ERROR ANALYSIS

Error analysis for ESL students involves:
- analysis of errors in your writing
- judging of the accuracy / appropriateness of your writing.
- making the necessary changes to your work

We can identify 3 levels of errors in students’ writing:
- grammar (sentence level) errors,
- paragraph level errors (problems with coherence within the paragraphs, summary sentences, linking phrases and other devices),
- whole text level errors (introduction, thesis statement, direct linear text, etc)
This handout focuses on the grammatical or sentence level errors.

Why is error analysis useful / necessary? How is it used in academic contexts?
Error analysis helps you to:
- make your writing intelligible
- make your ideas clear
- get higher marks (some subjects allocate a percentage of final mark to accuracy in grammar or lack of errors).

Who does an error analysis of your writing?
You – the writer OR your tutor OR another person?
Ideally you do it yourself. The advantage of this is that you become better able to write in an acceptable way. In addition, you can write, evaluate and make required changes to your grammar independently without relying too heavily on other people for support.

How can error analysis be carried out?
- Determine your most serious and frequent sentence errors
- Decide which ones to focus on first (You can’t really expect to eradicate all problems immediately. However you can aim to reduce them).
- Develop a strategy for solving this particular problem.
  - eg. Revise the particular grammatical structure / error by reading a reference book and doing some exercises.
  - Look through your writing for examples of this structure or where you think this structure should be used / is being used incorrectly.
  - Make corrections
  - Take note of any feedback from tutors, lecturers or other people who read your writing.
La Trobe University, LAS(ESL)
Error Analysis – Handout for students

What are some frequent errors made by ESL writers?

Typical errors are:

**Articles**
- A mistake with the article - a, an the, or 0 (the “zero” article)

**Verb tense**
- A mistake with the verb tense.

**Subject Verb Agreement**
- The subject and verb do not agree in number e.g. *They is sleeping/He smoke.*

**Singular / Plural**
- A mistake with number (singular and plural) e.g. *I bought 2 book/one weeks ago.*

**Punctuation**
- Capital letters, full stops, or commas missing.

**Word Class**
- The word is in the wrong class e.g. *She is unemployment.*

**Vocabulary**
- The wrong word is used. e.g. *She is married with an Australian.*

**Sentence structure**
- The sentence is not complete or perhaps is too long and needs to be reorganised.

**Spelling**

What strategies can you use to avoid making these typical errors?

See attached Handout – *Strategies for Error Analysis*

Sources for error correction:


# STRATEGIES FOR ERROR ANALYSIS

| VT = VERB TENSE | 1. understand the uses of verb tenses, especially the present perfect  
2. even when there is a time word/phrase, yesterday, tomorrow, the verb must also express the time  
3. watch the inappropriate shift from one time frame to another  
4. notice verb tenses in your reading |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| VF = VERB FORM  | 1. study rules for formation  
2. listening often does not help eg. help/helped  
3. knows verbs which are followed by infinitive/gerund/base  
4. infinitives have nothing added to them eg. NOT to admitted  
5. some verbs need prepositions eg. compete against, refer to  
6. recognise your phrasal verbs |
| MODALS          | 1. learn their meanings  
2. know their forms |
| COND = CONDITIONALS | 1. know their form  
2. if you want to show a condition and a result, it should be a conditional sentence  
3. check verb forms in both clauses of conditional sentences |
| SS = SENTENCE STRUCTURE | 1. check for patterns in errors  
2. work on those discovered  
3. check for the subject in the sentence  
4. check for common verbs followed by noun clauses. A noun clause begins with the word *that* and functions as a subject or an object. eg. We concluded that the experimental design was flawed. That you have graduated makes the whole family proud.  
5. check for parallel structures eg. Most successful students are skilled at taking notes, summarising and reading critically. |
| WO = WORD ORDER | 1. remember S V O/ S V C  
2. indirect questions eg. When I came home, I wondered where my roommates were.  
3. watch placement of adjectives/adverbs  
4. watch position of adverbial phrases or clauses at the end of a sentence eg. I walked to the cafe this morning. |
| CONN = CONNECTIVES | 1. know their meanings  
|                   | 2. watch if it is a co-ordinating or sub-ordinating  
|                   | 3. consider the logical relationship you want to establish so you use the correct connector |
| PASS = PASSIVE | 1. know how to form them  
|                 | 2. in scientific writing the passive is often preferred  
|                 | 3. check if it is transitive or intransitive/ only transitive verbs can be made passive |
| UNCLEAR | 1. avoid translating from your native language  
|         | 2. say it aloud first, then write  
|         | 3. use words you know rather than “big words”  
|         | 4. if your sentence is unclear, rethink what you want to say and rewrite it  
|         | 5. remember drafting is important. Put your ideas down and then redraft later. |
| SV = SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT | 1. check them |
| ARTICLES | 1. memorize phrases and terminology for your discipline |
| NUM = NUMBER | 1. remember countable and uncountable  
|             | 2. |
| WF = WORD FORM | 1. often referred to as word class. Make sure you use the correct part of speech |
| NONIDIOM = NONIDIOMATIC WRITING | 1. read as much English as possible  
|                                 | 2. Listen carefully to the way English is used  
|                                 | 3. Think in English as much as possible  
|                                 | 4. Ask a friend to read you paper and check for nonidiomatic phrasing |

REFERENCE:

Lane, J. & Lange, E. 1993 Writing clearly: An editing guide Heinle & Heinle, Boston