

“Not All Errors Are Created Equal”: What’s Serious, Very Serious, Status-Marking

From Hairston, Maxine. “Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage.” *College English* 43 (1981): 794-806.

Hairston conducted an attitudinal survey on common writing errors, in which 84 professionals, representing 63 occupations other than English teaching, responded to a questionnaire that consisted of 65 sentences, each containing a different error in standard usage. Respondents were asked to indicate the level of annoyance they felt at encountering each error. The results indicated that the professionals surveyed were highly aware of and often reacted strongly to certain kinds of formal and usage errors. Hairston classified the errors into five groups, from the most serious to the least serious:

Status Marking errors

- ❖ nonstandard verb forms in past or past participle: *brung* instead of *brought*; *had went* instead of *had gone*.
- ❖ lack of subject-verb agreement: *We was* instead of *We were*; *She don’t think* instead of *She doesn’t think*.
- ❖ double negatives
- ❖ objective pronoun as subject: *Him and me are going downtown*.

Very Serious errors

- ❖ sentence fragments
- ❖ run-on sentences
- ❖ non-capitalization of proper nouns
- ❖ *would of* instead of *would have*
- ❖ lack of subject-verb agreement (non-status marking)
- ❖ insertion of comma between the verb and its complement
- ❖ nonparallelism
- ❖ faulty adverb forms: *She treats her employees bad*.
- ❖ use of transitive verb *set* for intransitive *sit*.

Serious errors

- ❖ predication errors: *The policy intimidates hiring.* [Policies don't intimidate. People do.]
- ❖ dangling modifiers
- ❖ Use of *I* as an objective pronoun: *He's going to the museum with Jane and I.*
- ❖ lack of commas to set off interrupters like *however*
- ❖ lack of commas in a series: *Abraham, Martin, and John*
- ❖ tense switching
- ❖ use of a plural modifier with a singular noun: *These kind of errors*

Moderately Serious errors

- ❖ lack of possessive form before a gerund: *Consuelas policing of* instead of *Consuela's policing of*
- ❖ lack of commas to set off an appositive: *My good buddy Rog lives in Chicago* instead of *My good buddy, Rog, lives in Chicago.*
- ❖ inappropriate use of quotation marks
- ❖ lack of subjunctive mood. Subjunctive mood is simply a variation of the verb that we use in special circumstances, such as to convey a strong suggestion or recommendation. It is often used in that clauses.
Correct: *I move that the meeting be adjourned.*
If I were you, I'd be careful.
The suggestion that Bill see a doctor was a good one.
Incorrect: *If I was you, I'd be careful.*
- ❖ writing *That is her across the street.*
- ❖ use of *whoever* instead of *whomever*
- ❖ use of the construction *The situation is . . . when*
- ❖ failure to distinguish between *among* and *between*
- ❖ comma splices

Minor or Unimportant errors

- ❖ use of a qualifier before *unique*: *Des Moines is the most unique city.*
- ❖ writing *different than* instead of *different from*
- ❖ use of a singular verb with *data*
- ❖ use of a colon after a linking verb: *The three causes of inflation are:*
- ❖ omission of the apostrophe in the contraction *it's*