

# Basic Writers' Products

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Every year, we, as English composition teachers, encounter students whom Shaughnessy (1977) calls “Basic Writers”——unsuccessful college student writers. Whenever we face those writers’ compositions, we are bewildered by a string of indecipherable messages replete with erroneous use of written English. Because of such a multitude of errors in their pieces of writing, we are likely to label these writers as ineducable or irremediable. However, as Shaughnessy (1977) states, a close scrutiny of their compositions leads us to recognize that, although their papers seem to be a jumble of errors, there can be found “very little that is random or ‘illogical’ in what they have written” (p. 5). That is, most of these writers’ erroneous messages are governed by their unique rules, thereby making sense to the writers themselves. Then, it becomes possible to classify Basic Writers’ composing problems (primarily taking the form of errors) into several categories if we trace the underlying logic which generates those problems. In this paper, I will examine problems in Basic Writers’ written products, by reviewing relevant studies, under the following seven categories: problems at the discourse level, vocabulary difficulties, syntactic errors, punctuation errors, misspellings, usage problems, and poor handwriting. And I will conclude the paper by offering some pedagogical implications for those who have Basic Writers in their English composition classrooms.

Among several kinds of writing problems, those at the discourse level should be most seriously considered. Academic written discourse is expected to be structured according to a framework in which a central abstract idea is supported by concrete details; thus, it requires a writer to construct a “hierarchical network of goals,” shuttling between the higher

and lower levels of goals (Flower and Hayes, 1981). Because Basic Writers are not skillful in creating such a network, their writing is likely to manifest an inorganic structure, in which a central idea undergoes little elaboration and is led to premature closure. Even though they make an attempt to elaborate their idea, their elaboration turns out to be mere bulk filled with fragmentary comments on the idea. These comments do not follow the logic of academic writing marked by sound reasoning. Instead, they are based on the logic of either “common wisdom (platitude)” or “personal reverie” (Shaughnessy, 1977): the former mirrors Basic Writers’ “conventional stage of moral development,” whereas the latter reflects their “egocentric stage of cognitive development” as well as their attitudinal immaturity characterized by a lack of confidence and self-esteem (Lunsford, 1981). It can be said, then, that these writers’ logic is not an explicitly analytical one, but, rather, a personally expressive one. Such an egocentric perspective prevents them from sufficiently considering the purpose and audience of their writing; therefore, they cannot function in a rhetorical framework—and this reduces their compositions to an incommunicable “inner speech” or “monologue” (Flower, 1981).

Such a quality of speech in Basic Writers’ composition is necessarily linked to their second writing problem: the difficulties with manipulating sophisticated vocabulary. Collins and Williamson (1981) argue that unskilled writers’ papers manifest “semantic abbreviation,” by which they mean an insufficient representation of meaning, a representation that lacks full cues to meaning, as if being a spoken dialogue, where situational contexts can replace those cues. “Semantic abbreviation” takes the form of “personal and demonstrative exophoric references” and “formulaic expressions”: the former is defined as references (such as “I, you, it” or “this, that, there”) whose identification is not clear in the accompanying text, while the latter refers to socioculturally-prescribed expressions involving commonplaces, clichés, adages, proverbs, and epithets (such as “alot” or “very nice”). Because Basic Writers heavily depend upon those two kinds of lexicon, their writing results in a written version of their speech, thereby suffering from vagueness and triteness.

Suggesting that a writer's vocabulary choice reflects his cognitive stage, Lunsford (1980) explains that Basic Writers' lack of complexity in thinking generates their highly frequent use of personal pronouns (especially first-person pronouns) and concrete, familiar diction, as is exemplified by their use of "people" and "time," as opposed to the skilled writers' use of "observers" and "decade," as grammatical subjects in the essays written on the same topic. Basic Writers rely on a basic stock of vocabulary which serves to name or qualify in the most superficial manner. Consequently, their writing makes little use of maturer types of vocabulary, such as those classified by Finn (1977): "low frequency words" defined by the "Standard Frequency Index" (e.g., the 1971 word frequency list made by Carroll, Cavies, and Richman), "abstract nouns" (e.g., "alternatives," "efforts"), "verbs denoting cognitive activity rather than physical activity" (e.g., "abuse," "blame"), and "adjectives judging an abstract stages" (e.g., "controversial," "drastic").

The third category of errors found in Basic Writers' compositions involves their syntactic problems. Those writers' syntactic difficulties mirror their unfamiliarity with certain features of the code that controls formal written English. Unlike speech, written text demands clear structures of sentences, the structures, which are regulated by a convention of specific word orders, without which a writer's intended meaning cannot be properly conveyed to his audience. Basic Writers' syntactic problems, according to Shaughnessy (1977), manifest themselves in four types of errors, the first of which is "accidental errors" stemming from skips or misses of words (as in "no (one) should never think in turns of only this century"). The second type consists of "blurred patterns," i.e., improper combinations of features from more than one patterns (as in "At least I can say is that I will have a college degree"). "Consolidation errors" constitutes another type, involving false constructions of coordinate or subordinate structures (as in "I agree on the fact that a father should share his son's experience and to help him when he is in need"). "Consolidation errors" also involve the mere juxtaposition of two expressions which are not grammatically linked to each other (as in "The job that my mother has, I know I could never be satisfied with it"). The last group of errors

includes confused constructions of sentences in which changes of the habitual flow from subject to verb to object or complement are called for (as in “I am getting able to discuss many different points of view in this course which I could not do it before”).

In addition to erroneous word orders, Basic Writers are also likely to be confined by immature syntactic structures. Developmental writers, including Basic Writers, have only a small repertoire of syntactic possibilities. And especially, according to Hunt (1977), it is difficult for them to have access to the following “late blooming” syntactic patterns. The first of those patterns is the modification of a predicate adjective into a prenominal one (as is exemplified in the transformation of two sentences “Aluminum is a metal” and “It is abundant” into one sentence “Aluminum is an abundant metal”). The second is the “syntactic category shift,” an instance of which is a change of a predicate or verb into a prepositional phrase, e.g., a change of “look like clay” into “clay-like.” The third pattern is what Christensen (1975) calls the “cumulative sentence,” in which sentence modifiers are added to the main clause to explicate or exemplify the clause: e.g., “She slept all the time, laying no eggs”. Because those “late blooming” syntactic structures are not available to Basic Writers, their compositions result in a sequence of fragmentary sentences lacking in a quality of complexity: there can be found, in their writing, a relatively small number of words per T-unit<sup>1</sup> and a small number of S-constituent<sup>2</sup> per T-unit.

Basic Writers’ syntactic problems are closely related to the fourth problem, their difficulties with a convention of punctuation. These writers have only a limited access to punctuation marks: among a dozen marks, the comma, period, and capital exclusively appear in their compositions. Furthermore, because they misuse these three marks, their messages turn out to be incommunicable to their readers. Focusing upon Basic Writers’ difficulties with “terminal punctuation” (the difficulties with the proper use of the period and the comma), Shaughnessy (1977) explains that what “they have not been doing. . . is consciously marking off [their written] sentences according to grammatical structure” (pp. 17-18). In other words, because they are apt to draw upon oral language, they are not fully aware

where written sentences should terminate——i.e., which pause in speech signals the end of a sentence and which does not. Because of such a failure to segment their intended message into grammatical units, Basic Writers often omit necessary punctuation marks (e.g., commas deleted in run-on sentences), insert unnecessary marks (e.g., periods in sentence fragments), or insert wrong marks (e.g., commas in comma-splices).

Spelling errors are less important errors than those mentioned above, yet they dominate a large proportion of the entire errors made by Basic Writers (Shaughnessy, 1977). Generally, Basic Writers have little experience not only in writing but also in reading ; this inexperience causes their difficulties in remembering and discriminating letters, and their heavy reliance upon sounds as a spelling aid as well. Although it is often argued that there is systematic correspondence between letters and sounds in English (see, e.g., Venezky, 1967, Cronnell, 1979), English orthography is not indeed a phonetically-based system, where a sound and a letter (or letters) perfectly correspond to each other (Hartwell, 1980). Basic Writers, who tend to depend upon sounds in spelling a word, are confused by unpredictability within English spelling, without being able to choose a correct spelling among many graphic possibilities to stand for the same sound. Basic Writers' misspellings are caused by their unfamiliarity with the structures of words as well : because they do not fully understand a word's root and its affix, they, in spelling words, frequently fail to make use of the information on lexical derivation and on the system of English affixation.

Besides spelling, complicated grammatical usage of written English is also a difficult system for Basic Writers to master——and this leads them to fall into Shaughnessy's "common errors" (1977). According to Shaughnessy, these writers' "common errors" stem from any one of the following reasons: first, because their writing is influenced by their spoken language (i.e., non-Standard English or the students' native languages); second, because they misapply correct or wrong grammatical rules, and because, even though they know correct rules, they do not use them habitually ; and third, because they try to produce linguistic efficiency in their writing. Thus, Basic Writers often fail to attach to a verb

the “-s” inflection as a signal of third-person singular present tense in a sentence like “The boy hearss birds,” when their first language does not have a system of subject-verb agreement (because of the first reason); they produce a sentence like “Did you studieded yesterday ?” by overgeneralizing or hypercorrecting the rule of the “-ed” inflection (because of the second reason); they omit “-s” as a marker of plurality in such an expression as “five bookss,” believing that “-s” is redundant because the first word “five” carries a meaning of plurality (because of the third reason).

The last category of Basic Writers’ problems in their compositions involves their poor handwriting. Basic Writers are, as I have mentioned before, inexperienced writers, to whom writing has not yet become one of their daily activities. These writers, according to Lunsford (1981), belong to the “egocentric stage of cognitive development,” thereby lacking a full consideration for the audience. In addition, they are also confined by their affective instability—suffering not only from apprehension over writing (Daly & Miller, 1975; Daly, 1979) but also from a lack of self-confidence due to their failure in the academic writing class. All of these disadvantages which Basic Writers face are the sources of their immature handwriting. Because these writers are not used to the physical act of writing, they cannot move a pen naturally and smoothly. They cannot sufficiently take their audience into account when composing; therefore, they do not make an attempt to objectify their writing, an attempt to help the reader decode their messages. And because they have negative attitudes toward both writing tasks and their personality, they try to conceal their inferiority complex under the mask of indecipherable handwriting.

So far I have discussed problems found in Basic Writers’ written products under the seven headings: problems at the discourse level, vocabulary difficulties, syntactic errors, punctuation errors, misspellings, usage problems, and poor handwriting. I have tried to emphasize that, although these writers’ errors seem idiosyncratic and unpredictable, they are, as Shaughnessy (1977) and Bartholomae (1980) argue, never random, but rule-governed: they are signs of linguistic experimentation on the part of students who try to approach expected formal written English.

What the English composition teacher should do for Basic Writers is to abandon the traditional view of errors as “pathologies to be eradicated or disease to be healed. . . . [but, rather,] as necessary stages in all language learning” (Kroll & Schafer, 1978). In other words, the teacher should take an error-analyst’s standpoint, thereby regarding errors made by Basic Writers as necessary products which have resulted from these writers’ hypothesis-testing during the stage of “interlanguage,” the stage between immature written language and sophisticated, academic language. Then, the teacher, as a “cognitivist” (Kroll & Schafer, 1978), can look into the students’ mistaken strategies through their errors as windows and work out teaching devices, such as writing conferences (Reigstad and McAndrew, 1984), which meet those students’ inappropriate strategies.

Probing the cognitive side of Basic Writers’ problems is not sufficient, however. The teacher should have deep insight into the affective side of their problems as well. Those writers are overwhelmed by “anxiety, fear of evaluation, and insecurity” (Pinanko, 1979). Thus, the teacher has to familiarize the students with writing activities and let them gain more experiences in the act of writing English by creating an environment where he acts as a facilitator instead of playing the traditional role of an evaluator. In so doing, he can help the students gradually overcome their writing apprehension and gain self-confidence.

To assuage Basic Writers’ problems, a shift of viewpoint on the part of the teacher is crucial. As Shaughnessy (1977) states, it is necessary for the teacher to “dive in” the world of Basic Writers and to recognize the need to “remediate” himself and to “become a student of his students themselves” (p. 65). Without this recognition, his students will still remain Basic Writers when his one-year composition class is over.

## Notes

1 Hunt (1977) defines a T-unit as “a single main clause plus whatever else goes with it” (p. 93). Thus, a simple and a complex sentence is counted as one T-unit, whereas a compound sentence is counted as two t-units.

2 According to Hunt (1977), an S-constituent is “the abstract structure that underlies the simplest of sentences——what used to be called kernel sentences” (p. 94). For instance, three S-constituents underlie the sentence “The man who persuaded John to be examined by a specialist was fired” : one S-constituent would be the abstract structure underlying “Someone fired the man,” a second would underlie “The man persuaded John,” and a third would underlie “A specialist examined John.”

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