

Errors in Writing of USFSM Students Taught by Mr. Roberts

by T. E. Roberts, Instructor / 18 July 2011, updated 8 March 2012

Student's Question: *I have a question regarding the grading rubric. I reviewed the revision instructions, and am curious if each comment marked in yellow counts as one error. From my understanding, in order to get an "A" in the course, the allowable errors may be three or fewer. For instance, based on the instructions, I counted five errors, therefore, will that be five errors marked against the student? Thank you.*

Instructor's Response: The number of errors in a submission is just a gross measurement; equally important is the type of error. The most serious mistakes are those that reflect a serious weakness or failure in English sentence structure and important punctuation (including, but not limited to, sentence fragments, fused sentences, comma splices, dangling or misplaced modifiers, unclear subject/predicate combination, and faulty parallel structure). In some cases a spelling error can be considered "serious" if it alters the intended meaning of the writer or if it indicates sheer ignorance of idiomatic and correct usage (for example, "moral" for "morale," "rational" for "rationale," or "service" for "serve"). The basis of judging the severity of an error is its perceived effect on the READER, not the writer. If your document causes your boss and co-workers to become so confused that they have to request clarification, then your document has failed. If the mistake causes embarrassment to you or your employer in the eyes of customers or clients, then your writing has a negative impact.

The identification and weighting of mistakes involve the instructor's judgment. Unlike mathematics and other quantifiable modes of learning and observation, language may involve "errors" that are defined not in terms of strictly observed rules and laws but on the basis of cultural norms, social mores, prescriptive grammar, and native idiomatic usage. One reason that English is challenging for some people whose native language is something else is that English is a richly subtle, complex mode of discourse whose "rules" are hard to learn and sometimes inconsistent. However, success depends on meeting this challenge because English dominates the worlds of commerce, academic learning, the arts, and many other endeavors not only in the U.S. but throughout the world.

Ironically, some of my best-performing USFSM writing students are not native users of English, but they have clearly been trained in earlier schooling by excellent, demanding teachers who emphasize whatever is required to absorb, inculcate, and understand thoroughly the way English works and doesn't work. I mention this to confirm that one can indeed learn a foreign language, even one as unpredictable and challenging as English.

There are in fact many different categories of English, depending on social class, geography, profession, education, and even economic status. The variations are more pronounced in cultures which even today exhibit sharp differences in social class. English spoken in the British Isles, for instance, varies greatly in terms of "U" and "non-U" (U = Upper-class; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U_and_non-U_English) practices. This is also true where British colonialism had a profound influence throughout modern history (India, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Shanghai, the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, and of course North America).

I try to teach in USFSM writing courses the kind of written and spoken English needed to communicate effectively in business and professional careers, primarily in the United States. This is obviously very different from teaching one how to write a novel, poem, academic essay, or theatrical drama, but the basics of effective writing apply to all genres of written English -- conciseness, clarity, completeness, and creativity (the "Four C's," as noted in my lectures).

If you memorize the Usage Tips at the end of the syllabus and truly understand how to apply them, your writing is likely to be much freer of errors than if you do not do this. Please contact me if you have a question.