81
3. No comma, restrictive	65	3. No comma, introduction	76
4. No comma, introduction	61	4. No comma, compound sentence	58
5. No comma, compound sentence	53	5. Pronoun agreement	46
6. Hyphen error	39	6. Missing, needed capital	33
7. Missing, needed capital	23	7. No comma, restrictive	31
8. Faulty sentence	23	8. Hyphen error	30
9. Incorrect colon, semicolon	18	9. Colon, semicolon errors	24
10. Subject/verb agreement	14	10. Comma splice	19
11. Missing, needed apostrophe	11	11. Subject/verb agreement	17
12. Mechanical error with quote	11	12. Verb tense shift	15
13. No comma, series	11	13 Apostrophe error	14
14. Missing word	9	14. Poorly-integrated quote	12
15. Verb tense shift	9	15. Missing word	12
16. Poorly-integrated quote	9	16. Missing, incomplete document	12
17. Sentence fragment	9	17. Faulty sentence	10
18. Run-on	7	18. Sentence fragment	4
19. Missing/incomplete docu	7	19. Vague pronoun reference	3
20. Vague pronoun reference	7	20. Spelling error tied quote error	1

Chapter Six: An analysis of the third set of errors

Drivers' Ed, Part III

The final assignment for this class was a detailed position paper of four to five pages. Students were to find an editorial on an issue that interested them, then write an extensive rebuttal that included research on the issue and supporting evidence for their claim. The thirty-one papers used for this project represented 130 pages.

Results from last stack show that, if nothing else, the student writers are consistent. After a full semester of grammar instruction, they are still wrestling with commas, despite my trying to convince them that learning the guidelines once and for all could eliminate the uncertainty of usage for a lifetime. Whereas Lunsford's writers had more issue with wrong words, pronouns, and spelling, the KSU students were still stymied most often by commas.

Only five of the twenty categories showed an increase in frequency: unnecessary commas, up to 103 from ninety; poorly-integrated quotations, up to twenty from twelve; commas with a restrictive clause, up to thirty-five from thirty-one; vague pronoun references, up to seven from three; and sentence fragments up to five from four. Two specific errors were also added to the list: run-on sentences tallied four, and there were eight mechanical errors with quotes. Viewed in the light of longer papers, these increases are not dramatic.

Correspondingly, some of the decreases were also small: Instances of subject/verb disagreement dropped from seventeen to fifteen; apostrophes moved from fourteen to eleven. But there were also some major differences as well, most notably in wrong word category, where errors fell off from eighty-nine to fifty-four. Despite this drop, students still struggle with which, where, and when; like or such as; fewer and less; and most often, who or that. Some word choices would seem to convey a student's attempt to take on a tone they perceive as intellectual or academic that results in an awkward construction:

- The students avoided themselves from assault.

- Not everyone living with overweightness has an unhealthy lifestyle.

- Something is genetically faltered in them.

Others are still unclear about what distinguishes an adjective from an adverb:

- Prejudice behavior still occurs when determining who lives and dies in specific

trials.

Overall, the majority of wrong words in this category may well be ascribed to typos:

*- In the study's conclusion, the **researches** were clear to state the evidence found was*

proven to delay sex.

*- The medical benefits of funding this research make the moral concerns seem **minuet**.*

Though the number of introductory comma phrases errors ranked fourth on the list of

frequent errors, the instances of the problem were considerably reduced, dropping from

seventy-six in the second set of papers to fifty-one. Other declines were recorded in missing

words, down from twelve to six; shifts in verb tense from fifteen to five; and pronoun

agreement from forty-six to twenty-five.

One of the biggest difficulties first-year students continually face with writing comes

into play here: They frequently employ in their papers words and sentence structures akin to

what they use in everyday speech, so paragraphs are peppered with definitely, just, simply,

basically, now, very, and occasionally, "I'm just saying." Those casual words and phrases

create sentences with similarly casual construction that are rarely suitable for academic

writing. In addition, they frequently get in the way of clear, concise writing. Meaning can be

further subverted when students revert to idiomatic pronouns and verb tenses. For example,

the majority of errors involving pronoun agreement revolved around not making he, she, it,

or a single entity a he/she accompanied by a his/her, something students also struggle with when speaking:

> *- The stem cells from a patient's blood or bone marrow are transplanted into **their** brain.*

> *- A notice will be sent to the person to notify **them** of the condition of **their** vehicle.*

> *- The mother could make a better choice if **they** didn't want to have the child.*

The problem is most common when students write about companies or countries and resort to the gender-nonspecific "their" for possession:

> *- The oil company didn't do **their** job to minimize the impact of the spill.*

> *- Apple has lowered **their** prices on **their** standard computers.*

Some of the confusion could be attributed to the possessive pronoun being paired with a plural noun – i.e., in the Apple sentence, the writer connects "their" with "prices," instead of forming the agreement with the subject, Apple.

Another example of the fissure between the oral and written word crops up with verb tenses. We fluently use the conditional tense, when in reality, there is nothing at all conditional about what we mean to say. In writing, the difference is apparent:

> *- A girl in middle school would always bring healthy snacks. She would participate in gym class and tried to play as many sports as she could.*

> *- He or she will be occupying a cell in prison. This would cause the prisons to become overpopulated.*

If the person is already occupying a cell, then there is no question of whether or not he/she is there, which makes "could" a better choice for the second part of the sentence.

However, a comparison of this list of errors to the one compiled from the second set of papers indicates generally positive results. What might account for the progress? The explanation, I believe, is threefold. First, students were given explicit instruction in these areas. For instance, in the case of shifting verb tenses, there were at least three exercises and several discussions about employing the past tense for actions occurring in the past and avoiding the use of "would" unless specifying the conditional. Second, they worked with an instructor who placed a great deal of emphasis on grammar and expected them to do the same. Lastly, the consistent exposure to good grammar, both through readings and corrections to their own writings, heightened their overall awareness.

Table 4: KSU Top Twenty Comparison of three sets					
First set of errors/76 pages		**Second set of errors/102 pages**		**Third set of errors/130 pages**	
1. Unnecessary comma	108	1. Wrong word	90	1. Unnecessary comma	103
2. Wrong word	82	2. Unnecessary comma	81	2. Wrong word	54
3. No comma, restrictive	65	3. No comma, introduction	76	3. No comma, compound	52
4. No comma, introduction	61	4. No comma, compound	58	4. No comma, introduction	51
5. No comma, compound	53	5. Pronoun agreement	46	5. No comma, restrictive	35
6. Hyphen error	39	6. Missing, needed capital	33	6. Pronoun agreement	25
7. Missing, needed capital	23	7. No comma, restrictive	31	7. Colon, semicolon	25
8. Faulty sentence	23	8. Hyphen error	30	8. Hyphen error	22
9. Colon, semicolon	18	9. Colon, semicolon	24	9. Poorly-integrated quote	20
10. Subject/verb agree	14	10. Comma spice	19	10. Capitalization	20
11. Missing/needed apost.	11	11. Subject/verb agreement	17	11. Subject/verb agreement	15
12. Mechanical/quote	11	12. Verb tense shift	15	12. Comma splice	13
13. No comma, series	11	13 Apostrophe error	14	13. Apostrophe error	11
14. Missing word	9	14. Poorly-integrated quote	12	14. Missing/incomplete documentation	9
15. Verb tense shift	9	15. Missing word	12	15. Mechanical error, quote	8
16. Poorly-integrated quote	9	16. Missing, incomplete documentation	12	16. Vague pronoun reference	7
17. Sentence fragment	9	17. Faulty sentence	10	17. Missing word	6
18. Run-on	7	18. Sentence fragment	4	18. Faulty sentence	5
19. Missing/incomplete documentation	7	19. Vague pronoun reference	3	19. Verb tense shift	5
20. Vague pronoun reference	7	20. Spelling error tied quote error	1	20. Sentence fragment	5

Chapter Seven: Conclusions
Are we there yet?

This study began by reviewing three sets of student papers to gauge whether or not first-year writers in a contemporary classroom were making the same errors tracked by Connors and Lunsford in their 1988 survey. It also compared errors to Lunsford and Lunsford's 2008 recreation of the original study. With the exception of adding one new category to track semicolon and colon errors, my evaluation of ninety-three papers found no new mistakes to add to the list. Students in 2011 were grappling with the same issues the original research identified - an indication that students have yet to grasp many basic grammar concepts.

There are some key distinctions between the previous surveys and this project. While the initial goal of tracking common student errors was the same, my study came from papers produced by first-year writers in an introductory composition class. Connors, Lunsford and Lunsford worked with subjects who were mostly upperclassmen from schools across the country. It was also possible in my project to give some general observations about the participants: Whereas the earlier researchers had no indication of their survey participants' backgrounds, I can attest that, with few exceptions, the works in this study were produced by 18-year-olds who came to the university directly from high school. The numbers of nontraditional and non-native students were minimal. In addition, the three sets of papers reviewed in my project were produced over the course of one semester in the fall of 2011. Those works, written by thirty-one students, afforded the opportunity to track how the common errors might have increased or decreased in a class where grammar lessons were taught and the importance of the principles was emphasized.

A side-by-side comparison of the errors for each set of papers was made in the last chapter. Though the list of recorded errors basically remains the same, the frequency with

which those errors occurred does change, and in some cases, those changes are dramatic. Most notably, the instances of commas with restrictive clauses, pronoun agreement, wrong word choices, and commas with introductory phrases fell in the last set of papers. Though some errors are recorded with similar numbers – i.e., unnecessary commas moved from 108 to eight-one to 103; commas in compound sentences tallied fifty-three, fifty-eight, and fifty-two – those frequencies should be weighted against the fact that each set of papers was longer than the next, and the last paper was three times longer than the first. Making that same extrapolation for errors would mean the mistakes could have doubled in the second set and tripled in the third; instead of seeing wrong word entries at eight-two, ninety and fifty-four, they could have shot up from eighty-two to 164 and 246. But that was not the case; clearly, students had a better sense of word choice by the end of the semester than when they began. Similarly, compare thirty-nine hyphen errors in seventy-six pages against twenty-two in 130 pages, and there is evidence to indicate students were learning how to manipulate the structure.

This study set out to discover any possible correlations between grammar instruction and improvements in student writing, and based on the final tabulations, it is clear that improvements were made. I believe one of the leading reasons for the change was the instruction, which was explicit: It was an active process that involved presentations, exercises, games, readings, and revisions of individual writings. Students were not merely handed a grammar text or fact sheet and told to adjust their writing accordingly. The instruction often resulted in lively discussions and interactions that got students thinking about the effectiveness and usefulness of grammar in making their writing clearer. That specific

approach of continually emphasizing the connection between grammar and meaning was the most powerful contributor to lowering instances of errors.

In addition, I followed the suggestion of Dana Ferris, a California State University professor who wrote "The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes" in 1996. Though she is addressing concerns of the second-language classroom, her recommendations to home in on the most common errors were the approach I took with the creation of the OMG! and 60-Second ER lessons. Those short but effective sessions were reviewed more than once to address the most frequent problems of punctuation and usage.

While the comparisons overall show a decrease in the number of errors over the course of the semester, they also raise an interesting question: With such deliberate instruction ongoing through a semester, why aren't the numbers even lower? Unlike Connors and Lunsford, I had the distinct advantage of working directly with my subjects and was able to observe their responses to the process. For instance, I was able to note that some students remained resistant to learning grammar concepts, no matter how engaging the lessons or rewarding the results. They rationalized their inability to understand effective comma placement by saying they had never understood it, and they never would. In fact, in some categories, the majority of the recorded errors belong to one or two students whose papers consistently showed the same mistakes. The impact of grammar errors on their grades held little sway. Conversely, the majority of students were engaged and willing to work toward improving their writings. Some even became bolder, employing semicolons and colons to form more complex sentences instead of relying strictly on periods after simple subject-verb-object constructions. Having a better understanding of how grammar and usage did impact their work led to papers of higher quality by the end of the semester.

Along with instruction, the overall improvement of errors is linked, I believe, to another tactic used in these classes. My previous experiences in the first-year classroom revealed that students were tremendously resistant to writing drafts. They freely admitted to producing papers in one sitting, and in some cases, at the last minute, and once the printer finished spitting out the pages, the paper was pronounced complete. Little time was spent revising for clarity and polishing. In an effort to stress the importance of drafts in the writing process, I initiated a policy (that I still use with success today) that required every paper to be turned in with the rough draft and peer-reviewer's notes attached. This approach produced better results: Not only did students get something down on paper (and show up consistently on peer-review day); they also had a document to revise, expand, and polish for global revisions as well as line edits. Before instigating the policy, papers turned in as "final" were often first drafts, in very rough form indeed.

Students do rush to turn in assignments, and their goal is often to get to the Works Cited page and be done with it. This lack of careful reading and re-reading even includes an aversion to spellchecking, even though those automated programs have made life so much easier for so many writers (though I have even had two students admit that they did not know why their document was highlighted with red or green squiggles). The result of lackluster editing starts with misspelled, missing, and repeated words and spreads from there into more serious complications. Errors are often overlooked during a peer review are because the reviewing students are loathe to make corrections that might be interpreted as negative feedback and because many do not possess the confidence in their own grammar knowledge to make a change.

Another obstacle to lowering grammar and usage errors goes father back into our university students' educations. While it is easy to blame middle and high school teachers for not imparting the material at an earlier stage, there is no concrete evidence that the concepts are not being taught. However, British scholars Richard Hudson and John Walmsley, writing in the *Journal of Linguistics* in 2005, offered two specific reasons why students do not learn grammar in that country's schools, and it well may be similar to the situation in this country:

> We are emerging from a period of grammar-free education. Some older teachers were taught some grammar under the old system, but this knowledge is a mixed blessing as a preparation for teaching the new syllabus. Most younger teachers know very little grammar and are suspicious of explicit grammar-teaching. Not surprisingly, therefore, new recruits entering teacher-training courses typically either know very little grammar or have no confidence in their knowledge. (616)

Whether or not that precise scenario is taking place in American classrooms is difficult to document, but what is clear from the errors recorded in this study is that too many students arrive at the door of the first-year classroom with writing deficiencies. A large part of their missing education revolves around the language of writing. Many are unfamiliar with or baffled by the lexicon of the discipline, so a lesson that explains the distinction between nominative and objective case must begin with a tutorial in terms. While few instructors would demand that students be fluent to the point of articulating the concept of a predicate nominative or an intransitive verb, there are basic definitions that, if clearly understood, make the concept of a comma with a restrictive clause clearer. English, no less than any other field in the sciences or humanities, has a specific vocabulary that serves a specific purpose.

Without a working knowledge of the terms and their connections to the basic building blocks

of the language, students misidentify subjects and employ incorrect verb forms, confuse

pronouns with antecedents, attempt to turn adjectives into adverbs, and write and speak

sentences such as, "Me and my roommate get along good." Students struggling to distinguish

between nouns as subjects, objects, and parts of dependent clauses mistake the noun closest

to the verb for the subject. That struggle created these sentences from the study's papers:

- The statistics on the "gateway theory" is completely distorted

- Canada and several states in the United States has already legalized the drug.

- People against gay marriage claims marriage is natural between a man and

women [sic].

While most instructors - and probably all students - would veto a return to pop

quizzes on dangling participles and conditional verb tenses, knowing what the terms mean

and how they pertain to effective writing certainly make it easier to grasp why "Running

down the street, the car jumped the median and hit me" is a very awkward sentence.

Similarly, the inability to distinguish between verb tenses often creates rhetorical confusion

as to when an event occurred or research was conducted. There is a distinction between being

in the past, the past perfect, and the conditional state, but students frequently shift from one

to the next, not only in the course of a paragraph, but within the confines of individual

sentences. Whereas students frequently pepper their speech with "would" and the meaning is

understandable, in a written context, it is often confusing. Eliminating that confusion is one

of the top reasons for teaching grammar given by Susan Losee Nunan in a 2005 essay. She

connected learning grammar with the ability to develop "rhetorical effect, to make stylistic

decisions" (Nunan 72), tactics that greatly enhance meaning.

Not having a good grasp of grammar presents another problem when students do employ automated editing systems such as Spellcheck or Grammatik. They are unable to use those programs to their best advantage because they do not know that, in many cases, the system can be incorrect. I have had many students explain an error by saying it wasn't their choice; they let Spellcheck make the correction, but neither the student nor the machine had a sense of the context that dictated the right choice.

It is interesting to note that much of the inspiration for the approaches used in my classrooms came from the academic discourse of ESL teachers. Foreign language instruction relies heavily on grammar to explain the intricate relationships between gender-designated nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Students who struggle to comprehend grammar in their native language often have difficulty switching into another. Rod Ellis, a leading scholar in the field of second-language acquisition at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, addressed the controversy of teaching grammar in ESL classrooms in his 2006 essay, "Current Issues in the Teaching of Grammar," published in the *TESOL Quarterly*. After a synopsis that gave vent to experts on both sides of the issue, and after reviewing considerable research, Ellis took this bold position: "There is ample evidence to demonstrate that teaching grammar works" (102). Though Ellis specifically referred to second-language classrooms, the suggestions he made were important: demonstrate how grammar can affect meaning, zero in on the most troublesome issues instead of tackling every individual problem, and offer feedback on how to resolve mistakes (102). This process applied to my own classrooms played an important role in reducing the number of errors.

Another approach that I believe fostered a positive change in the students' writing is completely without measurement. Simply, the students were acutely aware, through

discussions, readings, exercises, lessons, and feedback, that grammar was a key component of the course that they were expected to learn. As many more experienced instructors know, it is often the expectation of performance that generates a positive outcome, and that expectation was consistently made clear throughout the semester. In addition, I have witnessed the impact of teachers' expectations on my own and my children's educations; it is a powerful motivator. Interestingly, a recent guest column in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* by Mpaza Kapembwa, a 2011 Gates Millennium scholar and a graduate of DeKalb County's Cross Keyes High School, made the same point from the other side of the desk:

> I want to challenge reformers to look my peers and me in the eye and tell us that we need to work harder. I am not convinced that we students are doing the best we can, while our teachers are not doing their part. We expect to be spoon-fed. We go to school, fill up with knowledge, go home and don't study – and expect to educated. We are more products of our expectations than we are products of our environment. (A12)

Establishing the expectation of honing grammar skills and communicating its importance gave students a specific goal to work toward. Yet the onus of doing the work fell to them.

As discussed in the introduction, the reasons for the ongoing problem are multiple, complex, and extremely difficult to document. Have teachers in middle and high schools (and colleges, for that matter) shunned teaching grammar because studies have touted ineffectiveness of rote instruction? Or has their own education in the area been weak, leaving them unwilling to correct errors they do not recognize? Have students without a solid sense

of the concepts been passed along without any redirection? Or has the general decline in

reading left students without any reference points from which to frame their own writings?

Along with the constant pressure on schools to do more with less and the continued emphasis

on graduation rates, many instructors would argue that grammar is the last thing anyone

needs to worry about. Yet feedback from the world beyond the classroom indicates

differently: Business executives, employment coaches, and graduate school admissions

boards rank the ability to write and communicate effectively as one of the most important

assets a prospective employee or student can have. Joyce Russell, director of the Executive

Coaching and Leadership Development program at the University of Maryland's Robert H.

Smith School of Business, has spent twenty-five years working with top executives around

the country, and she recently wrote eloquently on the significance of writing skills after

discussing the issue with several employers. The feedback they offered indicate that because

today's workforce writes at an unprecedented level, be it in e-mails or client proposals, many

companies now require writing samples before making a job offer and will frequently

eliminate a candidate after receiving a resume or application rife with errors. Russell's final

analysis of the problem applies as much to the first-year classroom as the office cubicle: "It is

not the reader's job to decipher what you're trying to say; it's your job to make it clear"

(Russell 2). Readers without decipherable road signs are apt to get quite lost. In a society

where so much is dependent on the written word, those unable to convey a clear and direct

message in annual reports, memos, or project presentations are at a distinct disadvantage.

       In the final analysis, English, as difficult a language as it is, has become the global

means of communication. Why not offer students every opportunity to explore its intricacies

and versatility? Unlike driving a car, the ability to speak and write is one they will use in

some form every day for the rest of their lives.

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2010 – present   **Contributor**: WABE-90.1 FM, City Cafe

1994 – present   **Public relations consultant**: Atlanta Preservation Center, Heery International, Darden Restaurant Group, Flammer Relations, Inc., Jan Jack & Associates, The Spizman Agency

2007 – 2009   **Co-Anchor**: WGST-640 AM, The Weekend Dish
Contributor: WGST-640 AM, The Morning Drive

1998 – 2000   **Author**: Relocating to Atlanta (Prima Publishing, 2000); Insiders' Guide to Atlanta (Insider Publishing, 1998 & 2000)

1997 – 1998   **Online local editor**: Dive In Atlanta; Foodline Atlanta

1983 – 1985   **Human resources manager**: John Wanamaker, Philadelphia PA

1979 – 1983   **Human resources manager**: Macy's, Lansdale, PA

1978 – 1979   **Public relations & publications director**: Immaculata University, Immaculata, PA

1977 – 1978   **Public relations & publications director**: Spring Garden College, Philadelphia, PA

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE
2010 – 2012   **Teaching assistant**, English 1101 & 1102, English Department, Kennesaw State University

2011 (summer)   **Writing specialist**, Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering Department, Georgia Institute of Technology

2009 – 2010   **Tutor**, Kennesaw State University Writing Center
2009 – present **Private tutor**, Communications & English Composition
2007 (fall)   **Assistant ESOL teacher**, English for Successful Living

ACADEMIC HONORS & ORGANIZATIONS

KSU Clendenin Graduate Fellow, selected as one of the first two-year fellows, 2009 & 2010
KSU Teaching Assistant, chosen as one of the English Department's first TAs, 2009
Fellow, Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project, 2010
Member, KSU Golden Key National Honor Society
Member, KSU Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society
Member, Temple University Kappa Tau Alpha National Journalism Honor Society
Student & member, Alliance Française d'Atlanta, 2008 – present

PRESENTATIONS

Georgia Writers Association, Atlanta Press Club, Public Relations Society of America, Atlanta Restaurant Association, Kennesaw State University, Lost Mountain Middle School

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Toastmasters, Clifton Sanctuary Chapter (officer & grammarian), The Baker Street Irregulars Atlanta Chapter (officer & past president), Atlanta Preservation Center, Habitat for Humanity, Fox Theatre, Woodstock High School (senior project mentor), McEachern High School (band officer), North Avenue Presbyterian Church, Peachtree Presbyterian Church.