

 **SAGE Study Skills**

The Quick Fix Guide to Academic Writing

How to Avoid Big Mistakes
and Small Errors

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Understanding the “Big” and “Little” Errors in Your Paper

The errors that students make in their papers are not the same and should not be treated equally. One type of error is structural and systemic: these “big” errors cannot be fixed easily; they require a lot of time and energy to fix, and it is best to avoid making them in the first place. The second type of error is grammatical, mechanical, and stylistic: these are easier to fix than “big” errors—they are the “not-so-big” errors or “little” errors. They are different types of mistakes that students tend to make in their papers, from a relatively typical research paper, to literature reviews, integrative reviews, and drafts of Master’s theses and PhD dissertations. In fact, “big” and “little” errors persist into professional writing as well; professors who submit papers to be published in academic journals also make variations of the “big” and “little” errors (at least I do). There is no context in which academic life is free of writing and judgement. In this chapter, I provide an overview of some of the “big” and “little” errors that permeate students’ papers.

“Big” Errors

The notable point about errors is that they are not randomly distributed. Big errors occur in particular locations within social science journal articles (SCJA); little errors occur in clusters and repeat throughout a paper. First, the big errors. Table 1.1 lists some of the notable big errors that students tend to make in their social science papers. You may or may not have made these errors yourself, but my guess is that you probably have. Although the names attached to the erroneous

practices are unique, the various errors—big and little—are already well known to composition teachers. For instance, Redman and Maples (2011) note that “poor structure” and “poor use of social scientific skills (such as handling theory and evidence)” are rather common, as is lack of clarity and faulty organization (see also Goodson, 2013). While almost all how-to book writers agree that poor grammar and language are their pet peeves, even the errors they describe, along with the big errors in Table 1.1, suggest that structural errors differ from grammar errors.

Table 1.1 Dr Phil’s code sheet for “big” errors

BHP: “Beating one horse to death problem”	Using one author throughout the course of a paragraph to assert a point.
LLP: “Laundry list problem”	Rather than synthesizing the literature thematically, stating the literature author by author.
FSL: Failure to synthesize the literature	Failure to identify and state the literature in recurring thematic patterns.
FCL: Failure to critique the literature/ and identify a GAP	Failure to state the shortcomings in prior works.
NOWTD: No WTD	The paper does not tell the reader what you will do; a WTD is missing in the introduction.
FSR: Failure to state the RAT	Failure to explicitly state why your work is necessary. The author has not answered the “so what?” question.
FRE: Failure to state the “results” of your synthesized arguments	Failure to state your results/arguments in thematic terms. This code also refers to arguments that are illogical, incoherent, poorly developed, or not developed at all.
FCC: Failure to connect current finding to past research	Failure to interpret the current findings relative to the findings of past research.
FMS: Failure to delineate major sections	The paper has not been organized into recognizable major sections.
FUS: Failure to meet source requirements	The paper has used sources that are not scholarly and reputable and/or does not meet other specified requirements; or the reference list is not complete.
FZZ: Failure to meet word page requirements	The paper exceeds or does not meet expected word length (4500–6000 words of text) and page requirements (8–10 single spaced pages).
FRS 1: Failure to read sufficiently	Failure to read and incorporate findings from the specified 30 peer-reviewed journal articles. Violation of FSR will result in 50% penalty of total value of the paper.

FFP: Failure to follow paper submission protocol	The paper has not been submitted in accordance with class policy.
USP: Failure to use paragraphs	Need to use paragraphs rather than clipped note forms or business writings formats. Failure to use paragraphs constitutes a major error: 50 point deduction per instance.
INCREP: Incomplete reference information	The references are incomplete (e.g., missing journal titles, volumes, years, full page numbers, etc.)
FXX: Failures not listed in this coding sheet and other notable penalties	Other shortcomings and flaws in the paper that will be described in a narrative in the paper itself. Usually, this error is difficult to quantify and anticipate in advance.
Other notable penalties	
DECPVT: The student has engaged in deception	The student has manipulated space, margins, and font in order to meet page requirements.
NOTRNR: The full “plagiarism software detection” report has not been submitted	The detection report and file have not been submitted timely on the due date.

For example, “beating one horse” or BHP describes the practice of discussing one author throughout the course of one paragraph. This error is the first one listed because it affects the rest of the paragraphs in ecological ways. If you are wondering about this, let me illustrate what a BHP looks like when represented as a block of text:

Excerpt 1: paragraph #1

Smith (2009) states that killing is wrong. Smith (2009) asserts that using a firearm to kill another person is punishable by death. Some claim that the death penalty and killing are wrong (Smith, 2009), even if it is done by the state. One could claim that the death penalty is wrong (Smith, 2009).

If instructors ask fourth year and graduate students if they have ever written paragraphs that look like excerpt 1, about nine out of ten students will raise their hands. Anyone who has not raised their hand is not telling the truth. The students then chuckle without much prompting. It is almost as if they intuitively understand the moral depravity connoted in excerpt 1. They know only too well that taking one author and discussing that author throughout the course of one paragraph violates their instructors’ directions. Even without this direction, I have noticed that students will wince, shift in their seats, and look at their friends when excerpt 1 is displayed on the projection screen. Indeed you may be experiencing a slight discomfort now as I am calling attention to paragraphs like excerpt 1. That

slight knot in your stomach is there for a reason: your intellect suspects what your intuition already knows. Some part of you already knows that paragraphs that resemble excerpt 1—the ones you have been writing—are wrong. Now it is time to figure out why it is wrong to compose a paragraph like the one above.

First, it is not wrong in an absolute sense, i.e., it would not be wrong to compose paragraphs that mirror excerpt 1 in other sections of a social science paper. However, in a literature review, paragraphs like excerpt 1 are unequivocally wrong. I would dare to call it a sin. That is because “beating one horse” would lead to a serious logical problem. If you discuss nothing but Smith (2009) in the first paragraph, then what will you do in the second paragraph? This question is a logical one as literature reviews generally exceed one paragraph. Literature reviews can be anywhere from 2 to 30 pages. Therefore, if Smith (2009) is discussed to death in the first paragraph, what then? Suppose you were to write the following sentences in paragraph #2.

Excerpt 2: paragraph #2

Jones (2010) states that killing is not wrong. Killing by the state and by an individual is different (Jones, 2010). Jones (2010) declares that killing is okay if Rick James does it, but wrong if Wayne Brady does it. In fact, killing should be avoided period (Jones, 2010). However, according to Jones (2010) Rick James can do whatever he wants because he’s Rick James!

An astute reader will see the obvious flaw with excerpt 2. Paragraph #2 is a mirror image of paragraph #1 in terms of its structure. Aside from the content, one author has been mentioned and discussed ad nauseam—again. Instructors hate this pattern of writing, i.e., not reading widely enough and “relying on one or two reference sources” (Greasley, 2011, p. 35). Smith (2009) is elaborated to death in paragraph #1 and Jones (2010) is similarly discussed in paragraph #2. Imagine if this pattern was repeated throughout the course of 15 paragraphs. Paragraphs like excerpt 1 and 2 should illustrate the systemic nature of BHP errors. One error leads to the next one and that is why these types of error are difficult to fix in one sitting. If paragraphs #1 and #2 are repeated for the next 3 to 15 paragraphs, such a pattern would exemplify a “laundry list problem” (LLP).

A laundry list simply lists each item (author) one by one, in sequence. The “laundry list problem” resembles another common error found in students’ papers, the annotated bibliography error (Jesson et al., 2011). An annotated bibliography is a common assignment that upper-level undergraduate and graduate students receive. They are usually asked to survey the literature on a given topic, but rather than taking the full step and synthesizing the literature, instructors stop one step short. Consequently, students summarize each article, note potential critiques, and other notable points in one paragraph, and then move on to another author in the next one. In other words, annotated bibliographies structurally look like LLPs;

annotated bibliographies are “laundry list problems” that instructors have authorized. It is not that BHP and LLP are inherently wrong in themselves; however they are wrong in the context of literature reviews because they culminate in a fatal error—students failing to synthesize the literature.

Failure to synthesize the literature (FSL) is the “official” charge that professors levy against students who have not organized their literature review in an integrative way. This error occurs in undergraduate writing, Master’s students’ theses, doctoral students’ dissertations, and even in some professional journal publications when there is no thematic coherence to the literature review—i.e., rather than presenting the literature in some principled and systematic ways, such as recurring points of theoretical, methodological, or analytical similarity or differences, using several sources to group a theme or topic into a paragraph (Greasley, 2011), the literature is presented in a disjointed way, such as author by author, year by year. This type of organization tells the reader that the author has not thought through the literature in a serious way; a laundry list presentation intimates that the authors have slapped the paper together without much thought. Or worse yet, that by putting together these types of paragraphs in a literature review they are showing their incompetence. From the perspective of someone trying to teach you how to avoid this outcome, it is important for you to be aware that in order for FSL to occur, LLP and BHP will precede it; LLP is a precondition to FSL, as is BHP to LLP. The structural errors shown in Table 1.1 are interconnected. That is why certain errors should be avoided at all costs. BHP leads to other major errors that culminate in the failure to synthesize the literature error (FSL):

BHP → LLP → FSL

For the last several years, I have been trying to figure out why students write paragraphs that resemble excerpt 1 and 2. Here are some of my guesses. First, some students are not able to synthesize the literature because they have not read enough. If they have to read only five to seven social science journal articles on a topic and review the literature in just as many pages, then “beating one horse” is an expectable course of action. In fact, professors often assign various papers that require somewhere between five and seven peer-reviewed journal articles as source requirements. If students had to summarize five journal articles in a literature review, then by all means, an author-by-author, year-by-year discussion of those five authors is absolutely the logical thing to do. In a way, students are not at fault for producing this undesirable outcome; the instructors are responsible for not teaching them how to avoid those types of paragraph and for creating the conditions that facilitate the problematic outcome. Alternatively, those students may never have paid much attention in class—or they just forgot.

Second, students may have read 20, 30 or more journal articles as sources for their papers, but are not able to synthesize the information. There may be multiple

causes behind a failure to synthesize, but some may be instructor induced. Course instructors may have assigned annotated bibliographies as writing projects rather than a traditional literature review. Others may arise from the students themselves, i.e., they may become so overwhelmed by the sheer size of the task facing them that they just cower and fall back on what they know—“beating one horse.” It has worked before, so there is no reason to doubt that it will not work again. And unless an instructor calls you into the office, shows you excerpt #1 and tells you that this type of paragraph is incorrect, that literature reviews should be thematically organized and synthesized, you will never learn the correct way to do a literature review. What my own students throughout the years have told me is that they look at the comments, then the letter grade received, and repeat the same error again in other classes.

Third, some students who compose paragraphs that resemble excerpt 1 and 2 may not have been taught to organize the literature thematically. Let me repeat this part because perhaps you will agree with me on this: your professors told you that you needed to synthesize the literature, that you should look for similar themes and group them together when you work on your literature review. You very well may have been given this type of a directive. However, as I said earlier, being told to do something is not the same as being taught to do something. A synthesis requires a combination of things and in the context of a literature review, there are two sources that have to be incorporated: the main findings (ROFs) of the journal articles, books, and other texts that you have read and previous summaries (SPLs) of others’ works. Students often become confused because they cannot differentiate between SPLs and ROFs. This conflation is expectable when they have not been taught how to read social science journal articles properly.

Finally, some students may be writing paragraphs that mirror excerpt 1 and 2 because that is what their high school teachers and instructors at the university taught them. Students generally do not like to snitch on other professors in one-on-one meetings, but on one occasion I was so frustrated at seeing repeated BHPs that I bluntly asked the student where she had learned to write her paragraphs. I told her that I wasn’t angry, that I had been trying to figure out the cause of this error for quite some time. She admitted that this was the way her high school English teachers had taught her to organize multiple authors; she also admitted that one of her course instructors at the university had taught her the same lesson. When I checked with other students I received similar answers, and when I checked with high school English teachers they confirmed those responses. Students may be reproducing this incorrect approach to synthesis because that is what their teachers told them to do. Simply put, they were not properly taught.

So far, I have argued that BHP, LLP and FSL are closely related. There are ways in which other “big errors” are intertwined. For example, I have found that students really struggle with formulating research questions in the

paper writing process. Students who struggle with formulating research questions do so because they are attempting that task too early in the paper writing process: they sit like a yoga guru in transcendental meditation, staring at their belly button and chanting “ohm ... ohm,” praying that a question will magically pop out of thin air. Or they follow the advice proffered in numerous how-to books—to brainstorm, to connect to the broader historical, cultural, and political context of the topic and yada yada yada. That type of advice is correct for a seasoned academic, but novice undergraduate students and beginning graduate students need something more concrete. Before you can ask a meaningful research question, you need to read enough of the literature, grasp a broad understanding of what the topic is about, and formulate a critique of some sort. This part is not easy. You will struggle here because you are trying to do all three preceding tasks after having read five journal articles or a handful of encyclopedia entries. That is not enough.

When writing literature reviews, students are able to summarize the previous literature (SPL) fairly well; they do it well because it is consistent with what they have already done in the past—in their high schools and English composition classes where they have had to write book reports disguised as “research” papers. What students have trouble doing is developing a critique of the literature. What is missing in the literature? What are the shortcomings that exist in the literature? What are the Points of Critique (POC) that the student author has noted during their reading? Failure to critique the literature (FCL) has tremendous implications, for it will lead to an incomplete and incoherently shaped statement of the problem, the question that is being asked in a writing project. More importantly, FCL will lead to a failure to state the rationale (FSR). You have to explain why your paper, your topic, and the problem you are investigating are important. The significance of the paper, the topic, and the shortcoming in the literature that is leading up to the formulation of the research problem must be stated in the introduction somewhere. Once you have explained what is missing in the literature and why the shortcoming is significant, then you should be able to tell the reader What [you] They will Do (WTD) in your paper. You will need to include something like the following in any paper you write: “In this paper, I will examine ...”, “The purpose of this paper is to argue that ...”, “This paper examines ...” Not having this type of explicit statement of purpose constitutes a major error (NOWTD).

After you have reviewed the literature, identified the shortcomings in it, and proposed a way to remedy that gap in research through original data collection or a reinterpretation of existing published works in a conceptual paper, you will have to say something new-ish, i.e., you will have to produce a claim that differs sufficiently from what others have said before. A bigger problem occurs when no claim is made in a paper, when it just rehashes what others have already said in a few paragraphs that have been strung together without “describing the context or comparing or contrasting the findings” (Jesson

et al., 2011, p. 90). Students make this major error because they do not know what a claim is; they do not know why a claim is being made and where it originates. And because they do not understand the genealogy of a claim, they are clueless as to how to produce one of their own—failure to state your results/arguments in thematic terms (FRE). This code also refers to arguments that are illogical, incoherent, poorly developed, or not developed at all. Simply put, nothing has been said in the paper—*nada*. Whether the claim emerges from a reanalysis of others' arguments or whether the Results of Findings emerge after analysis of the data you have collected, the onus is on you to produce a claim or a finding. In this day of multiple plagiarism detection software, packaging a claim as your own is not easy. In social science papers, claims and findings are organized into major and minor sections with headings. The argument/finding section should be clearly distinguished from the data and methods section and literature review sections. Failure to do so constitutes a major error (FMS). This type of error is a major one because if the person reading and passing judgement on it is not able to make sense of your paper, it becomes a big error.

Once you have produced an argument or an empirical finding of some sort, you must then contextualize your results/argument against the literature. Does your argument/finding support (RCL) or refute (RTC) the existing works? When you fail to connect your current findings to past research (FCC), you will have made a big error. That is why I have maintained that the literature review is so important: it connects social science papers in the front and rear of texts (Shon, 2015). The literature and its shortcomings shape the questions that you ask; the literature can be organized in ways that give it shape and form; the literature dictates how your own findings are interpreted in the discussion and conclusion sections. That is why the literature review is so important in social science writing. Failing to connect to it in the discussion and conclusion section is a major error.

There are other “big” errors that are a bit different from the ones discussed so far though the next set are more related to administration. For example, if your instructor asks that a paper fall somewhere between 4,500 (about 16 double-spaced pages) and 6,000 words (about 20 double-spaced pages), then your paper needs to meet that expectation (Redman & Maples, 2011, p. 9). If you submit a paper that is 2,000 words (about 10 double-spaced pages), then you have not met one of the requirements. If your instructor is asking for a social science paper that is 20 pages in length, my guess is that there is an additional set of requirements (e.g., literature review, production of an argument, etc.) that must be met within those 20 pages. Your instructors have arrived at that page requirement for a specific reason. Only inexperienced and oafish instructors assign 20, 30, and 50 page “papers” to undergraduate students without spending some time explaining what it is they want students to accomplish in their papers. Those types of instructors assign long papers as punishment, and do not know

the difference between a university and a prison. Similarly, if your instructor requires that you read and incorporate 20 up-to-date sources as part of a literature review, and you only read and incorporate eight journal articles, then you have not met the paper’s expectations. Big error codes, such as FUS (failure to meet source requirements), FZZ (paper does not meet expected length), and FRS (failure to read sufficiently), would be applicable.

There is a reason why failing to meet length requirements, not reading enough, or failing to meet source requirements constitute “big” errors rather than “little” errors. In order to effectuate changes to papers that do not meet the aforementioned shortcomings, a substantial amount of time must be spent. Simply put, the preceding changes cannot be completed in two to three hours; they require a lot more time to complete (exactly how much time is required will be discussed in Chapter 2). You may think you can crank out these types of major changes to a paper in a few hours or so, but the only way that is possible is if you take shortcuts. That is one of the main characteristics of “big” errors: they take time to fix. I am certain that I have not even covered all the major errors that other instructors routinely see in the papers they receive. However, I am sure that whatever other big errors your instructors have noted, they would not be amenable to revisions within a short amount of time. Students usually have about 12 to 16 weeks to start and complete a typical research paper in a semester; they should use that time wisely and plan things out judiciously. The “big” errors cannot be fixed that easily. Based on the works of others (e.g., Goodson, 2013; Jesson et al., 2011; Redman & Mapales, 2011; Shields, 2010) and from my own experience, I have found that students who do not do well on their papers tend to make the major errors noted above. Other errors can be fixed more easily.

“Little” Errors

As an undergraduate student, I had three philosophy professors who really made an impression on me. One of them was a bit more influential than others. I took more of his courses as they were required for philosophy majors. He had a monotone voice, cracked dry jokes during class, and carried around a coffee mug in the shape of a human skull; he was learned but carried himself in the most unpretentious way. His examinations and papers, however, were legendarily tough. Those of us who were enrolled in the history of ancient philosophy and later, history of modern philosophy, had to have read Bertrand Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), in addition to primary works; on mid-terms and finals, he would select a quotation from one of the nearly 1,000 pages of the text; then we had to identify the selected quotation by the author’s name, and write one paragraph explaining what the quotation meant in the context of the author’s overall ideas. He called those types of examination questions

“quote identifications.” My fellow students and I called them something else. All of us dreaded them. I even failed a midterm in one of his courses.

If the answers to one of those questions were not satisfactory, the philosophy professor would write “largely magnified generalities” next to the inadequate sentences. Later when I became a teacher, I too noticed that students would try to “BS” their way through an answer by saying nothing at all. Rather than writing out “largely magnified generalities,” I called them LMGs in my grading code scheme. The original source here is my philosophy professor, Dr Stanley Kerr. I owe that one to him. Notice how the LMG is similar to what Shiach (2009, p. 12) describes as “waffling”: “it is when a student attempts to hide that they [sic] have nothing much to say about a subject by making generalised statements, empty statements that could apply to a whole range of topics, but which manage to say nothing relevant in answer to the question.” In addition to the preceding type of error, I also noticed that students were making the same errors over and over again throughout their writing assignments (see Goodson, 2013, p. 67). I initially thought that if I simply pointed out the errors to students, they could go look up the correct answers and fix the grammatical, mechanical, and stylistic problems on their own. Rather than writing out lengthy sentences, I started reducing student errors into alpha-numeric codes and then inserted them in the margins of students’ papers.

Table 1.2 Dr Phil’s code sheet for “little” errors

Code	Meaning
AWK	Awkward sentence
AMB	Term or sentence is ambiguous
CAP	Violates rules of capitalization
CITE	Need citation and substantiation
CITECONV	Incorrect citation convention
SECCITE	The use of secondary citations
COQ	Expression is too colloquial
RED	The expression is redundant
LVA	A linking verb has been used as an active verb
ELAB	Point needs expansion and elaboration
FN	Better placed in a footnote
LEX	Inappropriate lexical choice., e.g., (wrong usage, judgmental)
IR	Stated point is irrelevant
LMG	Largely magnified generalities (“BS”)

Code	Meaning
NP	Needs new paragraph
PUNC	Incorrect punctuation/needs punctuation
REF	Antecedent referent is not clear
RO	Run-on sentence
SP	Incorrect spelling
SPO	Failure to spell out a word/number/sign/symbol. The "&" sign when used in text must be spelled out.
OP	You have injected a personal opinion that is not relevant
TENSE	Inconsistency in tense
UG	Sentence is not grammatical
FRAG	The sentence is not complete; rather the stated phrase is a fragment. Not a complete sentence
UNN	Word/sentence/point is unnecessary
USG	Incorrect usage
EXQ	The student has incorporated an excessive amount of direct quotations in the paper. This practice indicates timidity and insecurity on the part of the writer. Rather than using a student's own words, s/he has merely let the text do the work.
# AG	# of subject determines # of verb; # consistency in pronoun usage
TLW	Indicated sentences could be reduced to 1 or 2 succinct ones
JOK	Is this a joke? The stated point is absurd beyond belief
SSW1.1	Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's
SSW1.2	In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last
SSW1.3	Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas. According to Strunk and White (1979: 3–4) "nonrestrictive clauses are parenthetical." A nonrestrictive clause merely adds something about the preceding subject. Hence, commas are needed. However, a restrictive clause is not parenthetical; it adds essential information: it is not set off by a comma.
SSW1.4	Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause
SSW1.5	Do not join independent clauses by a comma; comma splice
SSW1.51	Do not join dependent clauses with a semicolon
SSW1.6	Do not break sentences in two

(Continued)

Table 1.2 (Continued)

Code	Meaning
SSW1.7	Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a list of particulars, an appositive, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation
SSW1.8	Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption and to announce a long appositive or summary
SSW1.11	A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject
SSW2.12	Choose a suitable design and hold to it
SSW2.13	Make the paragraph the unit of composition
SSW2.14	Use the active voice
SSW2.15	Put statements in positive form
SSW2.16	Use definite, specific, concrete language
SSW2.17	Omit needless words
SSW2.18	Avoid a succession of loose sentences
SSW2.19	Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form
SSW2.20	Keep related words together
SSW2.21	In summaries, keep to one tense
SSW2.22	Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end

Readers will notice that the “little” error code sheet begins with an odd cluster of consonants (e.g., AWK, AMB, SP), then switches to SSW– followed by numbers. That transition in the codes is evidence of my sincere attempt to improve students’ writing before becoming overwhelmed and exasperated at the task before me, and then rediscovering the simple yet effective beauty of Strunk and White. Before I say anything else, let me confess that I adore Strunk and White (1979). There is no other word that does justice to the way I feel about their work. I have slept with that book on top of my chest, with both of my hands clasped neatly on top of it so that it does not slip off, hoping that the book’s spirit would trickle into my heart. I have used *The Elements of Style* as a pillow hoping that their directives would enter my head through osmosis. Sometimes, I would just hold the book between my hands, and flip through the pages, allowing a phrase here and there to glide across my face from the breeze produced from the turning of pages. No, it would not be an understatement to say that I am fanatic about Strunk and White. I still believe that if students tattooed the lessons contained in that book, there would be no need for another

book on composition, grammar, and punctuation. Even to this day, when I have to explain grammar and mechanics, I still pull out *The Elements of Style* as a gunfighter pulls out a revolver. I am still debating whether I should get the word “semicolon” tattooed somewhere on my body. In fact, the code SSW stands for See Strunk and White (SSW) in Table 1.2. The first number is the chapter; the decimal point, the section. I really thought *The Elements of Style* could fix everything. I often likened it to duct tape or crazy glue. Once I started grading students’ papers using these codes, I started to notice a pattern in their errors (see Goodson, 2013).

The first observation was that students made the same errors over and over again, i.e., they did not make 52 independent errors, but made a particular error repeatedly throughout the course of one paper. Second, students usually did not make one error but made them in clusters. Although I do not know which codes will be clustered according to traditional sociological variables (except some international students), I am sure that the errors will be clustered in some way. Third, I can explain the code SSW 1.5 (or any other code) till I am blue in the face, but students will not understand the error, see it, or care to fix it until I show it to them. Let me illustrate what I mean with an example.

Excerpt 3

Incorrect: Killers return to the scene of the crime to relieve the feeling of godlikeness they experienced, killers tend to be self-centered and egotistical persons who are able to only think of their own needs.

Just so there is no mistake, you should know that the sentence in excerpt 3 is incorrect. It is wrong because it violates one of the fundamental rules of punctuation and grammar. Students write sentences like this using incorrect punctuation marks because they do not know what a semicolon is and when it is used. They also do not know the 17 different usages of a comma (Truss, 2003). Because students are unsure of when to use a semicolon and a comma, if you write a sentence like the one in excerpt 3, other sentences that bear this error structure and form will appear throughout your paper, and the error will repeat itself. The key to ensuring that this type of error does not appear again is knowing the rules for semicolon usage. A semicolon is used to connect two independent clauses together. An independent clause is like a sentence; it can stand on its own.

In excerpt 3, “Killers return to the scene of the crime to relieve the feeling of godlikeness they experienced” is an independent clause, a sentence on its own. Similarly, “killers tend to be self-centered and egotistical persons who are able to only think of their own needs” is also an independent clause. Those two sentences have to be connected together using a punctuation mark that is intended for the job. Two will work. As the two independent clauses are sentences, they

can be connected using a period. An alternative would be to connect them using a semicolon. There are ways to get fancy (e.g., coordinating conjunction preceded by a comma), but a period and a semicolon would be the most robust way to connect the two sentences. These two moves are fundamental to basic writing; they are the equivalent of a single-leg and double-leg takedown in wrestling. They are two moves that all writers have to master if they are to perform at a university level. If a comma is used to connect the two independent clauses/sentences, a comma splice error will have been made. That is why excerpt 3 is incorrect. A correct usage of the semicolon would be the following.

Excerpt 4

Correct: Killers return to the scene of the crime to relive the feeling of godlikeness they experienced; killers tend to be self-centered and egotistical persons who are able to only think of their own needs.

You need to understand why the semicolon is needed rather than a comma in excerpt 4 and in other structures similar to it, and that you cannot rely on those blue squiggly lines to tell you whether a sentence or a clause is not grammatical. You should learn to become self-reliant rather than becoming dependent on the features of a word-processing software. Otherwise, you will continue to write sentences like the following.

Excerpt 5

Incorrect: Killers return to the scene of the crime to relive the feeling of godlikeness they experienced; which is fairly typical.

The first clause is a sentence, an independent clause that can stand on its own. However, is “which is fairly typical” a sentence? Is this phrase an independent clause that can stand on its own or is it dependent and subordinate, therefore necessarily incomplete? Dependent clauses complement the main clause in some way. Actually, you don’t even have to understand the latter in order to use a semicolon properly. Almost all students know that “which is fairly typical” cannot stand on its own; they know it is not a sentence. Heck, it doesn’t even sound like a complete sentence. When I ask if it sounds like a sentence, almost all students know it is not a sentence. So when I ask them why they used a semicolon to connect a clause that is not an independent one to another one that is, their answer is unequivocal: they were not sure about the semicolon rule. If I spend five minutes pointing out every instance in which this same error occurs throughout a single page, and show students clauses that are the equivalent of “which is fairly typical,” they become experts at spotting that particular error toward the end of the session. Once students are “shown” this error and the proper rule using the sentences that

they themselves have composed, I usually find that they already know or at least suspected they were not using it properly. However, they continue to do it because no one has shown them how not to make the error. Once this session is over, I find that I do not have to explain the same rule again.

The recurring pattern is unmistakable. A student has committed semicolon abuse. However, that error does not exist independently and in isolation. Students abuse semicolons for the following reasons: (1) they do not know the rule regarding its usage; (2) they do not know what a sentence is; (3) they do not know what a dependent clause is; (4) they do not understand when to use a comma. There are probably other reasons that can be included here, but the numerous ones noted above support my argument that little errors tend to occur in clusters. The same phenomenon occurs in the behavior of serial killers. A serial killer is, by definition, someone who has killed at least two or more victims in 30 days or more (Morton et al., n.d.). If someone has already killed two victims, then chances are good that the killer is a male who has targeted a female victim. If there is evidence of sexual assault, the use of restraints and blindfolds to control a victim, then the preceding characteristics highly suggest the presence of a predatory serial offender (Salfati, 2003). Those atypical behaviors tend to co-occur.

A similar principle applies to the way students make errors. Students who misuse semicolons will also make comma usage errors (e.g., a comma splice; unnecessarily disrupting the flow of a sentence); they will compose fragments and believe that they have written grammatical sentences that can stand on their own. Students who do not understand or appreciate the beauty and sublimity of a semicolon are also likely to abuse its often mistaken cousin, the colon. This interrelatedness of little errors is what makes teaching students the nuts and bolts of writing such a difficult and challenging task. Even when one item is particularly problematic (e.g., the semicolon), there are at least three other things that have to be explained in the process. Simply telling students to go fix them is not enough. I tried for a number of years. It did not work. Identifying the problem, giving it a name, and telling them to look up a certain page in Strunk and White (1979) also will not work. I tried for a number of years and that did not work either. If teachers want their students to write sentences that are grammatical, and connect those sentences to form a coherent paragraph, then they have to show them how to do it, line by line, word by word. That is teaching.

If you want to learn how to write grammatical sentences, you should ask your teachers to teach it to you, not lecture you about how to write them. Or if you really want to learn this, you can teach yourself. Here is one trick I learned from a world-class literary critic: read the sentences aloud. This advice means actually reading a sentence out loud, not silently moving your lips as if you are pretending. For most native speakers, if a sentence does not "sound" right, it generally is not right. If a sentence does not sound like a sentence, it usually is not. When you slow down the reading process, not only does it lead to better

comprehension and appreciation of well-written sentences, it also facilitates proofreading. You should not have to rely on a “friend” to help you proofread your paper when they are no more knowledgeable than you. There is nothing wrong with a hefty dose of self-reliance.

I would like to go through each and every one of the little errors to show you that fixing these is not as onerous as you may think. However, that task is not logistically possible. Besides, there are already lots of well-written books that can help you master those basic skills (Strunk & White, 1979; Truss, 2003). What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to show the two different types of mistake that students tend to make in their social science papers. One of these requires more substantial work to fix than the other. To fix the little errors, the important task is to identify the patterns that exist in the errors you are making. You don't need to go through an entire paper to get an idea of what you are doing wrong. A sample of 3 to 5 paragraphs should yield sufficient errors to discern a pattern in the errors that you are making. The errors you make will be thematic and clustered. In this initial 3 to 5 paragraph review, an error range of 0 to 3 represents the low end. This pattern means that you are making anywhere from 0 to 3 distinct errors, errors that repeat themselves within 3 to 5 paragraphs. Once you identify what those errors are, then you should consult how-to grammar books in order to fix whatever it is that you are doing wrong (Strunk and White would be an excellent source). A range of 4 to 8 represents the average. I have found that most students fall into this range and therefore have a bit more work to do; the assistance of writing specialists at teaching and learning centers is recommended, although students can fix the little errors themselves should they be motivated to do so.

For students who make 9 or more distinct little errors, the assistance of a writing specialist is a must. It has been my experience that those who fall into this range have serious problems in their writing, and are generally underprepared for university-level work. The code FRAG almost always appears in this range because students seem to lack fundamental skills, such as the ability to write a grammatical sentence. Students are not able to write a grammatical sentence because they do not know what a sentence is. They are not able to differentiate between a noun and a verb, a direct object and an indirect object. The code FRAG tends to co-occur with the code UG and AWK because students who do not know what a sentence is will write ungrammatical and awkward ones that I cannot even describe, much less explain how to fix. Some students may not be able to compose a grammatical sentence because they suffer from dyslexia and may not be aware of their condition. If that is the case for you, your instructor should be helping you to connect with an academic specialist at your school who is trained to respond to such needs in the classroom. Some students who are not able to craft a sentence continue for different reasons. I have an idea about how students make it to their fourth year of a university while not being able to write a simple sentence.

It is the same reason that a heavy-handed police officer makes it through the police academy, field training, and probationary period and remains on the force for years: no one wants to take responsibility, and dumps the problem police onto someone else—until several years down the road when the same officer uses excessive force against a citizen and is recorded by an unwitting one who is trying out his new camera for the first time (Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, 1991). The reason students who are not able to write a basic sentence move on to further university-level work occurs for similar reasons. I know. There were times when I was so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task before me that I recommended the student visit the writing center, and simply washed my hands of the messy affair as Lady Macbeth had done before. I knew those students never followed up. On such days, I had trouble looking at myself in the mirror because I felt like a fraud. Every teacher has these moments. I promised myself that I would fix that condition someday.

Conversely, if you are on the other end of that advice, and you know you need help, you should go find it. If you know you are one of those who is just getting by, you should rethink your options. You may think you are getting a free pass because you made it through a university without anyone finding out that you can’t write a sentence; but if you don’t seek help by asking someone, you are the one missing out. A university is the last place where people are there to help you. Once you leave it, no one will take the time to explain when to use a semicolon, how to write and fix a sentence, and how to structure an argument. Your bosses will simply assume that you already know how to do those tasks, and when they discover you cannot, they will give you an ass-chewing that you will never want to experience again if they are nice, or just fire you if they are typical. You are enrolled at a university for a reason; make the most of it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented and discussed the two types of error that students tend to make in their papers, what I have referred to as “big” and “little” errors. Big errors should be avoided from the start for the simple reason that they take time to fix and require a structural overhaul. They cannot be easily corrected by shifting paragraphs around or replacing a sentence here and there. The mistakes are systemic and structural changes to the paper are needed in order to fix this type of error. Little errors, on the other hand, are more amenable to correction as the changes can be made relatively easily. The difficult task in fixing little errors, however, is identifying the unique thematic patterns that exist in the errors you are making. Figuring out this pattern is the most consequential step in remedying the little errors that occur in your papers.