

Writing Matters

Writing Across the Curriculum
Southwestern Community College

Volume V
Number 6



“Mistakes are a fact of life; it is the response to the error that counts.”
—Nikki Giovanni

What’s Wrong?

One of the textbooks used in ENG 111 contains a selection that quotes from the musical *Bye Bye Birdie* in order to consider how “kids today” think and act differently than older generations. In the song that is quoted, there are the following lyrics that may sound familiar: “Kids, I don’t know what’s wrong with these kids today/Kids, who can understand anything they say?”

I’m sure that, at one time or another, we all have asked some form of this question. It’s easy to blame the generational gap, to see *our* generation’s way of doing things as “the right way,” to almost look down on younger generations simply for being different. What about student writing, then? Of course we should help students write correctly for our fields, but what’s wrong with “kids today” that creates so much error in student writing? A closer look at error through history may yield interesting results.

An Historical View of Writing Issues

Complaints about student writing and communication are nothing new. At least as early as ancient Greece and Rome, teachers saw the “lack” of student achievement and were afraid that the next generation would lead their countries into illiterate barbarism. Even when we look a little closer to home, we see that these complaints are old hat.

When President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act of 1862, it opened up higher education to subjects of study beyond law and religion. This

resulted in a wider population of applicants made up of those who wanted to study agriculture, engineering, science, and the humanities.

By the mid-1870s, many higher education institutions were alarmed at the number of applicants considered “under prepared” in writing. Harvard, for example, attempted to address this issue by instituting an entrance exam with writing in 1874. The first year the exam was used, half the students failed it.

Later, a 1917 list of errors

compiled by Roy Ivan Johnson, an educator and writer, indicated that the top three errors that persisted in student writing were spelling, capitalization, and commas.

University of Tennessee professor, John C. Hodges, conducted a similar study of error in 1938-1939. He discovered the top three errors were comma usage, spelling, and exactness.

In 1986 Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors performed a similar study. This was repeated by Andrea and Karen Lunsford in 2006.

The 2006 study of error included a top three of wrong word, comma usage, and incomplete or missing documentation.

When the four above studies are compared, the number of errors per 100 words did not significantly change. The types of error have changed over time, but the number of errors has not. In the words of Lunsford and Lunsford in their 2006 study, “student mistakes are not more prevalent—they are only different” (801).

cont’d pg. 2

That which has been is what will be,/That which is done is what will be done,/And there is nothing new under the sun. —Ecclesiastes 1:9 (NKJV)

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Historical View (cont'd)

In other words, concern over student writing and errors in student writing are nothing new. Every generation has its own version of “kids these days” that is developed into a finely tuned and universally believed argument about how everyone is getting dumber.

What if we go into the beginning of every semester or every class with this belief firmly rooted in our minds? What kind of

wall does that automatically build between us and our students? How much more distance does that create?

Students are already well aware of the power differential in the classroom. They see us as experts in our fields, as possessors of knowledge that they may never be able to grasp and understand. If we nurture that differential through an attitude of “kids these days,” we only make the climb a bit steeper for what our

students already view as a Sisyphean task.

Instead, we can approach our students’ writing based upon what is valued in our field. When error occurs (as it inevitably will; none of our students get “inoculated” from error simply because they take ENG 111), we can identify it and discuss it within the context of our individual fields. This can lead to a rich discussion of error and its effects within a particular discipline.

Therefore, instead of focusing on “what’s the matter,” perhaps we should shift our focus to what matters and let that new focus guide our teaching and our students’ learning.

Work Cited

Lunsford, Andrea A., and Karen J. Lunsford. “Mistakes Are a Fact of Life’: A National Comparative Study.” *College Composition and Communication*, 59.4 (2008): 781-806. Web.

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