



Full length article

College student perceptions of writing errors, text quality, and author characteristics

Adam C. Johnson^a, Joshua Wilson^b, Rod D. Roscoe^{a,*}^a 7271 E. Sonoran Arroyo Mall, Santa Catalina Hall, Suite 150, Arizona State University-Polytechnic, Mesa, AZ, 85212, United States^b 213E Willard Hall, School of Education, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, 19716, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Peer assessment
Perceptions
Reading ability
Writing beliefs
Writing errors

ABSTRACT

Both conventional wisdom and empirical research suggest that errors in writing impact perceptions of both writing quality and characteristics of the author. Texts that exhibit poor spelling and grammar, or lack compelling arguments and clear structure, are perceived as lower quality. Moreover, the authors themselves may be perceived as less intelligent, creative, hardworking or trustworthy. Using a within-subjects design, the current study systematically examined the effects of lower-level errors and higher-level errors on college students' ($n = 70$) perceptions of multiple aspects of writing quality and author characteristics. Results demonstrated that students noticed both kinds of errors but were much more sensitive to lower-level errors than higher-level errors. Nearly identical patterns were observed for judgments of text quality and authors, and the sensitivity to lower-level errors was stronger for more-skilled readers. Implications for challenges and biases in peer assessment are discussed.

1. Introduction

Popular culture suggests that writing errors inspire negative judgments of both text quality and authors' characteristics. For example, researchers at Grammarly, an online proofreading tool, reviewed 100 LinkedIn profiles (Hoover, 2013). Profiles containing fewer errors also reported higher status positions, more promotions, and fewer career changes. In accord with views that writing quality can convey authors' mental or moral attributes (Elliot, 2005), Hoover suggested that grammatically correct writing may signal writers "who care about their writing demonstrate credibility, professionalism, and accuracy in their work." Researchers at Grammarly have also analyzed profiles posted on the eHarmony matchmaking website (Mager, 2016). Male profiles were 14% less likely to receive a response if they contained two or more spelling errors, and 88% of women and 75% of men said they would judge potential matches based on grammar.

The current study systematically examines the effects of lower-level errors (e.g., spelling and grammar) and higher-level errors (e.g., organization and argument) on ratings of multiple writing and author traits. This work is conducted with college undergraduates—an important audience for writing instruction (Butler & Britt, 2011; Hacker & Sommers, 2016). As students navigate writing processes (Hayes, 2012) or assess their peers (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000), they must be able to monitor, detect, and repair writing flaws. Thus, a better understanding of how students evaluate errors has valuable educational implications.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: acjohn17@asu.edu (A.C. Johnson), joshwils@udel.edu (J. Wilson), rod.roscoe@asu.edu (R.D. Roscoe).

1.1. Consequences of writing errors on evaluations of text and author

One goal of writing instruction is to introduce recommended “rules for writing” (Hacker & Sommers, 2016). Although language is flexible, a student researching the word “synthesis” will find that “sinthisis” is considered an incorrect spelling, and that “synthesis” is the noun whereas “synthesize” is the verb. Similarly, sentences lacking a subject or verb are judged as incomplete fragments. Consequently, spelling instruction helps students master accepted orthographic rules (Graham & Santangelo, 2014) and grammar instruction teaches conventional syntax and morphology (Myhill & Watson, 2014). Students may also learn about organizational or rhetorical criteria. For instance, the “five-paragraph theme” (Johnson, Thompson, Smagorinsky, & Fry, 2003; Nunnally, 1991) reminds novice writers to include an introductory paragraph and thesis, supporting body paragraphs, and a concluding summary. Lessons on rhetorical principles can help students determine whether arguments are supported or unfounded, and whether sources are more or less credible (Butler & Britt, 2011).

Of course, writers can purposefully “break” these rules. Authors might “misspell” words to convey dialects (Hodson, 2014) and satire may use deliberate falsehoods and exaggeration to express humorous commentary (Simpson, 2003). Language conventions are also contextual. Modern social media conventions are permissive of diverse abbreviations, colloquialisms, and creative spelling and punctuation that still allow for effective communication (Turner, Abrams, Katic, & Donovan, 2014; Kemp, Wood, & Waldron, 2014; Thurlow, 2006). Likewise, evaluation of writing errors must be cognizant of sociolinguistic biases, such as defining differences between alternative dialects and Standard English as “deficits” (Fisher & Lapp, 2013; Godley & Escher, 2012; Johnson & VanBrackle, 2012). Nonetheless, violating rules for stylistic or communicative purposes is different from mistakes due to ignorance or neglect. And *perceived* errors—regardless of whether those perceptions are fair or valid—have consequences. When assessing student writing, raters likely view non-standard grammar or organization as errors rather than expertise or dialect (Godley & Escher, 2012; Johnson & VanBrackle, 2012).

Several researchers have evaluated perceptions of errors in essays written for school contexts. Marshall and colleagues (Marshall, 1967; Marshall & Powers, 1969) crafted essays that exhibited no errors (i.e., spelling and grammar were edited), spelling errors only, or grammar errors only. In holistic ratings assigned by over 400 pre-service teachers, both error types similarly resulted in lower essays scores. Figuredo and Varnhagen (2005) (see also Kreiner, Schnakenberg, Green, Costello, & McClin, 2002) specifically targeted perceptions of spelling errors. Approximately 270 first-year undergraduates evaluated writing quality and author characteristics for essays containing no spelling errors, homophone spelling errors, or non-homophone spelling errors. Overall, essays with no errors were rated as higher quality and easier to read than essays with errors. Spelling errors also resulted in more negative judgments of authors’ writing ability, intelligence, and attention to detail, but did not affect perceptions of academic potential or possibilities for friendship.

Researchers have also investigated experts’ perceptions of errors. Freedman (1979) invited 12 expert readers to holistically rate essays that exhibited errors in content (e.g., contradictions), organization (e.g., illogical order), sentence structure (e.g., fragments), or mechanics (e.g., misspellings). Lower scores were assigned to essays with content, organization, and mechanics problems, with the strongest penalties given for content errors. Similarly, Breland and Jones (1982) asked twenty English professors to rate essays that exhibited problems in discourse (e.g., missing thesis), syntax (e.g., subject-verb agreement), or wording (e.g., vocabulary and spelling). Overall, experts’ judgments were most influenced by discourse issues—essays that demonstrated better organization, ideas, logic, and elaboration were rated more favorably, but essays with spelling errors were penalized.

Other studies have examined the effects of elaboration, organization, and cohesion on expert judgments, but did not test writing errors specifically (Crossley & McNamara, 2016; Plakans & Gebril, 2017). Crossley and McNamara (2016) asked freshman students to compose two essays on different prompts and then revise to elaborate the content. A writing expert then edited all essays to improve cohesion (e.g., word overlap, transitions, and clarifying anaphors). The final corpus comprised 280 essays in four groups: original, elaborated, cohesive, and both elaborated and cohesive. All essays were then scored by twelve experts with at least one year of experience teaching university writing courses. Overall, adding elaboration and cohesion increased the assigned holistic scores, and adding cohesion improved perceived coherence.

Finally, several studies considered informal, online, and professional communications (Jeong, Li, & Pan, 2017; Morin-Lessard & McKelvie, 2017; Vignovic & Thompson, 2010). Vignovic and Thompson (2010) contrasted technical violations (e.g., spelling errors) and etiquette violations (e.g., terseness) on perceptions of emails. Over 400 undergraduates evaluated a supposed coworker’s email to judge technical correctness and the author’s personality. Spelling and grammar errors negatively impacted perceived correctness and perceived author intelligence, conscientiousness, and trustworthiness. In contrast, etiquette errors had no impact on perceived correctness or intelligence, but negatively influenced ratings of agreeableness, extraversion, and trustworthiness. Boland and Queen (2016) recently studied how raters’ personality influenced their error perceptions. Over 80 adults rated emails ostensibly advertising for a housemate, which were constructed to exhibit no errors, grammatical errors, or spelling errors. Raters judged the author on various qualities (e.g., friendly, intelligent, conscientious, likeable, and trustworthy) that were combined into a single housemate score. In addition, raters completed a personality measure with scales for extraversion, agreeability, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. Both typos and grammatical errors resulted in lower housemate scores, and raters’ own personalities mediated these judgments. More agreeable raters were less harsh and less likely to penalize grammatical errors. Extraverts were less likely to penalize typos or grammatical errors. However, more conscientious and close-minded raters were more critical of typographical errors.

In sum, diverse studies on perceptions of writing errors support the popular wisdom that errors inspire negative evaluations of the text and author (Elliot, 2005; Graham, Harris, & Hebert, 2011), and comparable findings have been obtained across different types of writing and populations of readers. Notably, at least one study has shown that raters’ personality can influence their reactions to

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6831573>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6831573>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)