



## English Composition | 2016-2017 Assessment Report

1. Please give a brief overview of the assessment data you collected this year.

For 2016-17, English Composition assessed programmatic outcome #6: “Standard English—Students’ essays will adhere to the conventions of Standard Edited American English.” In other words we confronted The Problem of Error. Our methods were as follows:

During the Fall 2016 semester, all UWGB teachers of English Comp classes were requested to ask the fourth person on their roster, in alphabetical order, if his or her last writing assignment of the course could be used for program assessment, with all individual identifiers removed. If that person declined, teachers were to ask the next person on the roster, and so on, until we got one paper from each class. During the Spring 2017 semester the same process was used, except using the twentieth person on the roster or, in classes with fewer than twenty students, the student at the midpoint on the roster. (We vary the place in the roster in order to avoid, over the long haul, a potential statistical bias from any one part of the alphabet, as for example from the large number of Hmong students named *Vang* or *Xiong*.) Not all teachers were able to provide an essay, particularly from the online classes. Nevertheless, we had a sample of 44 papers, out of 55 sections of English Comp offered in 2016-17. All students whose papers were used signed an informed consent form.

We created a form for tabulating the total number of errors in each essay and for classifying the essays into various categories (missing apostrophe with possessive, dangling modifier, etc.). As a pilot test, all four Assessment Committee members (Debbie Burden, Karla Larson, Brian Sutton, and Linda Toonen) used the form to tabulate errors in the same three essays, after which we met to compare results and discuss revisions in the form. We then revised the form and tested the revised form by having all four committee members use it to tabulate errors in the same essay. We met again, compared results and made minor changes to the revised form, and then divided up the 44 essays, with each committee member responsible for tabulating errors in 11 essays. The fully-revised form used to tabulate errors in the 44 essays is included here as Appendix A.

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE, SORT OF

If our assessment study were taken by itself, it would yield only mundane findings like “Essays in UWGB English Comp classes contain way too many errors, and we need to do something about it” or “Comp teachers at UWGB complain a lot about Error A, but our study found that Error B was far more common.” Fortunately, over the past hundred years a number of other studies have been conducted involving tabulation of errors in essays from English Comp classes, sometimes with stratified samples from pools of thousands of essays collected nationwide. In fact one of our Assessment Committee members, during his graduate-student days, was an error-tallying grunt-worker on the best-known study of errors in English Composition essays, the 1986 Connors and Lunsford study. Thus, we were able to compare

our results to those from similar studies from throughout the past hundred years. This was of particular interest to us because over the last couple of years, UWGB has accepted increasing numbers of under-prepared students, leaving us curious to know how UWGB students' papers would compare with papers from national studies. When other studies are used in this document for comparative data, they are cited in MLA format.

## RESULTS

### *Length—Does Size Matter?*

Our study, like the previous studies we cite, was intended to investigate frequency and types of errors in English Composition students' papers. But some of our most striking findings dealt not with errors but with the lengths and types of papers we received. The following table lists the four best-known previously published studies, along with our assessment study, followed by year of publication and average (mean, not median) length of papers in the sample:

**Table One—Average Length of Essay**

<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Year of Publication</u>	<u>Average Length of Essay</u>
Johnson	1917	162 words
Witty and Green	1930	231 words
Connors and Lunsford	1986	422 words
Lunsford and Lunsford	2006	1,038 words
UWGB Assessment	2017	1,768 words

These results suggest a gradual increase in the length of assigned essays over the past hundred years, with a more dramatic increase over the last few decades. On average, the essays we read for our 2017 assessment report were well over ten times as long as the essays Johnson read for his 1917 report. Granted, some of the change is surely attributable to the fact that our study and the 2006 Lunsford and Lunsford study both relied exclusively on the final essay of the semester (usually the course's longest and most demanding writing assignment) while the other studies did not. Still, the increase in length seems remarkable.

Types of writing have changed as well. Most of the essays making up the sample for the 1986 Connors and Lunsford study were (handwritten) personal narratives, citing no sources (Lunsford and Lunsford 793). Every single one of the 44 essays in our 2017 study was typed and cited multiple sources, most were argumentative (persuasive) essays, and about half of those which were primarily informative rather than persuasive involved original research (surveys, personal interviews) by the student and were written in the experimental-report format found in much academic writing in the social sciences, complete with subheads marked "Results," "Discussion," etc., and titles such as "The Effects of Attendance on Grades Received in Lecture-Based College Classes."

Similarly, when comparing the essays from their 2006 study with the essays from the 1986 study, Lunsford and Lunsford conclude that their results "suggest that an emphasis on personal narrative has been replaced by an emphasis on argument and research" (793). Lunsford and Lunsford, citing Fulkerson, point out "the tremendous growth in argument-based [composition] textbooks" in recent decades; they also cite a twenty-first century survey of

college writing programs in which “an ‘overwhelming’ majority of teachers indicated that they focus on argument- and research-based writing” (793).

If nothing else, then, our assessment project indicates that assignments in UWGB’s English Composition Program reflect changes in English Composition programs nationwide.

In many ways, this migration toward longer, research-based, usually argumentative papers is an encouraging trend in English Composition: Composition has increasingly become a course in which students must develop advanced skills in research, critical thinking, analysis, and the construction of extended arguments responsive to complex rhetorical situations, rather than simply a course in thesis statements, topic sentences, paragraph structure, and sentence-level skills. In addition, the more complex assignments allow Composition teachers to work with students throughout the research, writing, and revising processes: before the UWGB students turned in their final drafts, nearly all had participated in mandatory, individual rough-draft conferences with their instructors, and many had also participated earlier in individual planning conferences with their instructors. Most had also participated in peer-editing sessions on rough drafts with classmates. And one UWGB teacher, whose students contributed 8 of the 44 essays in the assessment sample, requires all her students to bring their rough drafts to appointments with tutors in the school’s writing center. Clearly, the emphasis on longer, more complex assignments allows Composition students to receive much more instruction during their process of completing the assignment, which is arguably when writing is most effectively taught. In addition, the emphasis on argumentative and source-based writing doubtless prepares students better for most of the writing they will do in other college classes and in the work force than do personal narratives.

The main trade-off for these advantages is a dramatic reduction in the number of completed texts produced by Composition students. In the 1980s, when Connors and Lunsford accumulated thousands of papers with an average length of 422 words, many Composition programs devoted much of the semester to weekly 500-word themes. And a century ago, when Johnson completed his study of papers with an average length of 162 words, it was not unusual for students to produce short written texts for every class period, with many class periods devoted to analysis of a paragraph from an individual student’s recent writing (Berlin). Today, most English Composition classes at UWGB require either three or four completed writing projects during the entire fourteen-week semester, meaning their students generally turn in papers once a month or less. Numerous other classes on campus require more completed essays than most sections of English Composition do.

Another drawback of the longer assignments involves the writing style such assignments may implicitly encourage some students to adopt. Although they were reading the essays for errors rather than for style or content, committee members repeatedly stated that the essays often seemed clogged by needless wordiness and especially needless repetition, as if the student writers were trying to stretch the material to fulfill a length requirement. It wasn’t unusual to encounter almost mind-numbingly repetitive passages such as this one, reproduced verbatim without addition of “[sic]”:

Another unique feature of online courses is the ability for the participants to extend their networks. These students can be exposed to many different people from across the world (Jung, pg. 67). This provides students with the opportunity to collaborate with peers that may be in similar situations, but also with people that are from an abundance of culture. Students have the opportunity to meet people from around the world. Since there is no geographical restrictions on who can take courses (as long as the individual pays), students may have the opportunity to network with students from around the world. Online classes and communities are opening the door to a globalized world.

Given that both business writing and the Internet favor short, concise, vigorously-worded texts, UWGB’s English Composition teachers may wish to reconsider the efficacy of structuring the course around a relatively small number of relatively long essays.

#### *Errors—How Many, How Often?*

Given recent changes in UWGB admissions policies, it’s perhaps not surprising that the UWGB Composition students’ papers evidently contained far more errors per 100 words than did the papers in previous studies. The following table summarizes this finding:

**Table Two—Errors Per 100 Words**

Johnson (1917)	2.11
Witty and Green (1930)	2.24
Connors and Lunsford (1986)	2.26
Lunsford and Lunsford (2006)	2.23
UWGB Assessment (2017)	3.41

The error rate remains largely constant throughout the previous studies but increases by over 50% in the UWGB study.

Of course, what constitutes an error is a highly subjective matter, changing over time. Thus, one might argue that the higher rate of error in the UWGB study reflects differences in methods of evaluating papers more than differences in the papers themselves.

But unfortunately, it seems likely that if methods had been kept constant, the UWGB papers would have fared even worse. For example, the earlier studies occasionally included error categories which wouldn’t be recognized as errors today, such as “Use of ‘would’ for simple past tense forms” (Witty and Green 391). One would expect such extra categories to push the error totals higher in the older studies, thus giving the UWGB papers a comparative advantage. In contrast, all error categories in the UWGB study were also found in some or all of the earlier studies, albeit occasionally under different terminology.

Even the derivation of word counts for the essays seemingly favored the UWGB papers. In 2006 Lunsford and Lunsford, faced with paper copies of hundreds of typed papers, derived their word counts by “assuming the standard 250 words per page” (792). But in 2017, working

mainly with electronic copies of Microsoft Word documents, the UWGB Assessment Committee simply deleted the portions of the paper not used in error-tallying (works cited/references pages, title pages and first-page headings, headers, etc.), then got the exact word count from Microsoft Word—but the committee also counted the number of pages and found that the papers averaged 346 words per page. Thus, it seems extremely likely that Lunsford and Lunsford understated the length of papers, and thereby overstated the error rate, in their study. If the UWGB Assessment Committee had used the same 250 words per page estimate that Lunsford and Lunsford used, the papers in the UWGB study would've been recorded as averaging 4.72 errors, not 3.41 errors, per 100 words—well over twice the error rate in the Lunsford and Lunsford study.

In addition, almost 10% of the errors reported in the Lunsford and Lunsford study were for either “Incomplete or Missing Documentation” or “Poorly Integrated Quotation” (795). But the UWGB Composition Program has an entirely different learning outcome for research-based writing than for control of Standard English, and just last year (2015-16) we assessed our students' research-writing skills, including citations and integration of quotations. Thus, we didn't include these elements in our tabulation of errors this year. Obviously, had we also tabulated problems with citations and with integration of quotations, then the rate of errors in the UWGB papers would've been still higher—about 10% higher, judging from the Lunsford and Lunsford results. So again, methodological inconsistencies appear to have *understated*, not *overstated*, the extent to which the UWGB papers were more error-laden than those in Lunsford and Lunsford's nationwide sample.

There is one difference in methods between the UWGB study and its immediate predecessors that may have artificially increased the margin by which the UWGB papers were reported as more error-laden. In both the 1986 Connors and Lunsford study and the 2006 Lunsford and Lunsford study, the lead researchers marked every error in a pilot group of papers, compiled from this a list of the twenty most common errors, created tally sheets listing only these twenty categories of errors, and then had their assistants use these tally sheets for the main group of essays. Thus, errors per 100 words in these studies reflect only the twenty most common categories of errors (other than spelling). But in the UWGB project, the tally sheet included thirty-two categories, including catch-all categories like “Other Punctuation Errors” and “Other Usage Problems.” Thus, other than being asked to refrain from marking arguably picky items such as “Every student did their work” and “The data is,” evaluators in the UWGB study were encouraged to mark every error, unlike scorers in the previous two studies.

Nevertheless, even if only the twenty most common categories were counted in the UWGB papers, the rate of errors per 100 words would decline only to 2.90—still about 30% higher than the rates in previous studies. And the effect of this change in narrowing the error rate would be more than offset by changes in the opposite direction if the UWGB study had used the same 250-words-per-page estimate as the 2006 Lunsford and Lunsford study.

If we go beyond the Lunsford and Lunsford study and compare the UWGB results with those in the three twentieth-century studies, we must consider differences in the writing tasks. The students in the twentieth-century studies were writing short essays, usually based solely on

personal opinions and experiences, while the students in the UWGB study were writing much longer essays, usually argumentative and usually about complex issues, and were integrating multiple sources (usually academic ones) into their texts. A host of studies confirm the common-sense idea that when writers face increasingly difficult writing tasks, they have more difficulties with “the basics,” including avoiding errors (e.g., Haswell 494-95; Williams and Colomb).

On the other hand, most papers in the twentieth-century studies were doubtless completed no more than a week after they were assigned, and in all probability scarcely any of the student writers had the benefit of rough-draft help from teachers, classmates, or tutors. The UWGB students generally had a month or more to complete the essays, with rough-draft conferences with teachers, peer-editing sessions with classmates, and sometimes sessions with writing center tutors along the way. Granted, Composition teachers and writing center tutors are taught to deal first with larger-scale concerns such as satisfying the assignment, having an easily discernible central point supported by enough appropriate evidence, clear organization, etc., and to deal with smaller-scale issues such as punctuation only secondarily, if at all, depending on time constraints. In addition, Composition teachers and writing center tutors are taught to be selective in dealing with errors, focusing only on the student’s most frequent and most serious errors and explaining the grammar/punctuation rules involved so that the student is empowered to find and correct errors for himself or herself, rather than simply correcting the errors for the student. Even so, one would have hoped that with so much more time to write and so much more help from others, the UWGB students would have generated far *fewer* errors per 100 words than did their predecessors. Indeed, in Witty and Green’s 1930 study, the Composition students’ papers were all timed, impromptu essays (389), with the students not informed in advance of the topics they would be writing about. Yet the UWGB students made roughly 50% more errors per 100 words than did the students in the Witty and Green study.

In one way, however, the UWGB students were less prone to error than were their twentieth-century predecessors—but the improvement most likely results from better technology, not better-prepared students. In all the twentieth-century studies, spelling errors were by far the most common error, so common that the researchers excluded spelling errors from their errors-per-100-words totals. To keep methods consistent from study to study, we also excluded spelling (and homonym) errors from the UWGB papers’ errors-per-100-words totals. But while spelling errors were extremely common in the handwritten papers from the twentieth-century studies, they were almost nonexistent in the UWGB papers. Of course, this decrease in spelling errors presumably is almost entirely attributable to spell check and autocorrect features, not to improved intrinsic spelling ability among students.

The chair of the UWGB Assessment Committee tried hard to find extenuating circumstances which might explain why the UWGB papers had a noticeably higher error rate. Perhaps the presence of papers by ESL/ELL students in the UWGB sample? But only three of the 44 papers appeared to have been written by ESL students, those three papers had only a negligible effect on the error rate of the sample as a whole, and the 2006 Lunsford and Lunsford study, with its much lower error rate, also included ESL/ELL papers in its sample (788). Perhaps the direction

for spring-semester teachers to request papers from the twentieth student on the about-24-student rosters may have caused overrepresentation of Hmong students (Xiong, Vang, etc.), some of whom may not have grown up speaking English in the home? But examination of the Informed Consent Forms turned up not a single Hmong name. Perhaps the sample size was too small for statistical significance? But there were 44 papers from 44 different English Comp classes, totaling almost 78,000 words of text.

Ultimately, there is no escaping it: the higher error rate in the UWGB papers, compared to papers in previous studies, appears to be significant in every sense of that word.

### *Errors—What Kinds?*

In most ways, the types of errors commonly found in the UWGB papers mirrored those found in papers from earlier studies. But when they differed, they did so in ways that were cause for further concern.

We'll start with the similarities. Previous studies invariably break comma problems down by category (missing comma in compound sentence, comma error with restrictive or nonrestrictive element, etc.), but when all comma errors are combined into a single category, they are the most common type of error (except spelling errors, in the studies prior to spell check). The same was true of comma errors in the UWGB study. And many of the usual suspects—comma splices, apostrophe errors, etc.—were about equally prominent in the common-errors list for the UWGB study as they were for previous studies.

When the categories of errors in the UWGB study differed significantly from those in previous studies, they often appeared to reflect a trend Connors and Lunsford first reported in 1986: the arrival on college campuses of increasing numbers of students with “declining familiarity with the visual look of a written page” (406). As Connors and Lunsford put it, “Students who do not read the ‘texts’ of our culture . . . come to school without the tacit visual knowledge of written conventions that ‘text-wise’ writers carry with them effortlessly” (406). Of course, this trend of students lacking “tacit visual knowledge of written conventions” seems to have increased since 1986, possibly exacerbated by the shift from print culture to digital culture.

The error patterns in the UWGB sample often suggested exactly this lack of the “tacit visual knowledge” possessed by more “text-wise” students. For example, excluding all comma errors combined and “Wrong Word,” the most frequent error category reported in the UWGB study, comprising 10.8% of all the errors recoded, was “Garbled Syntax.” (And if parallelism errors and dangling/misplaced modifiers are counted as forms of garbled syntax rather than as separate categories, then Garbled Syntax accounted for 15.1% of recorded errors and was the single most common category of error found in the UWGB papers after comma errors.) The prominence of this error category is new: the nearest analogue in Lunsford and Lunsford’s 2006 study, “Faulty Sentence Structure,” is only the tenth most frequent error category in the study, accounting for just 4.4% of the errors (795). And in the 1986 Connors and Lunsford study, the category “Garbled Sentence” accounted for just four errors in the project’s 300-paper pilot study (under 0.2% of the errors found in the pilot study), making it the 35<sup>th</sup> most

common error in the pilot study (399). Thus, “Garbled Sentence” wasn’t even included in the error-tallying sheets for the 1986 study. Moreover, no analogous category appears in the lists of most common errors in any of the studies from earlier in the twentieth century. The prominence of garbled syntax in the UWGB papers, then, appears to represent a relatively recent trend.

Operationally, our definition of Garbled Syntax was something like this: “I’m pretty sure I know what the student’s sentence is intended to mean, but for the sentence actually to say what it means, it needs to be substantially rewritten.” (If the sentence could be fixed by changing just one word or by making single-word changes in various parts of the sentence, then the category was “Wrong Word,” or as we more formally put it on the tally sheet, “Incorrect Word Choice.”) A typical example of what we marked as Garbled Syntax is the following: one student began a paragraph with the transitional clause “If the thought of only being able to obtain certain careers is bad enough,” when she almost certainly meant something more like “As if the thought of being able to obtain only certain careers *were not* bad enough.”

On other occasions, “Garbled Syntax” was the category used when we honestly couldn’t tell what a sentence was intended to mean, as in this sentence from a Comp One paper written by a student whose first (and probably only) language is English: “In the journal of education conducted by Arias, JJ et al suggest that in small economics classes have more discussion between others than used in lecture hall (Arias, 312).” Although this student was clearly trying to capture the look and sound and feel of research-based academic discourse, he apparently lacked the “tacit knowledge” to do so.

“Wrong Word” errors seemed to reflect a similar, albeit less dramatic, decrease in familiarity with academic discourse and the workings of language. This category of errors accounted for 13.6% of the errors in the UWGB study, almost identical to the 13.7 in the 2006 Lunsford and Lunsford study (795). But “Wrong Word” errors accounted for only 7.7% of the errors in the 1986 Connors and Lunsford study (403) and did not appear in the lists of most common errors in any of the earlier studies.

In the UWGB study, as presumably in earlier ones, the “Wrong Word” category was not used for homonym errors (there/their, etc.), nor for incorrect verb forms (lie/lay, etc.), nor for what were essentially stylistic decisions (the student’s use of *thin* where the evaluator would have preferred *slim* or *slender*, for instance). Rather, it was used for vocabulary errors (including misused prepositions) and for faulty predication, as in “The policy intimidates applications” where the intended meaning was probably “The policy intimidates potential applicants.” The following is a typical UWGB-sample sentence containing two different “Wrong Word” errors, one involving *concise* and one involving *for*: “In concise, factory farming operations are a cruel industry that are more trouble for what they are worth.”

Some of the recent increase in “Wrong Word” and “Garbled Syntax” errors may stem from changes in English Composition assignments, as first-year college students are increasingly required to adopt the diction and syntax of research-based academic discourse rather than those of personal narrative. But to some extent, the increase also probably reflects the



changing demographics of college students, in much the same way that Mina Shaughnessy, in *Errors and Expectations*, describes teachers at CUNY suddenly being confronted with new and perplexing categories of errors in student writing after the school adopted open-admissions policies in the 1970s.

In contrast, the one category of error far less likely to be found in the UWGB essays than in the essays examined for previous studies was the category which wasn't counted in the errors-per-100-words statistics: spelling and homonyms. As discussed earlier, most of the improvement over the twentieth-century studies surely stems from the availability of spell check and autocorrect features for the UWGB students. But the students in Lunsford and Lunsford's 2006 study presumably also had access to these features, yet spelling and homonym errors constituted 6.5% of the total errors recorded that in study (795), compared with under 1.4% of the errors in the UWGB papers.

2. How will you use what you've learned from the data that was collected?

## CONCLUSIONS, ALBEIT HIGHLY TENTATIVE ONES

In true Occam's-Razor fashion, the best explanation for the high error rate in the UWGB students' papers may require only the assumption that relatively poorly-prepared students are especially prone to errors. UWGB admissions policies have never been highly selective, and in the past couple of years have become significantly less so. The papers in this sample, coming from First-Year Composition classes, represent some of the first fruits of the school's changing admissions policies. During the 2016-17 school year, UWGB English Composition teachers sometimes observed to one another that students seemed to be arriving in their classes less prepared to write at the college level. Under the circumstances, one might have expected this study to suggest that UWGB English Composition students' papers were more riddled with errors than papers from past national samples of First-Year Composition students. It did.

Still, the types of writing assignments in the UWGB study may also have contributed to the higher error rate. For example, consider the rhetorical situation for the student who wrote this already-quoted passage: "In the journal of education conducted by Arias, JJ et al suggest that in small economics classes have more discussion between others than used in lecture hall (Arias, 312)." In this student's Comp One class, the assignment evidently was to conduct original research in the form of interviews, combine material from those interviews with material from articles in academic journals on the same subject, and write up the results in a long paper that followed the form of experimental reports in the social sciences, with headings such as "Results" and "Discussion." The paper topic—the efficacy of lecture, compared to discussion, in student learning—may have reflected the teacher's interests more than the student's. This assignment may not have created optimum conditions for the student to produce his best writing.

Of course, a strong case can be made for assigning challenging academic-discourse tasks in First-Year Composition, and frequent errors may be a perfectly acceptable side effect of

students' growth in critical thinking and analysis. Certainly, nobody on the assessment committee favors turning the clock back to the era of weekly 500-word themes. Still, it seems fair to ask if the pendulum has now swung a bit too far in the other direction. We should again emphasize that the assessment essays were always the final essay of the semester—typically, the longest and most ambitious essay assigned in the course. Most UWGB Comp teachers begin the semester with a shorter, less demanding essay. But many UWGB Composition classes involve only three essay assignments, yet all UWGB Composition classes must require at least 5,000 words of final-draft writing and most involve at least one MLA-citations paper and one APA-citations paper. Thus, it appears that the length and difficulty level of assignments ratchet up fairly early in the semester. Perhaps UWGB Composition teachers might consider starting the semester with a series of relatively brief, relatively frequent, less conceptually demanding essays, and using these to focus on such traditional elements as thesis, paragraph structure, clarity of expression, and, yes, avoidance of errors, before moving to more challenging assignments and a focus on higher-level skills later in the semester.

In any event, the increasing numbers of under-prepared students on the UWGB campus are not going away any time soon. How should UWGB English Composition teachers respond to their presence in our classes?

One way we should *not* respond is by turning our sections into old-fashioned skill-and-drill classes dominated by grammar exercises. Like evolution and global warming, the anti-grammar-exercises position is backed by a mountain of data from dozens of empirical studies which have found, with monotonous regularity, the total inefficacy of traditional grammar instruction. Thus, an official statement from the Council of Writing Program Administrators states that "Effective writing instruction . . . eschews approaches that lead to less effective writing, such as direct grammar instruction"; a resolution passed by the National Council of Teachers of English states that "the usage of isolated grammar and usage exercises . . . is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing"; and the most comprehensive and most frequently-cited compendium of research on the effects of various pedagogical approaches on student writing, Hillocks' *Research on Written Composition*, concludes that "School boards, administrators, and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional school grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching writing do them a gross disservice which should not be tolerated by anyone concerned with the effective teaching of good writing" (248).

Okay, but if we shouldn't break out the grammar exercises, what *should* we do? For starters, we might try to help students find their most characteristic errors and then, during rough-draft conferences and at other times, help them learn to correct those errors. Assessment Committee members noted that the error-tallying sheets made it easy to see a student's unique "error profile"—and those error-tallying sheets are readily available to all UWGB Composition teachers. While marking every single error in a typical student essay might prove traumatic to the student, a simple tally for one relatively short essay, early in the semester, might help the student to recognize what he or she needs to work on.

Committee members also agreed that we should consider trying harder to get our students to

read their drafts aloud. All the committee members were stunned and disturbed by the frequency of Garbled Syntax and Wrong Word errors in the essays, and all agreed that these problems suggested a need not for traditional grammar exercises but for getting students to look carefully at, and listen closely to, the texts they have written. Assuming students don't have the ear of a Van Gogh, the frequency of Garbled Syntax problems, Wrong Word choices, and other errors might significantly decrease if students could be persuaded to listen to what they had actually written.

Finally, although this study was far more time-consuming than most assessment procedures, and although the time-consuming nature of the project was more than offset (kidding) by the utter tedium of tallying errors in essays and then entering numbers from the tally sheets into a database, the Composition Program might consider revisiting this program outcome in the very near future. The results of this study are provocative and worrisome, and it would be useful to find out whether or not a replication study yields similar results.

### **"Closing the Loop"**

A key component of assessment is "closing the loop"—that is, taking action. The assessment procedure should not simply yield a report that gathers literal dust in some drawer or metaphorical dust in some obscure location online.

In this case, the assessment report will be distributed to all English Composition teachers at UWGB. The results and suggestions will be discussed at a meeting of all the English Composition teachers. After that it will be the obligation of each individual Comp teacher, under the guidance of the new Director of English Composition, to decide how his or her course will deal with The Problem of Error.

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## Appendix A—Error Tallying Sheet Used in the UWGB Study

Essay # \_\_\_\_\_ Error Tally Sheet  
Scorer \_\_\_\_\_

Ground rules: If the same error occurs multiple times in a single sentence, we count only the first occurrence of the error. But if the error recurs in the next sentence, we count it again.

*Error Category* *Number of Errors*

1. Spelling and homonyms

2. Incorrect word choice  
(includes incorrect prepositions but does not include  
incorrect verb case)

3. Obvious typographical error

### **PUNCTUATION**

4. COMMA ERRORS:

4a. After introductory element

4b. Before conjunction in compound sentence

4c. Restrictive/nonrestrictive or  
parenthetical element

4d. Items in series (Oxford comma optional)

4e. Between signal phrase and quotation

4f. Unnecessary comma before conjunction  
in series containing only two elements

4g. Other unnecessary commas

4h. Other comma errors

5. Apostrophe errors

6. Colon or semicolon errors

7. Errors related to quotation marks and/or italics

8. Other punctuation errors

## **SENTENCE BOUNDARIES**

9. Comma splices

10. Fused sentences

11. Apparently unintentional sentence fragments

## **VERBS AND PRONOUNS**

12. Subject-verb agreement errors

13. Shifts in verb tense (past/present, etc.)

14. Incorrect verb form or mood

*(has went, have drank, if I was to, lie/lay, etc.)*

15. Pronoun-antecedent agreement

*(We're accepting anyone/they but not a person/they and not committee/they)*

16. Pronoun "person" shifts

*(shifting from "he" to "you," etc.)*

17. Unclear pronoun reference

18. Inappropriate use of "you"

## **GENERAL GRAMMAR, USAGE, AND CONVENTIONS**

19. Capitalization

20. Garbled syntax

20a. Faulty parallelism

20b. Dangling or misplaced modifiers

21. Problems with "the," "a," or "an"

*(usually but not always ESL)*

22. Inflected endings

*(ing, ed, s, ing)*

23. Other usage problems

*(we're putting "would of" and "could of" here)*

## **TOTAL NUMBER OF ERRORS IN ESSAY**