J. M. Keynes is said to have commented that those economists who would disassociate themselves from current economic theory, claiming no need for it or admitting pure dislike, were nonetheless driven by theory — an earlier one. The same can be said, wrote Terry Eagleton (1983), of literary critics, and something similar can also be said, we hope to argue in this paper, of teachers of writing. We center our discussion on one activity in the teaching of writing — responding to student papers by identifying errors. Our aim is to arrive at some answers to the questions, "How do readers — in particular, teachers — label and interpret errors in a text?" and "How can such knowledge inform the teaching of editing?" To propose some answers to these questions, we review error studies in the context of post-modernist theories of literary criticism, and we discuss the findings from a study on how teachers from various grade levels responded to an error-laden student text.

Error: The Certainty Factor

Error and correctness in writing, as topics of research and components of language instruction, have the uneasy characteristic of being quite value-laden. We are taken aback when we recognize the vigor with which readers denounce certain usages, certain errors or constructions. Joseph Williams (1981) has pointed out that errors like different than or between you and I inspire an unexpected amount of ferocity. It is not unusual, for example, for handbooks and grammar guides to refer to the very commonplace usages of OK and hopefully and irregardless as examples of language use that are detestable and vulgar and idiotic.
and oafish. A recent survey of professional people (Hairston 1981) demonstrated that they disapprove very strongly of errors like run-on sentences, nonparallel constructions, and faulty adverb forms. Pop grammarians abound — Richard Mitchell, Edwin Newman, William Safire, John Simon — all self-proclaimed guardians of the language, ready to pounce upon deviations from conventional forms. Mitchell (1979) repeats an error from a Department of Transportation manual, "If a guest becomes intoxicated, take his or her car keys and send them home in a taxi," and comments: "It's so funny that we don't discern the failure of mind that has caused this silly mistake" (72).

The thing that strikes us about such comments is the steadfastness and certainty with which readers, experienced readers, stand their ground about what counts as an error and how much it counts. We see another version of this certainty in research on the assessment of writing skills, where the assumption is that sentence-level error in writing is a simple matter to measure. A comment by a researcher who evaluated the National Assessment data on writing mechanics is typical. Mellon (1975) warned that we ought not to give these data more attention than they are due just because "the categories can be defined, the data easily obtained." He went on to comment that "sometimes the ease of getting information leads people to overstate its value" (33). (See also Hirsch and Harrington 1981; Mullis 1984.) This attitude stands in great contrast to current thinking on the evaluation of discourse skills, where issues of validity and reliability regularly receive careful attention. (Breland [1983] provides a good review of these issues.) Sentence-level error seems to be the one part of written language upon whose nature everyone agrees. In this view, error does not need to be interpreted, but only recognized. To find another vantage point, we turn to literary theory.

**Reading as Interpretation**

In recent years, a revolution of sorts has taken place in departments of English in this country, a revolution that has to do with new theories on the nature of reading and literature. Broadly speaking, the new theories conceive the act of reading as an act of interpretation, or what is sometimes called the "transaction" between a reader and a text (Rosenblatt 1978). In contrast to critics earlier in the century who interested themselves in a work of literature per se, respecting its autonomy and the assumed intention of its author, post-modernist critics want to emphasize the role of context in interpretation. Thus, they no longer consider a literary work as static and fixed, containing
a meaning and an intended interpretation that skillful readers are supposed to ferret out and students are supposed to memorize; they see it as fluid and changing, waiting for enactments of many meanings by readers who necessarily bring different experiences to the text and who will thereby and necessarily interpret it somewhat differently.

To characterize the reading process, the phenomenological critic Iser (1972) offers the analogy of two people looking at the night sky. He explains that the two "may both be looking at the same section of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper." That is, all readers engage in certain "complementary activities of selection and organization, anticipation and retrospection, the formulation and modification of expectations in the course of the reading process" (Suleiman 1980, 23), but the performance of these activities will vary from time to time, from reader to reader; consequently, different readers (and the same reader at different times) will see different things in the same text. They will see different lines uniting the same stars. (For an introduction to Iser and phenomenological criticism, see Suleiman.) What we have wondered is the extent to which something similar might be said when the text to be read is a student composition and the reader, a teacher whose intent it is to comment on student errors. And as it turns out, a few researchers have already begun to characterize error detection and correction in ways that bring to mind the interpretative nature of reading.

Williams (1981) suggested that we find errors where we expect to find them, in student papers, for example, and demonstrated that we overlook errors where we don't expect them to appear, in scholarly articles by Joseph Williams, for example. He proposes that we categorize errors not according to systems of grammar, but according to whether a rule is violated and whether a reader responds. The interesting part of Williams's taxonomy, and the way it differs from traditional systems for categorizing error, is that he includes categories for instances in which no rule is violated but a reader responds anyway, and instances in which a rule is violated but a reader does not respond at all. His point is that errors aren't equal, that some lack practical force because their violation is rarely noticed — when a reader makes semantic structure, rather than letters and syntactic form, his or her field of attention, that is.

Bartholomae (1980) examined the case in which a reader is likely to see the most errors — when as a teacher, he or she attempts to analyze the errors in essays by inexperienced writers. Bartholomae argues that a variety of interpretations can often exist for an idiosyncratic sentence, and that this variety depends upon a reader's sense...
of discourse or the larger meaning pi- by the rest of the text, and upon a reader’s skill at predicting v a writer puts sentences together or constructs a style. He objects, then, to any easy assumption that to categorize an error, to give it a label, one need only imagine the sentence the writer would have constructed if he or she had been careful enough to write the sentence correctly from the start. Classifying as error isn’t like classifying a rock or a butterfly, he argues; when reading for error, we can’t avoid interpretation.

Lees (1986) offered evidence that college composition instructors see some errors and ignore others, even when their task is to locate and label all the errors in a student paper. She found considerable agreement on the presence or absence of errors in certain parts of the paper, and considerable variation in other parts. (See also Greenbaum and Taylor 1981.) Lees has identified, then, one example of what Stanley Fish likes to call an “interpretive community” — a group of readers who share common assumptions about texts and common strategies for making sense of them. However, this group did not share the same assumptions about what constitutes an error. Lees would argue, then, that error isn’t a binary matter, either “there” or “not there” in the text.

Hull (1987a, 1987b) called into question another common assumption — that writers locate and label errors in texts by consulting rules like those found in handbooks of grammar and usage. She documented that writers engage in other sorts of activities, too, strategies like focusing on the meaning of the text or listening to how it sounds. Hull proposes, then, that we enlarge our notions of editing to include such “comprehending” and “intuiting” activities, in addition to the “consulting” of rules. And she speaks out in favor of alternate error-classification schemes, arguing that traditional taxonomies fail to capture what is salient about error detection and correction. (For a review of other recent scholarship on error and editing, see Hull 1985.)

The Present Study

Given, on the one hand, assumptions about how simple it is to quantify error, and on the other hand, current thinking about the interpretive nature of the reading process, including reading for errors, we were interested in studying further the place where the contradictions inherent in these positions most often collide — teachers’ readings of students’ texts, teachers’ quantification and interpretation of errors in student writing. The purpose of the study was to describe how teachers
at several grade levels labeled and evaluated the errors they saw in a particular text. By doing so, we hoped to learn something about the knowledge teachers do or don’t share about errors and editing. Instead of assuming (as our profession has traditionally done) that teachers constitute an interpretive community in this respect, we asked if this was really the case.

We did not assume, let us quickly say, that these teachers taught by labeling errors, or that their responses to the errors in the paper we provided were indicative of their responses to errors in the papers of their own students. We did assume, however, that to address errors, most teachers do annotate their students’ texts. The teaching of writing in schools and colleges and universities consists in large part of the instruction that occurs when teachers comment on students’ essays. It is through such comments—the directions and admonitions and suggestions and judgments made in the margins, between the lines, over the words, and at the end of essays, stories, poems, and letters—that teachers react to the written language produced by individual students and that students learn to improve their writing.

We constructed an editing task for teachers (see the appendix, page 290) which asked them:

1. to read a student essay in order to mark and label all of its errors in punctuation, grammar, syntax, and spelling;
2. to pick out the three most serious errors from those they labeled, and to explain their significance; and
3. to comment on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the student writer.

For the editing task, we used an actual student essay (see page 291) that had been written as part of a college entrance exam. We used an actual student text and the errors that occurred naturally within it rather than one we had constructed, because it is hard to construct convincing student prose or student errors, and also because our subjects would be schoolteachers who would presumably notice the difference; we wanted the task to be realistic for them. The essay was a narrative, written about a time when the student had done something creative. It was approximately 400 words long, or about one and one-half typed pages; by our count, it contained thirty-five errors in punctuation, grammar, syntax, and spelling. We don’t mean to claim that other readers ought to see these thirty-five errors, too, or that they are “in” the text. Our list of errors counts, then, as a response and also as a practical way of tabulating the responses of other readers. There was a range of errors: mistakes in punctuation, tense, spelling,
and syntax. The essay contained one obvious error pattern — the omission of commas in particular places. We coded teachers' responses to the essay by setting up a database and entering demographic data (teachers' grade level, etc.) and error data (the errors identified and labeled, etc.). This database made it possible to access and compare data — to call up, for example, all the labels that teachers used to refer to an error in a particular line, and to sort those labels according to whether teachers worked at the elementary, secondary, or college level.

The participants in our study were twenty English teachers in elementary school (grades 1-5), twenty-five English teachers in secondary school (grades 6-12), and ten college professors in disciplines other than English. We chose these three groups because we thought they represented potentially different readers when it comes to error. Secondary-school teachers have the reputation of being sticklers for correct form, and there is evidence from a national survey that they respond most frequently to student writing by marking sentence-level errors (Applebee 1981). We don't know as much about the practices of elementary-school teachers, but we believed the range of their concerns might be different. College instructors who do not teach English represent experienced readers and writers who deal regularly with student texts but who do so outside the discourse community where concern for error is paramount. Again, we expected their range of concerns to be different. (The group we omitted is the one most often studied — college writing teachers. See, for example, Lees 1986; Greenbaum and Taylor 1981.)

Results

Analysis of Responses: Assumptions and Procedures

If teachers-readers of student writing constitute an interpretive community, then we should find that they share not only a common vocabulary for labeling the "errors" they see in texts, but also a common sense of when it is appropriate to do so. In other words, when we infer what teachers know about error from their written responses to a text, we are really asking where consensus lies among members of our profession.

Our controlling question for this research, then, was this: To what extent did the locating and labeling of errors reflect agreement among these readers about the "errors" in this text? To that end, we asked these four questions:
What places in the text — words, spaces, groups of words and spaces — were marked as errorful?

How many teachers marked each place?

What kinds of errors were implied by the labels used to mark these places?

For each place marked, how consistent were the labels used?

One of our major analytic tasks was to devise a category scheme for teachers' error labels. We classified labels according to these six categories:

**Punctuation** (which included matters of capitalization and underlining) and **Spelling**: These are typically what Hull (1987a, 1987b) has called "consulting" errors; in correcting them, readers call upon established rules and conventions, for written discourse, even looking them up in handbooks and dictionaries.

**Grammar**: These are mostly errors in the forms of those parts of speech still inflected in modern English, such as errors in verb endings or noun/pronoun agreement.

**Logic/Clarity**: These reflect the reader's inability to accept the sense of the text as it is written, either because it is confusing or because the words or other symbols do not fit the overall meaning that the reader is constructing. Hull refers to these as "comprehending" errors. We would include here not only such obvious labels as "unclear" and "doesn't make sense," but also ones like "wrong word," "omission," and "irrelevant sentence."

**Style/Structure**: The main concern here is for the form of the text, e.g., sentence structure, diction. The reader seems to understand and accept what is being said, but seems to feel it could be said in a better way. These often fall into the category that Hull calls "intuiting" errors.

**Unclassifiable**: These include places marked but given no labels, and also labels that are too vague, ambiguous, or strange for us to understand, even guessing from the context.

These are, at best, crude categories. Deciding how to classify errors required that we do much inferring from the context, and often the categories "leaked." Consider, for example, objections to the word *preformed* in the sentence, "At my lesson I preformed my version of Heart and Soul." Twenty-six teachers marked this as a spelling error, yet it is clearly not a spelling error of the sort evidenced, for instance, when a student writes *recieve* for *receive*. Here, *preformed* is another word entirely, the wrong word — an error, one might argue, in logic/clarity. Readers constructing sense out of a text about practicing and playing music can easily guess that the word the writer probably
intended was *performed*. But they do this more on the basis of the logical sense they are making out of the story than their sense that a word the writer intended to use is there, but orthographically misrepresented.

It was often hard for us to decide between style/structure and logic/clarity when classifying an error label, particularly when the labels were those such as "word choice," "omit," or "unnecessary." Consider, for example, the sentence beginning, "The next thing that she told my parents was that I was tone deaf..." Eight teachers clearly felt confused: "What was the previous 'thing'?" Two more labeled "The next thing" as "wordy" and suggested stylistic revisions. But a third group either deleted "The next thing" (six) or labeled it "usage" (two). Are these last responses objections to a phrase that doesn't make sense, or to one that is stylistically infelicitous? We can't be sure. In each instance, we had to use our combined understanding of the text (as we read it), our sense of the errors we found there, and our acquired familiarity with error labels to try to categorize the reader's response.

In the next sections of this chapter, we present global tallies and then discuss teachers' responses to high-, medium-, and low-consensus errors; teachers' error labels; those errors judged to be serious; the effect of grade-level of teaching and of training in the composing process on responses; and what the responses don't say.

**Gross Tallies**

The 55 teachers whose responses we analyzed found a total of 1,800 errors, an average of 32.73 per teacher, which is very close to the 35 errors we marked as occurring in the text. (Note that the 1,800 "errors" are a total of all responses, all things that were marked as errors in the text, not just the 35 items we initially identified as erroneous.) The groups fell out as follows: elementary teachers saw 575 errors, or an average of 28.75; secondary teachers saw 864 errors, or an average of 34.56; and college teachers saw 361 errors, or an average of 36.1. When we look at range, the variation is much greater. The lowest number of errors detected was 9, and the highest, 56. For elementary teachers, the range was from 9 to 56; for secondary teachers, from 19 to 50; and for college teachers, from 16 to 51.

**High-Consensus Errors**

When we analyzed the error markings, we considered the consensus "high" if a place in the text was marked for similar reasons by 23 or more teachers (41% or more), and "very high" if it was marked by
of such high-consensus errors.

Twenty of these high-consensus places were labeled as punctuation errors, 12 by 60% or more of the teachers, reflecting what we felt were highly shared perceptions of error patterns in this student's writing. Eleven places, in our subjects' judgments, showed a failure to punctuate clauses or long phrases at the beginning of sentences: "When I was in the fifth grade[ ] my parents decided. . . ." Four more places were felt to show the writer's lack of knowledge about the handling of song titles.

We thought it was interesting, however, that there was really much less agreement on what punctuation might be needed within or after the sentence's main clause. Forty-four teachers, for example, felt that some sort of punctuation was needed for the sentence which reads: "The next thing that she told my parents was that I was tone deaf and therefore it was out of the question for me to learn how to play the piano." Out of these 44, however, 15 teachers indicated the need for a comma after "deaf"; 2 wanted a comma after "and"; 7 called for commas both before and after "therefore"; 12 wanted a comma only after "therefore"; 1 suggested commas in all three places; and 7 more underlined the entire "deaf and therefore" chunk and simply wrote "punctuation" above, making it impossible for us to tell whether the error was the omission of one comma, two, or three.

A surprising lack of agreement about mid-sentence punctuation involved final free modifiers, a syntactical construction found in enough sentences in this paper to be considered a characteristic of the writer's style:

My parents pleaded with her saying that I would practice all the harder. . . .

I seemed to have been progressing quite well, learning all classical music.

But, now comes the hard part putting in the harmony with the left hand.

This cleared up my mind allowing me to try some new tactics.

Forty-eight teachers accepted the comma in the second sentence without objection, but only 31 called for a comma for the third sentence, 20 for the fourth, and only 15 for the first. Another 7 teachers objected to the comma in the second sentence, and 8 suggested revising the fourth to read: "... the hard part of putting in the harmony. . . ." We can't be sure why these responses are so inconsistent. Perhaps readers were struggling with other, more puzzling problems. But perhaps, too,
the evidence of the high-consensus markings suggests that placing commas after elements at the beginning of sentences has been more commonly learned, perhaps even overgeneralized to a rule, while punctuation of other parts of the sentence—invoking, perhaps, less familiar constructions and labels—represents a kind of knowledge that is a lot less firm.

Medium-Consensus Errors

The majority of errors in this category were errors in style/structure and in logic/clarity. Often these were the most interesting errors to analyze because of the way they reveal readers making error judgments based on their active constructions of the text’s ideal, “intended” meaning. These interpretations vary particularly where, as Hull puts it, the reader must “intuit” that something is wrong. These variations typically mean that different places in the text will be marked and different labels attached, depending upon the kind of revision the reader feels is necessary.

A wonderful example of a sentence that these teachers reconstructed in different ways is the one that begins the essay’s second paragraph: “My parents pleaded with her saying that I would practice all the harder, would she please let have at least a chance at it.” Some of the suggested revisions were:

My parents, saying that I would practice all the harder, pleaded with her.... [error label: dangling participle]

My parents pleaded with her. “If my child would practice all the harder, would she please ...” [revision advice: change indirect to direct quotation]

... saying that I would practice all the harder if she would please ... [various labels, mostly “usage” or “omitted words”]

My parents pleaded with her, saying that I would practice all the harder. Would she please let me have at least a chance at it? [change punctuation to make two sentences, add omitted word]

... would she please let me have at least a chance? [wordy or awkward structure, omitted word]

These stylistic/structural revisions address problems that readers have with the form of the sentence, but they do not question what the writer says. Problems of the latter sort, “comprehending” errors, were often, we found, problems that extended not only beyond the single word or space but beyond the sentence, indeed, to the meaning of much or all of the essay.
One such problem of clarity is the question about the tone of the whole piece. Is it a joke? Just how seriously are we to take the writer's assertions that she had great difficulty learning "Mary Had a Little Lamb," that after five years of piano practice the most she could accomplish was a variation on "Heart and Soul," and that these songs represent "all classical music"? There are hints at the essay's beginning that perhaps the story is being told in a tongue-in-cheek or tall-tale fashion, poking fun at parents who believe that talent can be acquired and who virtually dragoon their daughter into weekly piano lessons — even in face of the bad news that she is tone deaf! Some cues to a possible humorous reading are features that we associate with oral storytelling, such as sarcastic exaggeration ("enlisted" instead of "enrolled") and dropping into the present tense ("my parents decided its time . . ."). The problem is that these cues (if we are reading them that way) are inconsistent; they disappear from the text. By the end of the second paragraph, about half our readers found themselves simply confused about the experience being described: "This is not classical music." "Unclear how this relates to a nursery rhyme." "Not exactly an 'error,' bu' makes no sense." The result is that by the end of the piece, the writer's claims to an achievement of "total creativity" are simply unconvincing: "Is this the lesson?" "Is 'Heart and Soul' the be-all and end-all?"

Comments like these about logic and clarity show how much readers depend on culturally established textual cues to guide them in constructing meaning. But there was another kind of problem with meaning in this case, which came from a very different source: the gap between what the writer and the reader knew about her topic. The problem involved the sentences in paragraph three, where the writer describes the techniques of her piano practice:

Much to my surprise I was able to sit down at the piano and work on the right hand which is the melody of the song. Of course there was no problem on that hand, since that as the part of the piece well known.

Here, hand seems to have a different, specialized meaning: not a part of the body but a musical part — "the melody [and, we would also suppose, the harmony] of the song." Readers who either did not know this bit of musical jargon or who refused to accept the writer's definition objected not only to the confusion of "part" and "hand," revising so as to make them two different things; they objected as well to other constructions that also derive from making the two synonymous — for example, the phrasing of "work on the right hand." Some suggested revisions were:
... work on the right hand part, the melody of the song.

I was able to sit down at the piano and work on the right hand, the hand which delivers the melody of the song.

We wonder: Did the apparent absurdity of so much of the rest of the story undermine the writer's authority here, despite her efforts to provide a definition and head off confusion?

Finally, we ought to observe that many of these medium-consensus error markings reflect a higher agreement than we can see just from locating errorful places and counting markings. We need to look past these different forms of response and interpret the overall problem the readers seem to have with the essay. For one pair of sentences we have discussed (about "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "learning all classical music"), no one place was identified by more than 38% of the teachers as an error in logic/clarity. Yet if we take all logic/clarity error markings for those sentences into consideration, we find that the general consensus is much higher: 56.4% of all responses to these two portions of the text reflected some difficulty in understanding and accepting what the writer was saying about the nature of her musical instruction.

Low-Consensus Errors

Of all the places marked in this text as errorful, nearly three-quarters (74.6%) were marked by 20% or fewer of the teachers responding, and about two-thirds (63.5%) by fewer than 10%. To these low-count places we also add instances of labels that, even though attached to a place marked by many teachers, suggest a reading noticeably at odds with the majority of readers—a label, say, of "syntax" where most other labels for that place suggest that the problem is verb tense. If we take together the labels for places in the text with a low number of marks and the unusual labels attached to highly-marked places, the total figure is 31.9% of all error names. We begin to see why our range of "errors" was so broad, when we consider that nearly one in three analyses of the text can be considered unusual, even idiosyncratic.

Of these low-consensus responses, 35.7% seemed to refer to stylistic problems, 23.4% to problems of logic/clarity, 16.4% to punctuation errors, 8.1% to grammar, and 2.6% to spelling errors. Another 13.8% of these responses were unclassifiable.

We were not surprised that many of these low-consensus errors reflected objections to the style of the paper or to its logic, these being the kinds of responses more determined by personal taste and individual text interpretation. But we think other factors may be at work
as well, which would account for why these responses fall into the low-consensus range. Some readers may not have considered problems with style and logic as "errors," an attitude suggested by the label, "Not an error exactly, but makes no sense." We would speculate that even if readers had problems with the sense of the text, they might not have labeled these textual difficulties as "errors" for that reason. Some readers, too, may have felt pressured by the nature of the task itself to provide us with a label, even if they did not feel particularly expert about doing so; these could account for some of the unusual and unclassifiable responses. And, most especially, we have to take into account our understanding that, as we have already observed, many readers had difficulty with the substance of this paper, finding themselves confused by or in disagreement with the text, but that the kind of error analysis reflected by marks and labels varies depending upon the "intended" meaning being imagined. As Hull observes, these kinds of errors rarely fit neatly into "consulting" categories like "pronoun agreement" or "spelling." The fact that 59% of all low-consensus responses express problems with either logic or style (often hard to distinguish by label alone) suggests that these responses, however idiosyncratic, nevertheless are part of a general consensus about the problems this writer is having with making her meaning clear and credible.

Our results here, in other words, are ambiguous. On the one hand, we are struck by the great variety of highly individual responses to this text. Such variety underscores the validity of reader-response theory as a way of understanding what readers do with texts. But it also raises the question of whether a reader's problems with style and clarity ought to be considered as "errors" at all, rather than as responses more appropriately addressed to revision than to editing. We are not suggesting that teachers disguise problems they are having with a student's style and clarity. Rather, we suggest that as a profession, we remove the label of "error" from the second category entirely. This might give students a better sense of the kinds of responses to error that are conventional, i.e., that can be generalized to a set of rules or procedures students can reasonably expect will be shared among adult readers. At the same time, students might also better understand the distinction between these high-consensus perceptions of error and the inevitably more personal, individual responses to the style and logic of particular texts. They need to know about both if they are to be prepared realistically to write for audiences other than themselves; a crucial part of that preparation, we want to argue, is knowing the difference.
Error Labels

In analyzing the labels teachers used for high-consensus errors, we saw some labels appearing over and over: punctuation, commas, agreement, tense, wrong word, in particular. So, for some errors, it appeared that teachers did share a common vocabulary. Our concern, however, is the functionality such labels would have were they used on student papers. (We should remember, however, that this is hypothetical speculation, for we did not ask teachers to label errors as examples of their classroom practice, but as editors.) In many instances, these labels were used generically to refer to many different kinds of problems. For example, the label punctuation could be and was used to refer to needed or superfluous commas, hyphens, capitals, or quotation marks. Students might not, of course, interpret generic labels in the way that teachers intend.

Another problem had to do with areas that were high-consensus in terms of detection — that is, many teachers recognized that a problem existed — but low-consensus in terms of diagnosis — they tended to differ in their assessment of the nature of the problem. One example of this occurred in the second sentence of the essay: “They enlisted me in a musical program known as the once a week piano lesson,” with the phrase “once a week piano lesson.” Almost 80% of the teachers thought something was wrong here, but they differed, we infer from their labels, in what they thought the problem was. Some teachers preferred that the phrase be capitalized; others added quotation marks; others objected to wording, remarking, for example, that “weekly would be better”; others recommended that hyphens be inserted. And to return to the problem of ambiguous labels, some teachers simply commented “punctuation,” which could be interpreted a variety of ways.

Our point here isn’t to lobby for one interpretation of the error over another, but for the recognition that there are many gray areas where correctness and editing are concerned. Students do need to learn that there are some errors most readers see and about whose nature they will agree. But it is important also, we would argue, for students to be made aware that there are many gray areas where different readers — and teachers — will diagnose problems differently.

Another example of low-consensus diagnosis is the sentence, “My parents pleaded with her saying that I would practice all the harder, would she please let have at least a chance at it?” Teachers labeled the problem having to do with sentence structure — the juxtaposition of the “would she” clause with that part of the sentence preceding the
comma — in a variety of ways: comma splice, meaning unclear, grammar error, poor word choice, dangling participle, run-on sentence, sentence structure, word order. Clearly, the problem here is hard to diagnose, and there is no ready label to categorize it. But that is just our point. Many times errors are hard to diagnose, hard to label, and this is a phenomenon that teachers can be aware of and let their students know about. We are concerned about the fact that students often may have to learn not just to identify errors, but to see whole sets of labels as interchangeable, so that "comma splice" and "dangling participle" and "sentence structure" might all refer to the same problem. This fact, we suspect, is often hidden and unstated rather than openly acknowledged, and so perhaps feeds our students' sense that English teachers are picky and arbitrary. The variety of labels can also disguise those areas of textual problems (like certain forms of punctuation) that actually enjoy a fairly strong consensus among readers, again making teachers look more arbitrary and subjective about editing than they are.

As we said earlier, some of the idiosyncratic nature of the labels we saw may be due to the way our task asked for a label in the first place, even though the error perceived might not be of the "standard" sort that lends itself to easy identification. Nevertheless, when we analyzed l-œls for the medium- and low-consensus markings, we were struck by the difference between those responses which, however unusual or invented, render the reader's problem with the text clear and those which do not. We found that responses we felt were unclear or even unclassifiable could be put into four general categories.

One form of ambiguity was created when the labels and/or markings failed to indicate just how much text was considered errorful ("revise" written above a line without underlining) or just how many errors were indicated by a particular label. An example of the latter was the use of "punctuation" over the phrase "tone deaf and therefore" in the last sentence of the essay's first paragraph. As we mentioned earlier, such a vague label fails to indicate either the kind of punctuation in question or how many punctuation marks are missing.

A related category of ambiguity concerned responses that, instead of labeling an error, instruct the writer to revise without indicating either how or why this should be done: "change ending," "omit," "delete," or even, in some cases, marks through the text with no label or comment of any kind. Again, the reader of these responses has no way of knowing the nature of the error: Was a rule broken? A phrasing awkward or offensive? A vocabulary choice confusing? Or something else?
A frequent form of response (not surprisingly, considering the problems of clarity this essay poses) was one that simply noted that the choice of word is "wrong": "word choice," "phrasing," "wrong word." Here, we could see that the reader has some quarrel with the text as it stands, but it was often difficult to know why. Consider, for example, some of the responses to the sentence in the essay's last paragraph: "If there is something in this world that you want they go out and get it." Twelve teachers wrote wrong word over "they." Did they refer to a problem of pronoun agreement (imagined correction: "If there is something in this world that you want you go out and get it")? To a problem of misspelling, probably careless ("If there is something in this world that you want then go out and get it")? Both reconstructions appeared in many of the other responses to this error, but "wrong word" doesn't help us know which one the reader had in mind.

A fourth category of vague label consisted of teacher jargon words that are too imprecise to be useful to anyone trying to understand the reader's error analysis. Of 17 instances of the label "mechanics," for example, 1 seemed to refer to punctuation, 2 to logic, 1 to style, and 2 to grammar, while 11 more were unclassifiable even with the most generous guessing. We had similar problems with terms like 'grammar" and "usage"; they were too vague and appeared in too many different contexts to mean much more than just "error."

In criticizing these imprecise and unhelpful labels, we do not mean to suggest that unanimity among members of the profession about our jargon is desirable or even feasible. But we can't help but think that more could be done in teacher education and staff development to encourage teachers both to use specialized jargon more accurately where it is called for, and to do more to make clear what is to be corrected even where a ready-made label does not spring to mind. As this text makes especially evident, the irony is that should these teachers respond to their own students' writing with such vague, ambiguous, confusing, or otherwise unclear language, they would perpetuate the very problems of logic and clarity they condemn in student writing.

Which Errors Were Considered Most Serious, and Why?

Fifty-four teachers responded to our second major request: to name the three most serious errors in the text and to explain why these were serious. We left it up to them to decide if "most serious errors" meant single errors or types of error. Of those responses that we could
classify, 34.3% referred to errors in punctuation, 18.6% to grammar, and 1.4% to spelling, while 25.7% referred to errors in logic/clarity and 20% to style/structure. "Consulting" errors, then, appear to be the most serious problem for these teachers, seeming to confirm the popular impression of teachers as guardians of rules and orthodoxy in language.

When we look at why certain errors are considered serious, however, our picture of these teachers' concerns changes radically. Nearly three-quarters of their 140 classifiable responses (104, or 74.3%) said the errors in this text were serious because they got in the way of effective communication of meaning. Of these, 45.2% focused on the text itself; 40 answers indicated that errors were serious because they caused the text to lose meaning and precision: "Without proper punctuation the 'sense' of the sentence can become confusing"; "Author's intention isn't clear." Seven more responses said that error hurt other communicative potential of the text, such as style, credibility, or emphasis: "Destroys cohesion of both a story and an argument"; "If special phrases aren't set aside with quotes they can lose their special importance." A nearly equal number (53.8%) focused on the way that error impairs the reader's process of interpretation: "[The error is serious] because it causes the reader to stumble instead of smoothly following the thought (like hitting a pothole)." The remainder of the 104 answers either combined concerns for textual meaning and reader comprehension or complained of the effect on the reader when meaning wasn't clear: "Irritating to a reader and makes reading extra tedious"; "Makes the reading of the piece very difficult." But whether the responses focused on the text, the reader, or both, the overwhelming majority (86.5%) of these 104 responses regarded error as a serious barrier to meaning.

A second set of responses (16, or 11.4%) said the errors in this text were serious primarily because they represented some problem with the student's education: either she had failed to acquire a basic skill she would need to have, or she would find that this kind of error would pose basic problems for her as a writer: "If you have no sense (or an incomplete sense) of sentence structure, you can do nothing else."

Only a small minority of the teachers (14.3%) seemed to think of the seriousness of error primarily in terms of rules, taste, conventions, or simple frequency. We find that figure impressive—as impressive as the majority's high concern for meaning. It says that for this group of teachers, at least, correctness is not the matter of propriety and rules that it is often made out to be by the pop grammarians; we saw
very few expressions of offended taste, condescension, or ridicule. Instead, we find these teachers’ responses to be admirably student-centered: wanting to understand what this writer is trying to say and concerned about the course of her development.

Relating these results to the kinds of labels that the teachers used brings out clearly the irony of vague or ambiguous comments. But more important is the fact that even the more precise error labels failed to convey the readers’ concerns for effective communication: As we mentioned earlier, our initial impression from simply reading the labels of “most serious” errors was that these teachers were more concerned with rules than with meaning. While we do not assume that error-labeling is the method these teachers would use to respond to texts, we also recognize that error-marking is widely used in our profession as the teacher’s main method of teaching editing. Our results lead us to believe that such a practice, if precise and informed, can have the positive effect of teaching student: a common vocabulary for discussing textual problems with their teachers, peers, and, presumably, other readers in the future. But the labels alone are deeply misleading if the same students were to read them as indications of their teachers’ underlying concerns. Labels by themselves do not indicate that teachers’ apparent concerns for rules are really problems of trying to understand the meaning of the paper. As such, error labels are ineffective representations of why error is a serious problem for adult readers; if these teachers are at all representative of our profession, error markings do not teach what we most want our students to learn (see also Anson’s chapter in this volume).

What Difference Does Level of Teaching Make?

When we examined the responses for our three groups of teachers (elementary, secondary, and post-secondary) we saw some striking differences among them — so much so, in fact, that we feel justified in describing these three groups as different interpretive communities. Global counts of the errors that teachers marked suggest these differences. Although all three groups marked a wide range of errors, stretching from single digits for some teachers into the 50s for others, both mid-range and overall averages increased from elementary to secondary to post-secondary teaching. Fourteen of the 20 elementary teachers marked between 23 and 35 places in the text as errorful, while 17 of 25 secondary teachers marked between 28 and 43 such spots, compared to 5 of 10 post-secondary teachers who marked between 32 and 43 errors. Elementary teachers averaged 28.75 error markings; secondary teachers, 34.56; and post-secondary, 36.1.
The most striking difference we see in these global counts is the jump in average number of errors marked by elementary teachers and secondary teachers — an average difference of nearly six errors. This seems to us a big difference in response to error, and we wonder whether it would not create real problems both for students and teachers from the two levels who try to cooperate in some way. For example, secondary teachers sometimes complain that students are still making errors they should have had under control before leaving elementary school. Perhaps these complaints don’t take into account developmental differences and the kinds of errors that can accompany maturing style, but perhaps, too, there is a difference in specialization or practice, or both, that means these two groups of teachers really don’t see the same errors when they look at a text.

We also noted differences in the kinds of errors that teachers said were serious. Secondary teachers were only a little more likely to emphasize logic/clarity than elementary teachers, and this held both for their choices of serious errors and their explanations for why errors are serious. However, when secondary teachers chose the three errors they considered to be serious, and when they ranked the most serious of the three, their percentages for style/structure overall were approximately one and one-half times the corresponding percentages for elementary teachers. That is, 25.8% of the three serious errors that secondary teachers named had to do with style/structure, compared to 17.4% for elementary teachers. Secondary teachers considered style/structure as the most serious error 27.3% of the time, compared to 18.8% of the time for elementary teachers.

We see these responses as possible reflections of the particular challenges faced by teachers at different grade levels. Secondary teachers might reasonably expect their students to have mastered the basics for written discourse; their students’ problems are more likely to be stylistic, at the level of the sentence, or rhetorical problems of logic, organization, and diction at the paragraph or whole-essay level. In secondary school, too, there is an increasing emphasis upon expository or “transactional” writing (Applebee 1984; Britton et al. 1975; Emig 1971), an emphasis often justified by expectations that this will be the kind of writing demanded later in life, in college and/or on the job. It is a style of writing that, in its forms of organization and impersonal diction, is highly artificial, a kind of translation (as Britton and his colleagues argue) away from the more personal style and associative or narrative organization of expressive discourse. It is not surprising, then, that style would be an important concern for secondary teachers.
Elementary teachers, on the other hand, were more concerned than secondary teachers with what we have called "consulting" errors in grammar and punctuation. Of the errors elementary teachers considered serious, 34.8% were mistakes in grammar, compared to 18.2% for secondary teachers. Another 43.5% of the errors elementary teachers said were serious were punctuation mistakes, compared to 37.9% for secondary teachers. The difference between groups is especially visible for those who chose punctuation as the most serious error: for elementary teachers, 68.8%; for secondary teachers, 40.9%. Even with this student writer's numerous and repeated punctuation difficulties, which would probably lead teachers to consider this category of error serious, the difference between groups is striking.

Again, we would speculate that these responses reflect the special sentence-level problems that elementary-school teachers must face when dealing with the texts of very young and inexperienced writers. As Glenda Bissex (1980) acknowledges in the title of her book, *Genys at Wrk* ("Genius at Work"), these teachers have to be creative and generous readers if they are to get at the meanings behind their students' invented spellings and irregular or missing punctuation. It is not surprising, then, that elementary teachers do not say this text is particularly puzzling to understand, but focus their concerns instead on basic grammar and on punctuation, one of the major visual features of written discourse that young writers struggle to learn.

The other big difference in the kinds of errors marked occurred between teachers at the elementary and secondary level and post-secondary teachers. In contrast to the other two groups, the professors did not focus concern on violations of written conventions; what bothered them was their own difficulty in making sense of the text. Overwhelmingly, the professors seemed to care about logic/clarity; 81.5% said an error was serious because it caused the text to be unclear or made it confusing to read, compared to 62.5% of the elementary teachers and 58.5% of the secondary teachers. When citing serious errors, professors mentioned cliches that "add nothing that was not said in the previous sentence"; lack of clarity when subjects and verbs don't agree; lack of clarity associated with word choice, with adjectives ranging from "imprecise" and "incorrect" to "incoherent" and "unintelligible."

We do not, of course, expect professors in the content areas to sound like English teachers or to share the same concerns in teaching their own students. College professors typically expect their students to be ready to handle written prose competently, and so this group's focus on content rather than mechanics of diction is, again, what we would
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expect. But we also feel a certain concern about the very different kinds of response we see when we compare professors as readers to the secondary teachers. We do not want to suggest that high-school teachers are wrong to be concerned with form and style; we do want to raise the question of whether, in the process, they clearly connect style to meaning, to the transaction between reader and writer. This might better prepare college-bound secondary students for the kinds of readers they will encounter in the future.

In summary, our data suggest that the readers that students can expect to have for their writing will differ as they move from grade to grade. Teachers at different levels represent different discourse communities, to some extent. In general, as students move up in grade level, they will get more marks on their papers and the kinds of labels they receive will change, shifting from grammar and orthography to style and then to logic/clarity. This shift may contribute, we suspect, to the sense many students seem to have that there is something mysterious and even arbitrary about being "correct," something arcane that teachers all know about but that students are not a party to. Certainly, if these data are representative, teachers might do more to concern themselves with preparing students for how their writing will be read at the next educational level.

What Difference Does Training in the Composing Process Make?

We asked elementary and secondary teachers if they had had some kind of training in teaching the composing process — in-service, a college course, etc. — and 28 (11 elementary teachers and 17 secondary teachers) reported that they had. Sixteen (8 elementary teachers and 8 secondary teachers) reported that they had not.

Such training doesn't seem to make much difference in the range of errors marked. However, we began to see possible effects of being trained in the composing process when we compared responses on which errors are serious. For both overall averages (8.3 vs. 19.7) and for first choice of a serious error (8.3 vs. 19.2), teachers who had had some training were more than twice as likely to see logic/clarity as the paper's problem. This contrast is especially striking at the secondary level, where four times as many teachers who had been trained in the composing process said logic/clarity was a serious error compared to nontrained teachers (21.3% vs. 5.3%). Of trained secondary teachers, 64.4% said error was serious because the text became unclear or confusing, compared to 50.0% of nontrained teachers. Also, 75.6% of trained secondary teachers said error impeded communication, compared to 55.0% of nontrained secondary teachers. Further, when
explaining why communication problems are serious, the trained teachers seem more likely than the untrained ones to speak in terms of problems created for the reader rather than of problems in the text. Again, this gap increases at the secondary level, where 51.1% of trained secondary teachers were concerned with problems created for the reader as opposed to 35.0% of the untrained secondary teachers.

We interpret these figures as suggestions that the composing-process training does convince teachers that there is more to responding to student writing than just marking errors, and that what the student has to say is important. However, we saw some other differences between groups that we have trouble interpreting. Elementary teachers who were not trained in the composing process were more concerned with logic/clarity as a reason for the seriousness of error than were those who had been trained (75.0% vs. 53.6%); they were also more likely overall to say that error is serious because it impairs communication (85.0% vs. 60.7%). This is the reverse of the findings for secondary teachers and perhaps can be read as another indication that elementary and secondary teachers are members of different discourse communities.

What Responses Don’t Say

Whenever we ask people to describe how a particular reality appears to them — in this case, what constitutes “errors” in a text — we need to ask ourselves not only what their responses might mean, but also what they are not saying, the issues or possibilities that they slight or ignore. In the case of this research, we see these things not said in three important ways.

First, hardly anyone raised the issue of the context for writing — what the assignment was, how much time the writer had to write, whether this was a first draft, or whether any time elapsed between the composing of the text and its proofreading. We did not mention these issues ourselves, except to say that “the student who wrote the essay had time to proofread it.” But none of the teachers mentioned these issues either, although the constraints of both time and task are known to affect writing performance.

Second, as we mentioned earlier, few responses indicated a concern for the student’s level of development; most who did comment on what students know or don’t know (or typically do) seemed to be referring either to some unspecified “student” or to writers they had seen in their own classes. Yet, we would argue, the issue of whether the errors in this text are serious depends, at least in part, upon the
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age of the writer. A junior-high student who is not quite sure how to punctuate song titles or introductory clauses might be just average, but for most college-level writers, such problems might instead be viewed as remedial. Similarly, the blurred syntactical pattern, My parents pleaded with her saying that I would practice all the harder, would she please let have at least a chance at it, might be a sign of a basic writer attempting to stretch beyond simple sentence patterns toward the complexity of mature prose, as Shaughnessy (1977) and Bartholomae (1980) have argued; but for an average twelfth grader or college freshman, the failure to catch and revise such a sentence might more appropriately be viewed as evidence of proofreading laziness. One professor recognizes this connection between errors and what he can usually expect from college-level students when he writes, “By my standards for undergraduate papers (assuming proofreading): extremely poor.” But such comments were rare.

Finally, we were struck by the lack of connection between the genre of the text and what was deemed an “error.” James Britton and his colleagues (1975) have argued persuasively that the style, organization, and diction of a written text are directly related to the function of the writing. They identify three major functions (although in practice these may overlap):

1. **Expressive writing** is personal writing that expresses and explores the writer’s own inner feelings, thoughts, values, and memories. In both organization and style, expressive writing is often similar to spoken language.

2. **Transactional writing** is writing that serves the purposes of getting something done — informing, giving instructions, persuading an audience. It is usually public writing directed at others; “expository prose” comes close to meaning the same thing.

3. Finally, **poetic writing** is what we more ordinarily call “literature.” Its function is to be a well-made, esthetically pleasing artifact, although its specific conventions may vary from genre to genre.

When we ask ourselves what function of writing this particular text might be said to serve, our answer is that it seems mostly expressive, with a very brief attempt at the end to generalize in a way that moves toward the transactional. But what does that interpretation have to do with how we determine the errors in this text? Quite a lot, we’d say. The paper’s expressive function does not account for or excuse the writer’s failure to observe punctuation conventions or mistakes such as writing “preformed” instead of “performed.” But many of the
writer’s choices that readers objected to on grounds of diction or sense look quite different if we see this piece as a humorous example of first-person storytelling, one close in style to oral discourse: the writer’s exaggerated representation of herself as having been drafted into music lessons (“[My parents] enlisted me in a musical program”); her inclusion of expressions that typically link pieces of dialogue, such as “well” and “of course” and “by all means”; the underscoring of certain words to achieve emphasis (“total creativity,” “Goal!”); the breezily informal diction (“take me on,” “cleared up my mind”); and even the shifting of verb tenses, the kind one hears from someone recreating a story (“my parents decided that its time . . .” and “now comes the hard part . . .”). Few subjects, however, gave the effects of the text’s generic function much mention, and those that did rarely connected it to the problem of determining error. Forty-five of our 55 subjects wrote brief responses to the final request to “please comment on this student’s overall strengths and weaknesses as a writer.” Taking these comments together with their responses to Part II about serious errors, we see that 17 subjects seemed to have what might be called all-purpose standards for good writing. For these teachers, the strengths of the paper were matters such as “paragraphing,” “organization of theme,” and “good sentence structure,” and, similarly, the major weaknesses were matters such as “punctuation” or “grammar.” Nineteen subjects did refer to one or more elements of expressive storytelling, such as narrative structure, vivid description, use of specific details, and the expression of the writer’s feelings. But it is not clear that these comments formed any evaluative framework for determining what was or was not an error in the text. Finally, a small group of 8 subjects did make what we would consider connections between function and the writer’s achievement: 2 elementary teachers, 3 secondary teachers, and 3 professors. The problems in this essay with logic, sentence-level coherence, cliches, and punctuation are important because, these teachers argue, the student is trying to appeal to the reader to share her ideas and feelings about this story, and the errors she makes get in the way. Further, as one response suggests, writing a story is not quite the same as telling it; what is acceptable in one kind of discourse becomes an error in another:

The strength of this piece is its conversational tone. I can imagine listening to someone say all of this, and I’d have understood what was to be conveyed. Paradoxically, this student’s verbal impact does not transfer well into prose.
We don't suggest that there are no standards common to all good writing; carefulness in proofreading and orthodoxy in spelling (unless one is writing in dialect) are conventions with which we have no argument. But there are so many kinds of writing in the world, for so many purposes, that it seems unworkable to imagine all-purpose rules for word choice or organization. More to the point, as we see in many of these responses, many seemingly universal standards are really specific to transactional prose and would hardly be appropriate in any other kinds of writing. Instead of using many absolute labels like "wrong word" or "not necessary," teachers might try instead to help students differentiate between the kinds of errors that can be found in any kind of writing and "errors" that are really violations of genre conventions. This student, for example, might be asked to "translate" her story into both a poem and a prose argument, in order to be able to consider what in the process has to change and what remains the same.

Conclusions: The Dream of a Common Language

We do not offer here extensive advice about how students are to be taught what error is and what to do about it. We assume that part of the work of education is helping students understand that written language is governed by rules and conventions. We also assume that teachers, schools, and districts must decide how much of such instruction should be in the form of explicit teaching and how much implicit in ways that teachers and students talk about student papers.

Our concern is this: Whether conventions and their violations ("error") are addressed out of context (by drill or discussion of workbook examples) or in the context of particular student texts (in conference, class discussion, or by means of written remarks), teachers and students need a shared language. They need a common vocabulary that will inevitably be somewhat specialized and precise, i.e., a jargon. And they need a commonly understood set of procedures that will signal more than the jargon alone can express — understandings about, for instance, the ways that error boundaries can be marked or about how to distinguish those teacher responses that are relatively conventional from those that express more individual readings of style and content. Without such a language and such procedures for using it, we would all be as hapless as those philosophers encountered by Gulliver who pointed to objects they carried about in sacks instead of using words to represent them.
But the research we have reported here and the work of other colleagues in the field suggest that we can no longer take the existence of such a common language for granted. And so our conclusion is both obvious and radical: We think that student teachers and teaching staffs need to put aside their handbooks and lists of error symbols and talk among themselves about what they mean by "error" in student texts. To what extent do they share common assumptions about what is to be labeled an error? What do they call the errors they see and the conventions that these errors imply? Which kinds of errors do they consider serious, and why? When they speak together, are they talking about the same thing? Then, perhaps, teachers might also consider their own classrooms as interpretive communities. When they talk to their students about error and its seriousness, instead of testing students to see if they "got" it, they might ask: How do the students really hear what they say? How do students interpret their teachers' interpretations?

We suggest, in other words, what many others have said before about improving the teaching of writing: that teachers become researchers of their own teaching contexts. They need to be aware of what they do and how this is perceived by their colleagues and students, and they need to do this before they address issues of what textbooks say or should say, what they could do in their classrooms, or whether what they have been doing improves student writing. We can only teach what we know, and (as Ann Berthoff likes to say) until we know our knowledge, questions about how and why to teach it are not useful because they are not well founded.

We realize that these suggestions may seem controversial and even threatening. Some participants in our study, for example, expressed concern lest our research be seen as advocating a return to the drill-for-skill approach that the composing-process movement has sought to replace. Their fear is that if we talk about error, we will focus our colleague's attention on rote learning instead of on composing and interpretation. But our analysis of teacher responses suggests that this is far from the case. These responses reveal how much error-identification entails an active interpretation of a writer's ideal, "intended" meaning, a reader's act of composing.

Our data also imply the many ways that students must be active interpreters of their teachers' responses, readers of their readers. Students must, for example, understand that for particular teachers errors may have several different and interchangeable names; that different teachers may name the same kinds of errors differently; that certain jargon terms like "usage" have different meanings depending
upon the teacher; that what teachers consider an error in writing may vary considerably; that a teacher's labels may be imprecise or even missing, so that they must be attentive to other cues such as boundary markings or questions to infer the kind of error the teacher perceives; that suggested revisions or comments like "wrong word" imply a version of the text that the teacher is constructing, not exactly the one they wrote or intended; and that even if all errors are identified with labels, some require consulting a rule or convention to be corrected while others involve revisions that are more negotiable. In short, we suspect that students who have the most success with editing are those who learn all these unwritten procedures so they can interpret their teachers' comments the way successful readers read any text: holistically, constructing meaning by perceiving larger patterns.

Re-seeing teaching about error as a form of reading instruction may raise, however, a different set of fears. To admit that error is not the binary matter of interpretation it is often thought to be may seem to threaten a loss of authority in the classroom and in the staff room. To admit that the teaching community is divided in its practices and that texts are not univocal when it comes to error may open the profession to the same "vision of political anarchy" that has bedeviled teachers of literature ever since the advent of reader response and other post-structuralist forms of criticism (Crosman 1980, 157-59). But again, this research leads us to feel that fears of "relativism and solipsism" would be exaggerated. The teachers we surveyed perceived clear patterns of error or the kinds of textual problems that can be corrected by referring to a handbook or dictionary; their sense of what was conventional in matters of grammar and punctuation was widely shared, even when their expression of it could have been more precise. We saw patterns, too, even for those responses that initially seemed to reflect a much lower consensus, comments about style or clarity. Even though responses to perceived problems of style and clarity took numerous forms and varied in how the error was located, we saw that many teachers shared a general sense of the kinds of difficulties this student was having in making herself clear, even if they did not express these perceptions in the same way.

Finally, we want to repeat a conclusion we drew earlier in the chapter because it is so important: focusing instruction on identifying and correcting errors (as is so often done) may disguise the striking kind of agreement expressed by so many of these teachers about the real reason to teach editing—to ensure that what the student has to say is understood by her reader. Despite the apparent evidence of the error labels, these teachers were not bent on socializing the student at
the expense of her self-expression. Their values were as generous and as student-centered as any that have been advocated by proponents of teaching invention and revision. Would that not be heartening for more of us to discover?

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Note


References


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Appendix A

We are interested in learning how errors in writing are recognized and labeled. By errors, we mean mistakes in grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling, mechanics, and usage.

On the following pages is a short editing exercise and questionnaire. Please take all the time you need to work through it.

Please note: Although we want to study how errors are recognized and labeled, we don't mean to suggest by our interest in this topic that teachers should or should not mark errors in students' papers. We understand that teachers respond to much more than sentence-level error when they read and comment on student papers and that they may sometimes choose not to respond to error at all.

Part I

On the next page is a sample student paper. We'd like you to:

1. Read through the paper one time just to get a sense of what it's about.
2. Then, read the paper again in order to identify its errors. Specifically, we'd like you to:
   • Underline each error that you see in the paper. Make sure that you underline the entire error, so that we can see where you think each error begins and ends.
   • Label each error right above the underlining. By label we mean supply the term you think of when you see that kind of error. Please give the label in full; don't use abbreviations.

Note. In this part of the exercise we are asking you to respond to an essay, not as a teacher, but as an error analyst. That is, we're interested here in seeing which errors you identify and how you label them. We're NOT interested here in how you would deal with this piece of writing if the student who wrote it were a student in your class. So, even if you wouldn't mark every error or any error if the student were one of your own, please underline and label the errors for us for the sake of the exercise.

Part II

We're not only interested in what errors people see and how they label them, but in which errors teachers consider the most serious and what they do about them. Look over the student essay again, and from among those errors you have already labeled, choose the three errors that you consider most serious. (Please assume that the student who wrote the essay had time to proofread it, that is, the errors that remain in the paper represent mistakes that the student couldn't correct on her own.)

Then, on the next page, after you have chosen the three errors that you consider the most serious,

1. Describe the error and tell us the line(s) in which it appears.
2. Tell us why you believe the error is serious. (Is it an error that would offend a lot of readers, for example? Is it an error that is difficult for
students to learn to correct? Is it an error that makes the text hard to understand as you read? Or something else?)

3. Tell us how you would address the error with the student. (Some ways of addressing the error might be to mark or write on the student's paper in some way, create a lesson for the whole class, refer the student to a handbook or assign him workbook exercises, or work with the student in a conference in some way.)

A. Most Serious Error
   1. Description of the error and the line(s) in which it appears:
   2. Why it's serious:
   3. Way(s) of addressing the error with the student:

B. Second Choice
   1. Description of the error and the line(s) in which it appears:
   2. Why it's serious:
   3. Way(s) of addressing the error with the student:

C. Third Choice
   1. Description of the error and the line(s) in which it appears:
   2. Why it's serious:
   3. Way(s) of addressing the error with the student:

Part III

Now that you've read the essay, please comment on this student's overall strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

Appendix B

When I was in the fifth grade my parents decided that it's time for me to acquire a musical talent. They enlisted me in a musical program known as the once a week piano lesson. At first I was excited about this idea until I met the piano teacher. She had me sit down at the piano beside her while she played notes and asked me to sing that note. The next thing that she told my parents was that I was tone deaf and therefore it was out of the question for me to learn how to play the piano.

My parents pleaded with her saying that I would practice all the harder, would she please let have at least a chance at it. Well with all their pleading the piano teacher gave in and decided to take me on as her student. Next began the difficult task of learning Mary Had a Little Lamb. I seemed to have been progressing quite well, learning all classical music.

Five years later came my experience of total creativity at the piano. My piano teacher had asked me to prepare a variation of the song Heart and Soul. She obviously thought that I was capable of doing this. Much to my surprise I was able to sit down at the piano and work on the right hand which is the melody of the song. Of course there was no problem on that
hand, since that as the part of the piece well known. But, now comes the hard part putting in the harmony with the left hand. Forget it was all I kept saying. I had been spending hour after after trying to put the two hands together, but nothing worked. Finally, I decided to take a break. This cleared up my mind allowing me to try some new tactics. I decided to play songs I already knew and enjoyed. After doing so, I went back to Heart and Soul. Believe it or not ! finally came up with an original addition to it. At my lesson I preformed my version of Heart and Soul. She was astounded. "My I never heard it played so well and I told you you were tone deaf."

From this I have learned a great lesson. If there is something in this world that you want they go out and get it. By all means if you are creative about it you will in the end achieve your Goal!