

## Errors that will harm your rhetorical effectiveness

A 1981 study by Maxine Hairston identified common sentence-level errors that professionals other than English teachers found bothersome. Her questionnaire was sent to business executives, attorneys, bank officers, real-estate agents, stockbrokers, small business owners and engineers. She asked respondents to identify their reactions to sentences that contained different errors. The errors were then divided into status-marking errors (those that tended to indicate educational, social or ethnic status) and non-status-marking errors of various levels of seriousness based on the reactions of respondents.

Status-Marking Errors	
Nonstandard verb forms in past or past participle: <i>brung</i> instead of <i>brought</i> , <i>had went</i> instead of <i>had gone</i>	
Lack of subject-verb agreement: <i>we was</i> instead of <i>we were</i> , <i>he don't</i> instead of <i>he doesn't</i>	
Double negatives	
Objective pronouns as subject: <i>him and Richard were the last ones hired</i>	

Very Serious Errors		
Sentence fragments	Run-on sentences	Non-capitalization of proper nouns
Non-status marking subject-verb agreement errors	<i>Would of</i> instead of <i>would have</i>	Insertion of comma between the verb and its complement
Non-parallelism	Faulty adverb forms	Use of transitive <i>set</i> for <i>sit</i>

Serious Errors	
Verb form errors	Dangling modifiers
<i>I</i> as object pronoun	Lack of commas to set off interrupters such as <i>however</i>
Lack of comma in series	Tense switching
Use of a plural modifier with a singular noun: <i>these kind of errors</i>	

See the following links for additional information on any of the errors listed above:

For more on the mechanics of writing: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/4/>

For more on grammar: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/5/>

---

**Yeah, Write**

*Adapted from* Hairston, M. "Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage." *College English* 1981, 43(8), 794-806

Compiled by Margaret J. Marshall and Jamie N. Smith

8/2/2010

Office of University Writing  
Auburn University  
3436 RBD Library  
Auburn, AL 36849-5279

334-844-7475  
[www.auburn.edu/writing](http://www.auburn.edu/writing)