

Undergraduate Writing:

An Analysis of Errors and Weaknesses in Syntax, Lexis, Style and Structure

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Introduction

Essays are a common currency of assessment at third level. They serve to evaluate what students have learnt and, more importantly, to assess how learners can critically apply, evaluate and discuss this knowledge. Writing tasks at third level also help students to clarify and to externalise their thinking about a given topic. It has been argued that writing about a topic helps students to discover what they really believe (Moran 1997: 119). In order to function at this level of writing, students need to be adept in the established process of writing. There is also tacit knowledge which they need to acquire about the new requirements for writing at this level, for example, how to refer to other sources.

Within the genre of academic writing, there is a qualitative difference between what is required of a secondary school composition compared with a university essay. Some students intuitively sense this difference, but unfortunately, many do not. This paper sets out to examine a sample of first-year history essays in order to detail the types of errors and weaknesses which frequently occur. The analysis will focus mainly on problems at sentence and paragraph level in the areas of syntax, lexis and style; it will also examine how ideas within the essay are structured.

Background

There are many reasons why students underachieve at third level. Barrass (1995: 1) states that many students perform below their ability not because of low motivation or lack of effort, but because they do not pay enough attention to improving their competence in communicating their thoughts in writing.

The genesis of this study comes from dissatisfaction on the part of lecturers at Mary Immaculate College with undergraduate essay writing skills. It was felt that students needed some academic support in their transition from second to third level writing. A needs analysis was carried out and a foundation course in academic writing was designed and implemented for first year Arts undergraduates.

The Data

Data comes from a large corpus of undergraduate essays collected for analysis since 1996. For the purposes of this paper the sample has been limited to twenty-five history essays. This history module is open to first-year Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education undergraduates. Only pass grade essays were examined, in which students scored less than an honours grade of 55 out of 100. All informants were in their first college year in the academic year 1996/97. The essays were typed by requirement and had a word limit of 1000 words. The essay titles were: '*Women in early Ireland were given unequal but not unfair treatment*'. *Do you agree?*' and '*Estimate the impact of the Vikings on Ireland*'. Henceforth, *H1* will be used after examples to indicate the former essay and *H2* will denote the latter.

Method of Analysis

Error analysis was conducted at the levels of syntax, lexis, style and essay structure. Error types were tagged in the case of syntactic, lexical and stylistic problems. Structure was viewed qualitatively, for example, in terms of how an essay dealt with the central question posed in the title. It must be stressed that the results of this analysis remain tentative. At a later stage more comprehensive research needs to be conducted. In this case, the objective is to examine, in an intensive way, a small sample of empirical data in order to identify typical errors and weaknesses. In the future, the results of this pilot investigation can be tested longitudinally against a much larger sample.

It is a fair criticism that an analysis based solely on writing as a product is never complete since it takes no account of the recursive process involved including planning, drafting, revising etc. (see Kavanagh 1995: 75). Regrettably, research such as Kavanagh (1995) has shown that the majority of teachers, in his study of a selection of primary schools in Dublin, do not engage in a process approach to the teaching of writing. This must have telling implications for students' writing habits at later stages of education.

The Analysis

In this section, there are four main areas under which the data is analysed: syntax, lexis, style and structure. Under each of these headings, there is an outline of typical errors and weaknesses with authentic examples.

Syntax

Richards et al (1992: 370) define syntax as ‘the study of how words combine to form sentences and the rules which govern the formation of sentences’. This category is sub-divided into the constituent error types most commonly found in the corpus of essays.

(1) Spelling

- **Spellchecker-proof errors**

As stated earlier, students were required to submit their essays in typed form. Obviously, the use of word processors greatly reduces spelling errors. However, spellchecker-proof errors still exist. Here are some examples:

*Of course, **there** arrival would have caused initial confusion* [H2.2/4]
*...Irish women **faired** particularly well* [H1.18/1]
*The Vikings did **steel** from the monasteries but ...* [H2.10/2]

The existence of this type of error could be symptomatic of writing which has not gone through a process of review and editing. Equally, it could be indicative of poor spelling skills for which a spellchecker cannot fully compensate. In order to avoid the above errors, the writer needs to have an awareness of homophones (their/there; fared/faired; steal/steel). It could be argued that the spellchecker facility has, in many ways, disempowered writers by luring them into a false sense of security about the accuracy of the software.

- **Bound Grammatical Morpheme**

There is evidence of spelling errors which result from students’ lack of language awareness. In the example below, the writers are not aware of the morphological difference between **-ice** (noun: practice) and **-ise** (verb: practise).

*A woman had to be monogamous but a man could **practice** polygamy.* [H1.3/2]
*Polygamy was widely **practiced** in early Irish society...* [H1.19/1]

- **Possessive ’s,**

Oversimplification may explain some of the confusion in this area, that is, where a writer over-extends a rule and is not aware of exceptions and variations. For instance, in an essay on the impact of the Vikings on Ireland, the following errors were found:

*...and enriched **it’s** existing culture.* [H2.11/2]
*At the same time, their **idea’s**...* [H2.11/1]

We see that ’s is used in every context of possession. In the same text, we find *it’s* used in the normal way meaning *it is* (see below).

*I believe **it’s** due...to the communal sense...* [H2.11/1]

Another error type in this area comes from avoiding the issue of where to put an apostrophe (see examples below). From the writer’s point of view, omitting the apostrophe will not have as

negative an impact as inserting it in the wrong position. In any case, it stands a good chance of not being noticed by the corrector.

...on the Vikings effect on Ireland. [H2.2/3]
...her husbands actions... [H1.1/1]
...her fathers land... womens rights [H1.2/2]
... the mans honour price [H1.19/1]

It is worth noting that spellcheckers are very inconsistent in picking up these errors.

- **Capitalisation**

Due to linguistic interference from the Irish language, it is common for Irish students to capitalise the seasons in English.

...Normally they would arrive in Ireland for the Spring, leave in the Autumn and remain in Scandinavia for Winter. [H2.1/1]

- **American versus British English Conventions**

Mixing of American and British English spelling conventions is evident:

These included clothes and jewelry which could be given as a pledge... [H1.8/1]
... it is evident that the center of Irish intellectual life... [H2.10/2]

The earlier example of *practice/practise* error under the heading of ‘Bound Grammatical Morpheme’ could also be as a result of confusion between British and American conventions.

(2) Punctuation

- **The Breathing Method of Punctuation**

It is a widely pronounced dictum that punctuation can be based on where you would take a breath if speaking. Some writers assume that if you can say a sentence without taking a breath, then you can write it without using any punctuation. This may sometimes be the case, but it would be far more enabling for students if they were introduced to the notion of sentence structure and how it relates to punctuation. In the corpus of essays, many instances can be found where students avoid punctuating a sentence. One can deduce that either they simply do not see the need for punctuation or that they are using the ‘breathing method’.

So if there was a break up in the marriage then the woman would be compensated and would receive compensation in accordance to the amount of work she would have done. [H1.3/3]

Also for example it was considered a much more serious crime to murder a woman rather than a man and the offenders hand or foot could be cut off as punishment. [H1.14/1]

The records of the Norse/Irish co-operation suggested that the Norse of the coastal settlements filled into the political structure of the country very much as if they had been Irish tribes. [H2.9/3]

The following examples might be plausible when spoken, but they clearly do not work when written. Prosodic exponents, such as intonation and word stress, would disambiguate these

sentences in spoken form. Unfortunately, these writers are not sensitive to the nuances of writing as a distinct medium:

When the Vikings began to settle their metalwork was copied by the Irish. [H2.7/2]

In conclusion I would like to point out that much of the evidence we have of the Vikings is while contemporary, severely biased. [H2.11/3]

Their movements moreover were so sudden and quick, that they generally made their escape before the people had time to intercept them. [H2.1/1]

(3) Maintaining Grammatical Parallelism

Good writing style demands that corresponding ideas within a sentence be expressed in parallel grammatical form (for a detailed treatment, see Mohr 1998:120). An example of this is the lack of parallel between the nouns ‘*marriage*’ and ‘*unions*’ in the following example:

*...a detailed description of the many different types of **marriage and unions** that were permitted in Irish law.* [H1.20/1]

It would be better to have both nouns in plural form: ‘*marriages and unions*’. In the example below, we see parallel between ‘*...result of a man being*’ with the adjectives ‘*sterile*’ and ‘*impotent*’, but this does not extend to the third item ‘*spoke to others about the marital bed*’.

*A woman could divorce her husband for varied reasons for example divorce could be result [sic] of a man being sterile, impotent, **spoke to others about the marital bed** or...* [H1.14/3]

If it were grammatically parallel, it would be: ‘***speaking to others about the marital bed***’.

(4) Concord

Concord refers to a grammatical relationship in which the form of one element requires the corresponding form of another, for example, agreement between subject and verb: **she eats**, the **boy has**...and so on. Many instances of such agreement errors were found:

*Was there [sic] **attacks** exaggerated?* [H2.9/3]

***Women** were not capable of sale, purchase, contract or transaction without the authority of **her** superior.* [H1.3/2]

***Women** also had half the honour price of **her** male superior...* [H1.4/1]

*...e.g. Greece and Rome where women had not as **much** rights...* [H1.4/1]

*There **was**, however, good **aspects** to their presence...* [H2.1/5]

*One of the **situations** that **reflect** that women were fairly treated, was the way in which...* [H1.8/2]

(5) Tense

Writers display widespread problems with tenses, most notable is the lack of consistency with time reference.

*If a woman **marries** a stranger her freedom **was curtailed** she **has** only a land interest while she **is** alive (Present Simple, Past Simple, Present Simple X 2) [H1.1/2]*

*The husband **cannot buy** or **sell** without first consulting his wife, she **is** completely free to eradicate any deals her husband **has made** without her knowledge. The wife **is** constantly aware ... They **must consult** each other at all times. On the other hand, females **were** also **allowed** to retain their common property ... If the husband **takes** her land and **sells** it, she **can** immediately **divorce** him for compensation ... These profits **were divided** ... The wife always **received** some amount as she **provided** some of the labour.*

(Present Simple X 2, Present Perfect, Present Simple X 2, Past Simple, Present Simple X 3, Past Simple X 3)

[H1.2./1]

*...when the Vikings **begin** their raids on Europe the vast majority of their plundering **seems** to support survival...(Present Simple X2) [H2.2/1]*

*But out of the decline of metal work **appeared** ... stone work, ... there **is** a revival of metal work in the 11th and 12th centuries which **has** a strong Viking influence... (Past Simple, Present Simple X2) [H2.9/2]*

Lexis

Lexis refers to the vocabulary of a language as opposed to its grammar. In this paper, the area of lexis is dealt with as a separate item even though the errors overlap with other categories.

(1) Register

Register can be generally defined as the relationship between language features and their context (McCarthy 1998: 26). Aspects of register include levels of formality and differences between written and spoken language (see Halliday 1978; Biber 1988; Biber 1995). Biber (1995: 7) defines register in the general sense of situationally defined varieties. In the current analysis, we are examining the genre of academic writing where the level of language is formal and where certain lexical items and syntactic structures are more frequently used (for further details see Carter and McCarthy 1997: 115; Biber et al 1998: 135). The formality demanded in the context of academic writing limits writers in terms of the words and expressions they can use. Experienced writers have absorbed these limits. In the corpus of essays, there is substantial evidence that these writers are not aware of the contextual parameters of register within this genre. One obvious area of weakness is lexical choice. In the examples below, we see lexis chosen from outside the formal register of academic writing:

*If a man "**blabbed**" about his marraige [sic] bed, he could be divorced by his wife. [H1.21/3]*

*The Vikings were **tremendous** at adapting to their environment... [H2.2/3]*

*...from the coasts and islands of the Baltic, came forth groups of honest traders and **swarms** of daring robbers... [H2.2/1]*

Both partners commonly provided goods and were in the marriage 50/50 [H1.2/1]

...the importance of the Vikings can be parrelled [sic] with Ireland's joining the E.E.C. in 1973. Joining the E.E.C. in 1973 propelled us onto the playing pitch of Europe and instantly allowed us "catch up" with the rest of Europe. [H2.9/2]

The Vikings it seems assimilated quite easily into Irish society through intermarriage, fosterage, trade etc.. they were at first, difficult to digest. [H2.11]

(2) Contracted Forms

Contracted forms, such as *can't, won't, it's*, are common place in spoken language and in many written registers, but they are not the norm in academic writing. As discussed above, third level academic essay writers are often without such tacit knowledge of the register, for example:

I don't think their impact was as huge as ...[H2.5/1]

As the years progress it's paid to the woman...Women didn't separate ...[H1.15/1]

...if they raided and took everything, then there wouldn't be much left for the other raiders. [H2.13/1]

(3) Idioms

Here the term *idiom* refers to what McCarthy (1998: 130) describes as a string of more than one word where all elements are fixed in the phrase, for example, the expression *rough and ready*. Idioms are generally associated with informal situations where they provide colloquial alternatives to their semantic equivalents (see McCarthy 1998). Below we can find some interesting examples of idiomatic expressions not normally used in this register, again, it is further evidence of undergraduates lack of language awareness:

The partnership was further protected by the fact that they had to make contracts or business deals together, no party was allowed to be left in the dark. [H1.2/1]

...they would not stand for it and they would fight tooth and nail for their rights...[H1.3/2]

...So basically wherever a woman turned there was a male there to crack the whip [H1.9/1]

(4) Ellipsis

Ellipsis is a well-established feature of spoken English. Speakers choose to omit certain language, for instance, pronoun subjects are very often excluded where there is no danger of ambiguity. Carter and McCarthy (1997:16) give the following example:

A: What's the matter?

B: Got an awful cold. (ellipsis: *I've*)

A: Just seen Paco. (ellipsis: *I've*)

B: Did he say anything?

A: Nothing.

B: Interesting isn't it? (ellipsis: *It's*)

This phenomenon occurs across many speech genre and, in almost all cases, it is indicative of informality (Carter and McCarthy 1997: 17). Obviously, it is not a feature commonly found in the formal register of academic writing. Among the data, this example arose:

*What is unequal is that promiscuous women were offered no protection by law and if **became** pregnant, **had** to solely rear the children ... (two examples of subject ellipsis) [H1.2/2]*

Style

A sentence may be grammatically valid yet for reasons beyond syntax, it may not read well. Pirie (1985: 95) asserts that inefficient writing simply fails to communicate. Unless one's style is clear, no other virtues or skills which one may possess can be recognised. Under the heading of 'style', this paper attempts to identify areas where weaknesses commonly occur.

(1) Redundancy

Redundancy may be defined as the degree to which a message contains more information than is needed for it to be understood (Richards et al 1992: 310).

*They soon found out that many of the monasteries were rich in works of art, **such as crosiers, shrines, books and bells, which were ornamented with much gold, silver and precious stones** [H2.1/1]*

Tautology, or the use of words which mean the same thing, also adds to redundancy:

*The above statement is both **true and accurate**. [H1.2/1]*

*I would be difficult to doubt the Vikings initial impact was **sudden, unexpected**... [H2.2/1]*

(2) Repetition

Repetition of words and ideas is a very common symptom of poor style. Examples are found where students use the same word without any attempt to vary their expression even in the first example below where repetition could cause ambiguity:

***Evidence** exists which shows that females were banned from giving **evidence** and their oaths were useless. [H1.2/3]*

*Although women could never have full ownership of **land** they could inherit a life interest in **land** if her father had no sons. They were not free to pass it on like men but they did have the control of the **land** during their life time. The only way in which she could pass the **land** on to her husband or sons was if she was related to them. [H1.17/1]*

'Nervous writers', according to Pirie (1995: 107) 'prefer to dress each concept in at least two words as if one on its own might fail to prevent indecent exposure.' He refers to this as 'the belt and braces strategy', that is, making the same point more than once, lest one idea should fail to function:

Within the space of twelve lines in the same essay on the Vikings, we find the following example of repetition:

...They soon found out that many of the monasteries were rich in works of art, such as crosiers, shrines, books and bells...
...they plundered churches, monasteries and libraries, both on the islands and on the mainland...
... The monasteries in Ireland were favourite targets for the Viking raiders, for they were rich in treasure and the monks put up little resistance
[H2.1/1]

(3) Lack of Clarity

Clarity is usually achieved by expressing a point in the most straightforward way. The process of making sentences clearer for the reader forces the writer to refine his/her ideas. The following examples clearly show that the writer in each case did not go through a process of redrafting or editing:

Referring to the Vikings:

Only those who were raided had to bear the brunt of the raids. [H2.7/1]

Inthe [sic] the Irish literary movement seems to have remained aloof from the Vikings,and [sic] little intercourse on literary as distinct from the popular level seems to have taken place between the two peoples. [H2.11/2]

Still more positive is the renaissance of Irish art in the 11th and 12th centuries. With Irish art work taking on more characteristics such as spiral lobes. The Vikings paid [sic] both a negative and positive effect on Irish art work. [H2.12/2]

On women in early Irish society:

...Considering the time period we are discussing I feel women emerged well out of it, today in many developing and underdeveloped countries women are shackled and bound to laws which treat them as sub-human and we are citizens of the twentieth century. [H1.10/1]

(4) Long Sentences

In the process of writing, an experienced writer will usually refine and clarify long sentences either by breaking them up or by deleting unnecessary phrases. As we can see from the examples below, long sentences which have not been redrafted are a stylistic vice:

Referring to women in early Irish society:

If her husband became a vagrant or propertyless so he couldn't support her she could divorce him if he mocked her in public or told malicious rumours about her she could get a divorce if a divorcee[sic] was sought and the fault lay with the husband the coibche or bride price remained with the bride but if the divorce was the brides fault [sic] the coibche was returned. [H1.16/3]

In Early Irish Society anybody of any importance was given an honour price, this price represented their status in society a king or Rí had the highest honour price and from the first wife had half the honour price of the husband, this was called a Díre husbands also bought their bride from her father and this bride price or coibche was calculated to the wife's Díre. [H1.16/2]

On the Vikings:

Around AD850 there are records of the arrival of the Danes, from England, and their confrontations with the Norse, many argue that these Danes were in fact hired and Norsemen also began. [H2.2/3]

Parenthesis can be used in writing to add an explanatory or qualifying phrase within a sentence. However, many students use parenthesis as a substitute for thinking things through. What results is usually a 'premature' idea:

If rape resulted in a child, the rapist was responsible for rearing the child as children were prized in Early Ireland (the whole purpose of marriage was to produce children) this maybe explains the absence of illegitimacy. Punishment for rape was to do with payment. [H1.1/5]

(5) Spoken Voice

The use of a 'spoken voice' is connected with the area of register; it is also indicative of poor language awareness. From the examples, it is clear that the writers communicate in an informal register. They write as if they are speaking about the topic. Most obvious is the use of the first person:

*This may be viewed as degrading **but as I heard it argued** before women gained their status from this...* [H1.14/2]

*Early Irish women **I feel** were treated fairly* [H1.10/1]

***I have come to the conclusion** that the Vikings did have an influence on Ireland* [H2.5/6]

Below are samples of language which are clearly written with a listener rather than a reader in mind. They contain typical spoken discourse markers, such as, *well* and *of course*:

Why monasteries? Well, they were... [H2.13/1]

Of course, if this was a male heir there would be no suggestion of such a thing. [H1.19/1]

Exclamation marks appear frequently in the corpus. Writers use them to add a prosodic dimension to the message. Their use further suggests that the writers have not conceptualised the formality of this genre:

*When a man wants to marry a woman it is necessary that he gives a 'coibche' or bride price to her kin. **Simply hand the money over and receive the goods!*** [H1.6/1]

*...Despite the certain amount of fairness that existed in early Ireland being a woman in that period certainly does not appeal to me. **Thank God for the twentieth century!!...***[H1.6/2]

*...it is amazing how even in the sixth and seventh century they managed to figure that one out... **'womens lib' must have been campaigning even then...!*** [H1.8/1] (all dots in bold from original)

*A woman could leave a man if he was impotent; 'because an impotent man was not easy for a wife' 4. Other circumstances were obesity, the reasoning being that excessive obesity prevented sexual intercourse thus preventing fertilisation... **Wouldn't that keep the 'couch potatoes' of today fit!*** H1.8/1]

This type of marriage was more of a business arrangement than a love relationship! [H1.8/1]

Below are examples where writers respond to the title as if in a speaker-hearer relationship:

Equality? A non chauvanistic[sic] male dominated society? [H1.6/1]

I would have to agree that women... [H1.18/1]

Structure

Some of the essays in the corpus are more deficient in structure than in the areas of syntax, lexis and style as discussed above. Most commonly, these essays fail to address the core question posed by the task. Without a thesis statement, they lapse into description rather than discussion

and analysis. These essays may have been well written and adequately researched, but the writers display little or no ability to analyse. Such essay writing, no matter how few syntactic or stylistic weaknesses it contains, will never rise to honours standards. These are the saddest cases of all because often they are the work of diligent students who get little reward for their efforts.

At this point, it is worth returning to the study conducted by Kavanagh (1995) in a selection of Dublin primary schools; he found that children were not exposed to a wide range of writing. Note, in particular, the results for argumentative and persuasive writing:

Genre	Percentage of Teachers
Narrative /story writing	95%
Descriptive writing	71%
Expository writing	23%
Drama	9%
Argumentative writing	7%
Persuasive writing	3%
Poetry	0%

Kavanagh (1995: 82)

It is worth remembering that within six years of leaving primary school, many students enter college degree programmes ill-equipped in the genres of argumentative and persuasive writing.

Many essays show a pattern of ‘chunking’ or bulleting of ideas. Paragraphs are substituted by fragmented ideas. It could be argued that this excessive segmentation found in essays is a by-product of the Irish secondary school exam system in certain subjects, where memory of facts takes precedence over the ability to synthesise and critically analyse. This tendency also results from viewing writing as a product. Perhaps if students were to undertake collaborative writing projects, interaction with their peers might force them into the process of planning, drafting, revising, editing and so on.

The three lines below are presented by one student as a paragraph:

It was within this second settlement that the great town of trade was properly established in Dublin. The coins produced were exact copies of an English coin and were therefore primarily in use for trade.
[H2.2/4]

Conclusion

Overall, one of the most salient reasons for poor writing appears to be writers' lack of language awareness. The term 'language awareness' ranges from cognisance of word classes to sensitivity to style and register. Inadequate awareness not only cripples the writer's ability to self-correct, it also impedes feedback. If the corrector goes to the trouble of pointing out errors, the explanation may require grammatical metalanguage which forms a barrier between the student and the explanation. Some of the deficiencies in this area, such as register, subside as students progress through their college programme. Many gain tacit knowledge through reading academic texts or from their peers. Often skills specific to university writing, such as referencing systems, are passed on for one student generation to the next. It became obvious at Mary Immaculate College that academic writing could no longer be left to chance. A mandatory course is now in place which aims to provide some support for students in their transition into the more formal genre of academic writing.

Being a college graduate is equated with having a high level of literacy; however, universities do not see themselves as responsible for remediating inadequacies in undergraduate written expression. Very often, once children leave primary school, they will never again encounter comprehensive intervention in the area of writing. Basic grammatical rules go uncorrected and ultimately become fossilised in a content-driven curriculum at secondary level. The situation becomes cyclical in a matter years when a graduate enters the classroom as a qualified teacher. Indeed, many of the errors cited in this paper were made by future primary and secondary school teachers. Perhaps it is time for third-level institutions in this country to face their responsibility to produce graduates with highly-developed writing skills.

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