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The Seven Deadly Sins of Student Writers

By BEN YAGODA

I have been teaching college writing since 1992. The corrections I find myself making on student assignments fall into two general categories. The first concern problems of style — specifically, clarity and grace. So I mark the many places where my students commit wordiness, vagueness, awkwardness, banality, and so on. The other category is mistakes: usages that do not follow the accepted rules of standard English.

From the beginning, it was clear to me that most student mistakes fall into a small number of categories — seven, to be precise. They have common qualities that speak to unfortunate cultural trends, which I'll discuss in a minute. But first, the seven deadly sins. (The examples in quotation marks are from actual student writing assignments.)

1. Dangling modifiers. "Being the most spectacular event in the nation, newspapers were obligated to devote major coverage to the hurricane." "By reversing the color scheme, the eye is captured." "Claiming to be a simple man leading an ordinary life of a male as he enjoys watching football with his buddy's, Smith's lifestyle is far from ordinary." (For buddy's, see No. 6, below.) What makes these dangling modifiers (sorry if I seem to be stating the obvious) is that newspapers were not the most spectacular event; the eye doesn't reverse the color scheme; and Smith's lifestyle didn't claim to be a simple man.

An interesting thing about dangling modifiers is that a rather select group of students commits them: the minority who would even attempt a complex sentence. Another interesting thing is that, much more so than the other errors on my list, dangling modifiers show up in well-respected publications, such as *The New Yorker* ("Like a bad French movie, Jones's life began to intersect with [another person's].") and *The New York Times Book Review* ("rather than providing the meticulous examination of the process of looking ... , we are treated to rhetorical flights that provide little perspective of any useful kind").

2. *Omitted commas.* As the popularity of the book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* suggests, punctuation problems are endemic and, perhaps, epidemic. However, in my experience they are clustered in a few areas. One is the omission of a comma after an appositive or a parenthetical phrase. "All residents of Wilmington, Del. were issued paper bags in which to place their leaves"; "Prof. Jackson, who joined the faculty in 1978 is on sabbatical this year." My students usually leave out the comma after "Del." and "1978." Almost as common is neglecting the comma before an adverbial phrase, as in "The football team won yesterday ending a five-game losing streak."

3. *Gratuitous commas.* Let me count the ways. Students seem to reach for a comma whenever they feel any anxiety about a sentence's syntax, when they find themselves using an unfamiliar word, or when they take a breath: "Approximately, fifteen percent of the class are minority group members." "Smith described the concert as, 'a blast.'" "He shares a house with three, senior, pre-med students." "Class president, Joe Rockwell, presented the award." All the commas in those sentences need to go. A fairly new but very powerful trend is the insertion of a comma after "And," "But," or "Yet" when one of those is the first word in the sentence: "But, the president presented a different viewpoint."

Fifteen years ago, at the start of my full-time teaching career, I was most struck by the error of the comma splicethat is, the linking of clauses with a comma instead of a period, semicolon, or conjunction. For example: "He was not always this extreme, in fact he started out as a moderate." These are going stronger than ever; consistently, about a quarter of my students are habitual comma-splicers. Currently quite popular is the incorrect use of "however" as a conjunction roughly synonymous with "but": "The majority of students go away on spring break, however some stay at

home."

4. *Semicolons.* I've learned to pretty much count on it: Virtually any time a student uses a semicolon, the use is wrong.

5. *Use of the word "they."* This is the one item on the list with shades of gray. A student wrote, "He asked each audience member to reconsider their stance," using the plural "their" to stand in for the singular "member." Before 1975 or so, standard usage dictated the use of "his" in this context and since then has respectfully requested "his or her." Many people (including me) try hard to avoid the choice by rewriting the sentence to something like: "All audience members need to reconsider their stance." The fact is, however, that the plural formulation has a long pedigree, including use by such authors as Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde, and Sting ("If you love someone, set them free"); is today used in speech by all but the prissiest prescriptivists; and has even been endorsed for writing by some respected authorities.

My own sense is that this usage isn't widely acceptable in prose yet, but it will be soon. The trouble with my students is twofold. First, they are quick to use "they" even when the gender of the antecedent isn't in question: "I talked to my friend, and they said they would get back to me." Second, students typically use "they" when referring to (singular) businesses, rock bands, sports teams, restaurants, and stores — in cases, that is, where "it" is clearly the appropriate pronoun. For example: "Every college has their trends." "The company has been working hard to reshape their image."

6. *Spell-check errors.* I came in on the first wave of spell-check utilities. They lull students and others into a false sense of security, leaving homonyms or near homonyms of the intended word unmarked. Cataloging this kind of mistake can be great sport; I treasure the article about a board-of-education meeting that mentioned the "Super Attendant of Schools," and the one on drug problems that referred to a "heroine attic."

If you stare at such mistakes long enough, some of these actually seem to make sense, as in "The storm wrecked [as opposed to wreaked] havoc." And some such errors are so inviting that they now outnumber correct usages, at least in my students' work. I expect to read that something peaked (rather than piqued) the interest, that a person poured (rather than pored) over a book, that an action lead (rather than led) to negative

consequences. That's not even getting into all the homonymic apostrophe confusion described in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*: who's/whose, it's/its, you're/your, buddy's/buddies.

7. *Wrong word*. The spell-check errors get the headlines and the laughs, but a more common and insidious problem is word choices that are off, sometimes by just a hair, sometimes by a Beatles wig and a full beard. Too often, reading student papers is like listening to a routine by Norm Crosby, the malapropetic comedian who refers to having a good "rappaport" with a like-minded friend. Here are some real-life examples, with what I guess to be the right word in brackets:

"Of the many things the students aspired [expected] to see, a terrorist attack was not one of them."

"The drop in candidates can be accredited [attributed] to. ... "

"Stories about the hurricane invade [dominate] the entire first section of the newspaper."

"No one can blame [accuse] John Henrickson of being an apathetic college student."

"The vast proportion [majority] of students is enrolled in the College of Arts and Science."

Then there's this one, which seems to encapsulate all the problems students are having: "The land, which is currently occupied with [by] older, run down homes, will be rejuvenated [I'm not sure what the right word is — I just know that "rejuvenated" isn't it] to fit the positive stigma [image] that the city manages [is trying] to uphold."

The cultural trends that have led to the unmagnificent seven? The de-emphasis on grammar rules in primary and secondary education has to be a factor, as does the shocking shoddiness with which many students go about their work. That is, if they spent more than a few minutes proofreading their efforts, or thought to consult the dictionary when in doubt about a word, they would catch many or most of their errors.

But there is one overriding reason for these mistakes. It's hardly a secret.

Students, like most of our citizens, don't read very much good or, at the very least, edited prose. (E-mail messages, instant messages, and blogs, which they do read, aren't edited and are rife with all these mistakes.) Reading a lot is the only way to get a deep-seated understanding of the way punctuation is meant to be used, of spelling, of the construction of complex sentences, and of the meaning of the words that you might use in your own writing. Skilled writers profit from a continuously looping, subliminal soundtrack of all the sentences they've ever read. The students who do not have such a soundtrack fall back on the archive of conversations that are in their heads. The spoken language follows a different protocol, including conventions like using "they" for singular antecedents, a tolerance of loose syntax (hence the dangling modifier), and the sort of episodic sequencing that leads, when you try to put it down on paper, to the comma splice.

Once upon a time, reading was a popular pastime, at least among the portion of the population that went to college. Until and unless it becomes such again, I'm resigned to making the same corrections on the same mistakes, over and over, until I put away my red pen for good.

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