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Making writing invisible: A Study into the Complexities  
of Standard Written English Acquisition in Higher  
Education

Patricia Ann Hill

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in  
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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Volume I of II

# Abstract

Higher education in the UK has changed from a system catering for an elite, to one which aims to improve the potential of over 40% of young people (Clark, 2003). Whilst not rejecting the idea of education for its own sake, this thesis suggests that one of the purposes of this mass higher education is to fit students for employment. It maintains that for students studying English and Media, this purpose includes the ability to produce Standard Written English. It examines the complexities involved in producing English and Media graduates who have this competence and explores the power relationships involved in teaching and assessing writing. The theories of Bourdieu are used to give a perspective on the use of Standard Written English as an important aspect of cultural capital which distinguishes members of the educated discourse community. Using written work and interview data from fifteen English and Media undergraduates at one university, plus written tutor feedback and comments, it considers the reasons why students might not meet the criteria set. It challenges the notion that because spelling, punctuation and grammar are 'surface features', achieving competence in using them is easy or relatively unimportant. In firmly rejecting the 'student deficit' approach, this thesis maintains that there is a need to openly acknowledge different literacies, their social consequences and the complexities involved in changing writing habits. This acknowledgement then necessitates a curriculum which includes genuine opportunities and encouragement to acquire a valuable asset. It is suggested that in doing so, the UK higher education system can move a step further away from its elitist, gatekeeping function and closer to delivering meaningful qualifications and relevant expertise to those students whose employment prospects are linked to written communication.

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**To Dad**

**16.1.1917 - 28.8.2008**

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# 1. Introduction

This thesis is primarily about developing some aspects of student writing, in particular, the spelling, punctuation and grammar of English and Media undergraduates in the UK. The argument is made for the necessity for these students to be enabled to produce writing that is not entirely error free, but which is within the acceptable spectrum of writing practices encountered within an ‘educated discourse community’<sup>1</sup> and would not distract the reader. This development of their writing to within an acceptable range of competence for proficient writers would make their writing ‘invisible’ and would prevent it from being used, consciously, or unconsciously, as a discriminatory factor against them, either by their tutors or by prospective employers. In demonstrating the complex nature of writing and learning, the case is made for embedding the teaching of the fundamental skills of writing within the curriculum content in a positive and proactive way.

Firstly, it is necessary to explore the wider context in which this writing is set. The expansion of UK higher education since the 1960s, often referred to as ‘widening participation’, has prompted protracted debates about the purposes of higher education. There are those who regard universities as a necessary breeding ground for all ‘critical thinkers’ (Radford, 1997, p45) and as the ‘critical conscience of society’ (Barnett, 2004, p195). Their argument is that universities should be outside the framework of ordinary societal and political pressures so that a body of people can exist who eschew commercial criteria and concentrate on making improvements to the modern world. Grahame F. Thompson suggests that universities should be institutions

where those with ideas, with intellectual creativity and with capacities for cultural innovativeness are given a space to think and encouraged to offer advice and find

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘educated discourse community’ is discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

solutions to the pressing politico-economic problems of the day (Thompson, 2000, p161).

The contention is that this intellectual elite could come from all walks of life, and that University is a place where individuals should be encouraged to maximise their potential to ‘use their minds effectively through understanding ideas, mastering knowledge, and developing the ability to criticise theories and ideas’ (Edwards, 1997, p 235). Another perceived purpose of higher education, against which these high ideals are often weighed, is that of providing society with graduates who are adequately prepared to fill the gaps in the employment market. So, as well as the qualities depicted above, Kenneth Edwards, in his UK contribution to a world wide survey of the state of higher education, also suggests that students should be helped to develop ‘core transferable skills: teamwork, communication skills, problem solving skills, a reasonable knowledge of information technology and information systems’ (1997, p236).

The argument that a higher education system which fulfils this purpose cannot *also* produce the type of critical thinkers that can change the world for the better, is largely based on the premise that economic and political constraints on universities will force them into restricting those who are capable of formulating radical ideas. Alan Bundy (2004) in his influential work on information literacy, calls for universities to maintain their role as ‘the conscience of society’ despite being involved in “‘knowledge production” - with its echoes of the conveyor belt’ (p174). Such pleas for academic integrity are often linked to concerns that ‘widening participation’, an ongoing government strategy which has seen participation in UK higher education rise from 6% in the 1960s to ‘around 43% today’ (DfES 2003), will be responsible for diluting the power of higher education as standards are lowered to accommodate those who are not part of that ‘intellectual elite’:



The key question here is whether the university as an institution of culture and ideas can coexist with a trend towards potential mass mediocrity and managerial commercialisation. (Thompson 2000, p161)

Thompson usefully promotes this ‘coexistence’ as a necessary feature of the modern university which enables both research and teaching to flourish, whilst fulfilling the different demands made of it and resisting ‘the reduction of the universities to a homogenous dull uniformity’ (2000, p160).

In 1992, many new UK universities were created from former polytechnics which had been viewed as serving the vocational element in higher education. Although there are those that bemoan the loss of this dual system in the UK, where the intellectual, academic version of higher education that Thompson discusses was largely separated from the vocational (Lea, 1999), this situation is unlikely to be reversed. John Radford (1997, p7), in his perceptive review of the changing purposes of higher education, points out that ‘universities have always been changing’ and will continue to do so; he sensibly advocates a move away from comparisons with the past towards questioning what higher education can do for a ‘wider range of students than hitherto’ (Radford *et al.*, 1997, p47). The large body of work produced on standards in higher education, and whether or not they will inevitably be lowered as a result of widening participation, has brought about a clear acknowledgement of,

the diverse nature of UK higher education in terms of the different purposes and missions of individual institutions, the differences between subject disciplines, and differences between students’ prior achievements experiences and abilities. (Williams, 1997, p72)

This then allows for a discourse which is not prescribed by a narrow or elitist view of the purposes of higher education but which can accept that society may benefit from developing educational potential in the majority rather than in a minority.

In accepting that higher education institutions and disciplines may have very different priorities, one of the priorities to be considered is that of fitting graduates for employment. There is much debate in government, academic and business circles about what type of employment this might be. Lancaster University's Anthony Hesketh (1998), in a large scale study on graduate employment, found that 'growth has stalled. Lower-skilled jobs have expanded at far faster rates than knowledge-worker jobs'; using evidence from Brown and Hesketh's book *The Mismanagement of Talent* (2004), BBC education correspondent, Mike Baker, suggests that 'Maybe, like investing in houses, no-one can be really certain that investing in a degree will continue to be worthwhile' (Baker, 2004). The Government, predicts that 80% of new jobs created in the next decade will be in higher-level occupations (DfES, 2003), yet a report from Cardiff University suggests that,

its general findings raise serious doubts about the claims made about graduate earnings and employment trends in the White Paper on the Future of Higher Education that informed new legislation on the future funding of higher education in England. (Brown and Smetherem, 2005, pviii)

A survey on English graduates (Prospects UK, 2006a) found that a high proportion of graduates work in clerical or secretarial, rather than professional posts. Whatever the actual situation, all graduates need to be able to compete for jobs in their field,<sup>2</sup> whether those positions are at graduate level or simply in the right industry to gain relevant experience of the field. This thesis concentrates on undergraduates reading English and Media from one Northern University but the discussion necessarily puts this topic in a much wider context.

In order to compete in the job market, graduates are often said to require 'key skills' and communication is generally listed as one of these.<sup>3</sup> In a DfEE<sup>4</sup> supported project, Gordon Weller (1999) found that, irrespective of degree discipline, 'employers show preference to

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<sup>2</sup> See later discussion of what these jobs might be.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of transferable skills is contested and will be discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>4</sup> Department for Education and Employment.

new graduates who can demonstrate competence in ...Communication [skills]' (p2). Research shows that 90% of the employers surveyed rated communication skills as important, compared to only 10% of employers who rated numeracy as important (Surrey University,1996). Oral and written communication skills also feature as essential criteria in many other surveys, both internationally and in the UK: Hesketh, 1998; Neilson, 2000; Curry *et al.*, 2003; Edwards, 2005, supporting the idea that graduates need to be good, all round communicators in order to compete within the employment market.

Much of the sociolinguistic research in the area of communication has concentrated on speech; Lankshear *et al.* (1997), Milroy and Milroy (1985, 1999), and Peter Trudgill (1984, 1992) have all argued very clearly for the equality of language varieties. They suggest that 'non-standard forms are not simply debased variants of standards and [ ...] can be shown to be 'grammatical' in their own terms' (Milroy and Milroy, 1985, p8). In these debates, writing is usually mentioned only marginally:

Whereas the writing system requires a high degree of uniformity so that messages may be transmitted over time and distance in a clear and unambiguous manner, speech is a social activity. (Milroy and Milroy, 1999, p 69)

This thesis focuses on the less obvious premise that writing is also a social activity. In an analysis of employment strategies in *PRWeek*<sup>5</sup> (May, 2006), a human resources director of a large firm was quoted as saying 'First we reject outright all those who use bad grammar and can't spell. That gets rid of most of them' (p15). This suggests that the judgements that employers make about individuals are not only based on what they write but also on how they write it. The ability to write following the conventions of Standard English<sup>6</sup> is one of the

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<sup>5</sup> A well established international PR publication.

<sup>6</sup> '...distinguished from other forms of English by its vocabulary, and by the rules and conventions of grammar, spelling and punctuation' (Department of Education, 1995). The use of this term is discussed in detail in part two of the literature review pp63/68.

criteria on which prospective graduate employees are often judged. Universities, therefore, have some responsibility in ensuring that graduates are proficient in Standard English so that they can compete in the employment market, yet a recent survey by the Recruitment and Employment Commission (REC) complains that ‘Around half of all CVs received by recruitment consultants contain spelling or grammatical errors’ and ‘In this age group [21-25] graduates are twice as likely to make mistakes as those who did not go to university’ (Jones and Ashton, 2007). This raises an interesting question on the effect of university education on the development of student writing; this thesis engages with this question by examining the complexity involved in that development.

In exploring how key skills, including written communication, are embedded in university courses, John Brennan (1992), in his work with the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, suggests that particular types of degree require different relationships with employers. Whereas vocational degrees have a very specific employment preparation requirement, non-vocational degrees are providing graduates for an ‘open market’ where there is necessarily a reliance on ‘more general and transferable knowledge and skills’ (p12). Degrees in English and Media are often classified within general Humanities disciplines, and as such might be regarded as non-vocational. Good communication skills, however, are more than general skills in these disciplines; they are part of the content as set out in QAA benchmark statements. The English benchmark document calls for ‘[a]dvanced communication skills and the ability to apply these skills in appropriate contexts’ (English Subject Centre, 2004); the Media statement requires ‘[a]n understanding of the roles of communication systems, modes of representations and systems of meaning in the ordering of societies’ (QAA, 2005, 3.1.1) and the ability to ‘communicate effectively in inter-personal settings, in writing and in a variety of media (QAA, 2005, 5.5). These requirements are

related to the type of employment that graduates in these disciplines are expected to fill. Teaching is a significant goal for many English graduates and many of them also fulfil clerical and secretarial roles, 10.9% and 23.8% respectively (Prospects UK, 2006b). A significant proportion of Media students also go into clerical and secretarial work (20.4%) whilst the Media, literary work and advertising are shown as major career destinations ((Prospects UK, 2006b). These types of employment rely heavily on good written communication skills and employers might logically expect that graduates in English and Media possess them.

This specific requirement for fostering good written communication skills in these students is usefully discussed initially within the context of general higher education literacy. For undergraduates as a whole, Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams (2004), in her Royal Literary Fund (RLF) *Report on the Teaching of Academic Writing in UK Higher Education* clearly documents a perceived literacy crisis (p5). In exploring responses to this, she details the influential theory of ‘academic literacies’ proposed by Lea and Street (1998b). They suggest that the ‘crudity’ and ‘insensitivity’ of the study skills approach has been followed by ‘academic socialization’ which relies upon notions of appropriate writing for a particular purpose; these two approaches are then encapsulated within a more general ‘academic literacies’ framework which allows for ‘a more complex and contested interpretation’ (Lea and Street 2000, p44). The conclusion of Ganobcsik-Williams is that this framework can be used to ‘inform each of the approaches to student writing’<sup>7</sup> so that ‘teaching staff...do not limit their pedagogical methods to those that only see writing as a set of itemized skills or departmental conventions to be learned’ (2004, p37). This RLF report rightly puts emphasis

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<sup>7</sup> Approaches include: Dedicated One-to-One tutoring; Study Support/Study Skills; Peer Tutoring in Academic Writing; General Writing Courses; Teaching Writing within Subject Disciplines; Academic Writing Programmes; Staff and Postgraduate Development in Teaching Academic Writing; Computerised Support for Student Writing

on ‘making meaning’ and the acknowledgement that writing needs to be viewed from all of the differing perspectives of the institution and students in a way that reflects the inherent power structures within the academic community rather than simply one of ‘student deficit’ (Lea and Street, 1998a; Lea and Stierer, 2000; Cartwright and Noone, 2003).

Although strongly supporting the value of this more realistic, complex and egalitarian approach to student writing, this thesis emphasises not only the specific need to engage students in discussion about the effects of using non-standard writing features but also the need for developing strategies that will enable them to clearly identify those differences and adjust their writing if they choose to do so. Eradicating differences would allow their writing to become ‘invisible’ so that the reader would not be distracted from the content, nor be able to discriminate against the writer. This position is not conceived with an attitude of ‘student deficit’ but from one that works towards giving students a realistic choice in determining their academic and employability status. As Norman Fairclough (1989) points out in his work on language and power: ‘whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects’ (p23).

The argument in this thesis is not about general academic literacy but about social literacy in 21<sup>st</sup> century England. Lea and Stierer (2000, p4) rightly challenge the system that uses the term ‘good writing’ as if it were homogenous across all disciplines. Their call for more explicit dialogue about what this constitutes, both at student/tutor and at institutional level, has been a valuable impetus for change. The concentration on the production of formal Standard English in this thesis could easily be regarded as a backward step in a move towards acknowledging the complexity of academic writing. I would argue, however, that it is crucial not to lose sight of the importance of being able to produce formal, Standard Written English

in a competitive world. Although this is a requirement of the British education system from a very young age through the National Curriculum, the fact that many children do not acquire this proficiency is well documented. Those who do have this ability are those who are generally regarded as 'educated'. When students come to university without this proficiency, I would contend that it is not enough to blame the system so far but that it is the responsibility of the higher education system to provide students with the opportunity to gain a level of literacy which will allow them to benefit from their level of education. As this thesis will show, this is not a straightforward proposition.

One of the main purposes of a modern education is said to be to produce a literate society but there are many different concepts of literacy. As Nancy Grimm points out in her powerful exposition of writing centre work in America: 'Because literacy is not culturally neutral, even though many pretend it is, changes in literacy involve changes in our understanding of identity, politics, and relationships' (Grimm, 1999, p45). This concept of powerful literacy is associated with life changing advancement and a means of gaining political power. In her discussion on *Literacy and the Politics of Writing*, Albertine Gaur (2000) establishes this link between literacy and power by documenting the challenge for those in power to balance the need for a literate society with the need to maintain the status quo in which their power is based. She discusses the British 'two-tier' system, established in the nineteenth century, in which public schools were used to educate the 'governing elite', and state schools were used to give 'just enough literary knowledge to teach the children of the poor how to read the Bible and learn from it how to be industrious, while still accepting their place in a **carefully graded society**' (p174, my emphasis). The present government suggests that widening participation in higher education, as well as providing a fairer system, is a necessary step in fulfilling society's requirements for knowledge workers (DfES 2003) but British education is still

steeped in a class-based hierarchy. Employers are still making distinctions based on the higher education establishment from which students graduate by distinguishing ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities. Kate Hilpern, of *The Independent*, quotes employers who say that they ‘look at the calibre of the university, not the degree’ (2004). I would argue that another powerful distinction that employers use is based on the competent use of Standard English. It may be difficult to move away from this ‘two-tier’ higher education system in terms of which university is attended, but in striving to improve the level of social literacy of all graduates we can, perhaps, move towards ensuring that their writing becomes ‘invisible’ so that it cannot be used as another marker in our still ‘carefully graded society’.

Although the move towards acknowledging and valuing literacies other than the dominant standard is an important and positive one, the discussion of ‘new literacies’ and the concentration on literacy as a process of meaning-making related to individual identities should not lose sight of the continuing importance of literacy as a social tool:

Literacy – of whatever type – only has consequences as it acts together with a large number of other social factors, including political and economic conditions, social structures, and local ideologies. (Gee 1996, p53)

In her report, Ganobcsik-Williams quotes Lea and Street (1998b) as saying that their academic literacies model should promote ‘ a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities’ (2004, p36).

Whilst agreeing wholeheartedly with these aims, this thesis is not only concerned with promoting genuine dialogue on these power relationships but also questions how students will specifically develop the writing skills which will allow them to take advantage of this knowledge if they so wish.



In a powerful dismantling of John Honey's<sup>8</sup> arguments for language standardisation based on claims of superiority for Standard English, James Lantolf (1998, p35-43) states how important it is to 'raise the consciousness of those communities and speakers who have been marginalized by the ideology of standardization' (p43). Simply pointing out the iniquities in the system, however, does not alter the system, and Lantolf accepts that the process of standardisation is not easily challenged. The reasons for this are complex but this thesis adopts a perspective based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1992,1996) that conceptualizes a society where instruments of power such as standardisation are so firmly entrenched that they appear 'legitimized' and are upheld even by the people who are subjugated by them. If we accept the premise that language standardisation and the power that it holds in society are immovable, or at most will change extremely slowly, then it is imperative that we give students the encouragement and opportunity to acquire that standard. This is not supporting Honey's stance of the inherent superiority of Standard English but is supporting the provision of opportunity to access positions of power in a society that equates the use of Standard English with being educated.<sup>9</sup>

Carole King, in her impassioned plea for teachers to empower young writers, describes writing as a 'complex social, cultural and historical activity, involving both affective and cognitive processes' (2000, p28). She says that 'concentration on the surface, rather than the deep structures of writing, negates the power of writing' (2000, p28). Ann Hinkle (1997) also argues that 'written responses to writing which focus on compositional features generally lead to improvements on transcriptional features' (p165). Their argument appears to be that if writing is engaged with on a 'deeper level' then the 'surface features' will take care of themselves. The number of students who graduate without competence in these transcriptional

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<sup>8</sup> Professor of English and author of *Language is Power* (1997). See p36 for more discussion.

<sup>9</sup> See Watts, R., (1999, pp 40-68) for a clear historical account of how this equation developed.

features would suggest otherwise. This tension between hearing the student voice, thus encouraging making meaning through writing, and the need to see writing as a social tool which is judged on deeply embedded notions of ‘appropriateness’ is a major strand of exploration in this thesis.

Whilst concentrating on deeper structures of writing is crucial in encouraging writers of all ages, it also needs to be acknowledged that writing is a social activity bound by conventions and that not following those conventions has consequences in how the writer is perceived. Unintentional lapses in spelling, punctuation and grammar are regarded as evidence of a poor education, and graduates are at a disadvantage if they leave university without the ability to edit their writing to an acceptable standard. Michael Stubbs (1986), in his respected work on educational linguistics, maintains that Standard English is ‘related in particular to the power and wealth of the educated middle classes and, conversely is used to exclude others from certain roles and professions’ (p85). Many educated, middle class researchers in this area rightly react against the propensity to see writing as ‘an autonomous set of easily generated skills’ (Russell, 1999, p1). They do so by calling for a deeper approach that acknowledges the complexity of the writing process and engages the student in writing ‘at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialization’ (Lea & Street, 1998b, p159). This thesis maintains that this dismissal of ‘skill or socialization’ is only available to those who are already skilled or socialized and that this is one way in which academics, consciously or not, ‘exclude others’ from their profession. It is important to listen to and value what individual students have to say, but it is equally important to acknowledge that the way they communicate their ideas will have an impact on who listens to them and how seriously they will be taken.

Whatever the variations in written English, whether these are to do with varieties such as American or Australian versus British English, or ‘old fashioned’ versus contemporary English, it should be possible to compile a list of features which most people involved in education in England would *broadly* agree are necessary for formal written English, such as the use of the apostrophe and acceptable spelling and syntax. Ganobcsik-Williams (2004) details the problems associated with gaining a complete consensus, but a well known American proponent of teaching writing, Professor Peter Elbow, gives a useful definition of Standard Written English as ‘the usage, grammar, syntax, punctuation and spelling that will pass muster with most university faculty [...] as correct or at least acceptable’ (2000, p324). I have adopted the term Standard Written English when talking specifically about writing, as it helps to differentiate more clearly the difference between spoken and written forms. Although such conventions may not be regarded as of major importance in the vast cultural complexity associated with writing, failure to understand and follow these conventions could result in a writer being excluded from what is perceived as the ‘educated discourse community’.<sup>10</sup>

In the research literature consulted for this thesis, not one piece of writing was in anything other than formal, Standard Written English apart from student work, so although linguists often denounce the ‘complaint tradition’ and make comments that there are more important aspects of language than whether or not to use ‘*like* as a conjunction’ (Wardaugh, 1999, p182), they do so from the advantageous and powerful position gained from being able to communicate clearly in formal, Standard Written English. It is disingenuous for competent writers to suggest that insistence on this is pedantic when their command of it is an asset of which they take full advantage, and this creates a challenge. In foregrounding issues of identity, complexity and power relationships in writing, contemporary scholars offer a

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<sup>10</sup> The use of this term is discussed in detail in part two of the literature review.

valuable framework that can be used to confront the dominant ideologies that maintain the elitist element in higher education. It is my contention that this is necessarily a slow process and, in the meantime, it is important to give today's students not only a critical and realistic perspective but also the practical help necessary for them to take advantage of their hard-earned qualifications in an increasingly competitive environment.

The next chapter of this thesis reviews the literature in the field. The first part of the review covers relevant theory and establishes definitions and use of terminology. The second part of the review aims to establish the writing requirements for UK English and Media graduates in the context of writing as a complex and individual process with myriad aspects to consider; it examines what we ask of students and why. It begins with an overview of the higher education context in which these requirements are set. The purposes of higher education are shown to be diverse and contested. The insistence that 'it is impossible to completely fragment writing' (Hinkle, 1999, p2) so that content and expression are seen as discrete elements is discussed in relation to the way that writing is used to assess the writer, both consciously and unconsciously. The conceptual framework that supports the existence of an educated discourse community is explored along with specific features that might result in exclusion from that community both in academia and employment. Attitudes towards language standardisation are examined with relation to tutor and employer expectations of English and Media graduates.

Chapter Three details the methodology, firstly depicting the pilot study and then detailing the process by which a sample of student writing was collected and analysed in order to establish which elements of their writing were 'visible' as non-standard, and whether or not this diminished through time.

In the first part of the results in Chapter Four, the problems that students have in meeting the requirements outlined in the literature review are illustrated. The means used to convey those requirements to students are examined, and extracts from the writing of 15 undergraduates are analysed in order to illustrate any gaps between the requirements and these students' writing skills. The complex nature of writing precludes any simple assessment but samples of writing from each student exemplify features that could be regarded as non-standard and outside the expected range of competence for an English or Media graduate. Tutor and student perceptions of the situation are discussed with reference to particular examples and these are put in context of the cognitive and social demands which writing makes on each of us, both as writer and reader. Where student writing does not meet the requirements discussed earlier, there is an attempt to document possible reasons; this includes reference to the cognitive aspects of writing which could affect the students' ability to change their writing habits; the institutional procedures which might have inhibited such change and the implications that this has for the student, the higher education system and society.

Chapter Five continues the exploration of student writing through the results of a more quantitative approach based on close scrutiny of 277 collected assignments from 15 students. The quantitative data is used as a starting point to illustrate changes for individual students, and any possible patterns are explored using insights gained from qualitative data.

Chapter Six gives the study context by exploring the different strategies that are employed for the improvement of student writing. This ranges from documenting the spectrum of strategies employed throughout higher education based on surveys and scholarly writing, reviewing the latest ideas on possible ways forward, to a discussion on the tensions in using feedback as a strategy for writing development within a criteria-based assessment framework.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by documenting where these strategies will fail without radical changes in perspective and attitudes. Some shift of responsibility from learner to teacher and institution is crucial if students are to develop sufficiently in their writing to reap the promised rewards of higher education. The move in scholarship towards valuing the student voice is applauded but this cannot be done at the expense of ignoring the social aspects of writing that rely on the acceptability of ‘surface features’, nor can it ignore the complexity involved in changing adult writing habits. Despite widening participation, higher education in the UK is shown to be still working from a gatekeeping perspective and existing power relationships are supported by the ideology that accepts Standard English as the uncontested norm rather than the social dialect of the privileged that can be used as a tool of discrimination. In order to combat this discrimination, students need to be able to produce ‘invisible’ writing that falls within an acceptable range of competence. Undergraduates in English and Media, many of whom aspire to teaching and professional media careers, need to engage in this debate in a positive way and be encouraged and enabled to develop the necessary competencies to be able to join the system – or to change it.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 General Literature Review.

The first part of this review of literature begins with an appraisal of the purposes of higher education, and although acknowledging its important role as a critic and conscience of society (Dearing 1997, section 5), it also establishes that producing employable graduates is one of those purposes. The discussion on what constitutes an employable student leads to a focus on the need for them to be able to communicate well in writing. It goes on to consider arguments on what aspects of writing are important and why. The rationale behind strategies recommended to foster these aspects of writing, and why they may or may not be successful, are also explored.

The second part of the literature review considers more specifically the writing requirements for English and Media graduates both in academia and in employment. It explores the complexity associated not only with defining the social and academic conventions but also those attitudes to language and education that conspire, both consciously and unconsciously, to exclude. It details the contextual and cultural influences on writing requirements which might make it difficult for academics to acknowledge or change their role in this exclusion process and those which make prioritising different aspects of student writing development challenging for everyone involved. The notion of a standard language is explored along with those attitudes that serve to obscure and minimise the inherent values underpinning academic writing practices.

Higher education in the UK has expanded and changed dramatically over the last thirty years, and its purpose has been hotly contested in government and educational circles. *The Dearing*

*Report of 1997* was largely adopted as a blueprint for an expanded higher education system.

In considering the purposes of higher education, Dearing was given a list of five points reflecting the Department for Education and Employment's (DfEE) view. The first of these points was 'imparting employment skills' (Dearing 1997, section 5.9); after consideration, the Committee produced a separate list of four points in place of this one phrase where the first item was:

to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well-equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment. (Dearing 1997, section 5.11)

This expansion and change in emphasis from employment skills to individual growth and fulfilment demonstrates just how complex the ideas on the purposes of higher education are. They range from those who believe that the higher education system should be for members of an intellectual elite who guide society in moral and ethical dilemmas and push back the frontiers of knowledge (Thompson 2000), through to those who believe that everyone is entitled to higher education which fulfils their individual potential and that this would benefit society generally. Even within the arguments of those who are in favour of expanding higher education, the views range from those who visualise universities as the 'critical conscience of society' (Barnett 2004, p195), capable of changing how society works by empowering students with radical ideas, and those who see university as a means of acquiring higher level knowledge which will allow graduates to fit into and benefit society as it exists by filling gaps in the employment market.

One of the proponents of the latter position has been Sir Christopher Ball (1983), a leading figure in the UK educational establishment, who, at the 1990 conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), called for a 'responsive model' in which we



‘...explore the limits of participation which will be useful and profitable to society and rewarding for the individual’. He has called for a ‘radical change’ in the education system, and consistently promotes a vision of higher education for the masses rather than an exclusive, gatekeeping one which is valued more for its ‘scarcity than its substance’ (Ball 1990). Ball sees higher education as a necessary vehicle for maximising individual potential in a way that benefits everyone. In a House of Lords debate on lifelong learning, Baroness Blatch (2001), as education spokesperson for the Conservative Party, emphasised the ongoing relevance of Ball’s stance with the following quote:

In the 21st Century those individuals who do not practise life-long learning will not find work; those organisations which do not become learning organisations will not survive; those schools, colleges and universities which do not put their students first will not recruit. (Ball, 1996 in Blatch, 2001)

Although Ball has a ‘market forces’ perspective, he also promotes a student centred approach and does so in a way that accentuates his philosophy that learning is a similar process for children and adults. His keen interest in the education of pre-schoolers and a belief that learning should be a positive experience are central to his attitude to higher education; this appears to deny any real barriers to learning as he says that failure can always be put down to one of three causes: ‘lack of clarity of aims, no true determination to succeed and inability or unwillingness to learn’ (Ball 2003). This linking of ‘inability’ and ‘unwillingness’, however, highlights a fundamental contradiction at the heart of his case, as they are entirely different issues and need to be dealt with as such. A student who is unwilling to learn can be ‘coached’ as he suggests, but by acknowledging an ‘inability’ to learn he opens up the wider issues of innate ability and different intellectual resources which are part of the ‘widening participation’ debate, and are also central to any discussion of the purposes of higher education.

In his argument, Ball makes a clear link between education and employment; his assertion that ‘all universities are businesses’ and subject to market forces connects with his belief that equal opportunity problems disappear if professional standards are maintained (Ball 2003). This is a key point, as the argument that widening participation means a lowering of those professional standards is a hotly contested issue. As Peter Scott, former editor of *The Times Educational Supplement* and Vice Chancellor of Kingston University, puts it:

The present moment in Britain may be recalled as the time when a still inward-looking system of higher education was irreversibly opened up, rather as America’s was between 1945 and 1970, to the immeasurable benefit of all; or as the time when the ill-defined but deeply-etched “quality” of British universities and colleges was lost as irreversibly. (Scott 1993 in Radford *et al.*, 1997, p8)

Ball is strongly in favour of this opening up and his belief in the value of mass higher education is well argued but is challenged by those who believe that in order to function effectively higher education needs to be exclusive, and is only for those 10-15 per cent who are capable of coping with the intellectual rigour of a ‘traditional’ university course (Lea, 1999). Ruth Lea, Director of the Centre for Policy Studies<sup>1</sup>, argues that the expansion of higher education through the creation of more universities is a mistake and that the ‘clearly differentiated academic and vocational pathways’ of the former polytechnic and university system worked much better (Lea, 2006). This division of higher education into ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ is counterproductive and one of the recommendations of the Dearing report was that this artificial division should diminish (1997). All undergraduates should be required to approach their discipline from an academic and critical stance and even the most cerebral usually have to earn a living. The premise that scholarship is worth doing for its own sake is one that is at the heart of traditional higher education, and should never be lost, but the expansion of higher education means that the majority of those entering must be able to use

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<sup>1</sup> Think tank on UK policies set up by Conservative politicians, Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph, in 1974.

their knowledge in some capacity, whether that means gaining relevant employment or being funded for further scholarship and research.

The argument for an elite higher education system is complex and proponents often defend their views in historical terms by referring to a legacy going as far back as Ancient Greece (Radford *et al.* 1997, p17). In *Quantity and Quality in Higher Education*, John Radford, although not identifying with elitist attitudes, details the various perspectives, spanning those who regret ‘the passing of a golden age’ when higher education was based on Plato’s model of producing a ‘virtuous elite [who] would become suitable governors of society’ (p18) to those who regard universities as ‘enterprises in the knowledge industry’ (p46). Radford pleads for a system which produces ‘practical, high level skills combined with wider awareness (educational, cultural, and so on), personal autonomy and social responsibility’ rather than one which tries ‘vainly to provide for vastly increased numbers a cut-price, off the shelf version of what was once an elite education of a particular specialised kind’( pp178-9). Radford’s detailed and lucid account of these perspectives, followed by an even-handed and coherent discussion on the ‘ends and means’ of higher education, leads him to a reasonable goal of producing graduates who are critically and culturally aware of their own society and their place within it. As Melanie Walker suggests in a more recent analysis of the context of higher education, it is becoming more difficult to ‘measure and quantify the goods a higher *education* ought to produce, or how instrumental pedagogies are to support universities’ claims as places “of debate, of openness...in which ideas ferment and persons can flourish” (Barnett 2003:177)’ (2005, p11). What is apparent is that this ideal can only be pursued with a radical shift in perspective from those responsible for devising and delivering higher education curricula. An overwhelming focus on traditional discipline content and summative assessment can mean that the necessary space for critical reflection of any kind is sadly lacking.

In 1997, Radford's compelling argument was that if we, as university educators, took more notice of educational research and past successes, then we could build on these rather than 're-inventing the wheel'. He cites the 'close personal relationship of tutor and student' at Oxbridge; the 'flexibility, explicit aims, openness and co-operative peer accountability' of the polytechnics, and the 'non-traditional teaching methods' of the Open University as some examples of best practice from which a diverse and responsive higher education system should learn (p179). In the last ten years, there have been system changes which mean that the gulf between different types of university has been bridged, but there is still some way to go in ensuring that best practice is shared and that students across the UK are given the best possible chance to reach their potential, irrespective of the institution they attend. Radford is not very clear about how improvements in teaching strategies necessarily result in an increase in a student's 'wider awareness' and 'social responsibility'. But, as Walker points out:

How to teach (and what to teach) is [...] a practical expression of whether existing cultural, economic and political patterns in any society ought to be reproduced or transformed. (2005, p12)

So a first step towards a reflective student must be a reflective teacher, and it would seem sensible to question teaching practices in higher education in light of what needs to be achieved by society as a whole as well as by the individual.

Peter Scott, another champion of mass higher education, bemoans the apparent loss of the idea that, 'by expanding its social base, the intellectual and cultural possibilities of the university are enlarged' (Scott 2001). Over several years, he has espoused the idea that higher education should have better aims than 'social inclusion' that 'incorporate[s] 'them' into 'our' society'. This division into 'them' and 'us' is central to this thesis as it identifies language as

one of the main markers by which people are included or excluded.<sup>2</sup> Developing the intellectual and cultural possibilities to which Scott refers is one of the aims of widening participation but the reality of conservative attitudes to language prevalent in academia means that unless ‘they’ talk and write like ‘us’ they are not going to be heard on an equal basis and the power still rests with ‘us’ to accept or reject ‘them’, largely on the basis of so called ‘surface features’<sup>3</sup> of language: spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Scott challenges the idea that a new university is somehow less able than the elite universities of the past to act as an ‘independent critic of society’ and maintains that these erroneous ideas are

based on idealized myths of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, which ignore the collusive relationships between political, social, economic and cultural elites on the one hand and intellectual, academic and scientific elites on the other. (Scott 2004)

This is an open acknowledgement of an elite system, and his discussion on ethics in higher education stresses that ethical considerations have become intrinsic to a system that is required to be more socially accountable and responsible than in the past. Scott’s perceptive account clearly acknowledges the positive elements of an expanded higher education system and debunks the myth of a ‘golden age’, but he is still inevitably part of that elite system<sup>4</sup> and there are those who consider that some problems associated with a rapidly growing higher education sector cannot be solved without ‘a democratic reconstruction of the entire society’ (Ainley, 1994, pxiii).

Patrick Ainley’s pessimistic, but perhaps realistic, view is reflected in his assessment that:

The aspiration for professional education for all in a learning society therefore remains largely rhetorical. It would imply not only higher education for all but careers for all.

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<sup>2</sup> These ideas are explored more fully in Chapter Two.

<sup>3</sup> The use of this term is discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>4</sup> See discussion on how this system is maintained as ‘legitimate’ later in this chapter.

The social implications of taking such a slogan seriously challenge deeply engrained hierarchies of interest and habit. They are too far-reaching for the powers that be to entertain seriously. (Ainley, 1994, p41)

Although his ideas are very different to those of Ruth Lea, Ainley also categorises higher education institutions into two strands of a hierarchy, where ‘cultural’ is regarded as superior to ‘vocational’. He suggests that those at the top will continue to take the most able students from the middle classes and confirm their cultural status, whilst at the other end of the scale the vocational universities will give a limited education which will result in a ‘new professional proletariat, selling, contracting and marketing its services in increasingly desperate competition with others.’ Ainley calls for a halt to ‘the further fragmentation of a once unitary academic culture of generalised knowledge’ and a return to the fundamental purpose of education: ‘to get people thinking’(1994, p185). This stance rightly calls into question the assumption, implicit in Ruth Lea’s call for a return to the exclusive model of higher education, that those involved in vocational courses are not capable of a higher level of thought. This thesis suggests that this perception is closely linked to attitudes to language that assume a correlation between the use of formal Standard English and intellectual ability.<sup>5</sup>

Ainley’s assertion that education is ‘not essentially or even mainly concerned with employment’ along with a plea to ‘combine general with vocational knowledge’, is an idealistic but essentially practical one (Ainley, 1994, p187). His contention that this would ‘unmask the pretence of vocational higher education to guarantee secure professional employment for all’ (1994, p187) is a truer reflection of an increasingly competitive society. As degrees become more commonplace, employers have to find other ways of selection, and Ainley argues quite rationally that, in order to compete or even survive, today’s graduates need to be able to place their own educational experience ‘in the context of a sociology of learning that emphasise[s] the cultural as well as the material distinctions between differently

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<sup>5</sup> See Lillis, 2000 pp 39/40 for a similar claim against those who assume ‘essayist literacy practices’ are the norm.

advantaged and disadvantaged groups within society' (Ainley, 1994, p30). Use of language is one of the more obvious factors that employers use in the selection process (Carey & Weiner, 2006). Many employers suggest that they reject applicants purely on writing skills without giving any real attention to what the writer says.<sup>6</sup> This is a crucial point for undergraduates to be made aware of and, as discussed throughout this thesis, although there are demanding reasons for not concentrating solely on the 'skills' aspect of writing, it makes the relegation of spelling, punctuation and grammar to the status of less important 'surface features' a grave mistake.

Ainley's motives, however, are not simply aimed at improving individual employment prospects but at improving society generally; he talks of a 'meaningful education in which learners themselves decide what is worth learning' (Ainley, 2006). He illustrates the practical benefits of his approach in an account of persuading first year, Youth and Community degree students that embedding 'academic literacy' skills into their course was essential if they were going to use their degree to establish themselves within a management framework which relied upon formal written communication (Ainley, 2006). This rightly puts language at the forefront of the arguments regarding social inclusion and widening participation. I would argue that his idea of self-reflection in a cultural context can motivate students to acknowledge that module content is not the only important learning that higher education offers and that in order to benefit fully from higher education they *also* need to be critically aware of language as a social tool.

In making a case for higher education to produce 'critical beings', Ronald Barnett (1997) takes Ainley's idea of self-reflection further and details it as only one of eight forms of reflection. His conclusion that self-reflection in higher education is 'arrested at superficial

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<sup>6</sup> An extensive American survey of businesses conducted by The National Commission on Writing found that 86% of respondents would regard poorly written applications as 'extremely prejudicial' (2004).

levels' (p101) is a potent one in relation to language. Barnett maintains that students are often asked to reflect, but only within the confines of an established power structure; although they may be encouraged to question power differentials in an educational or employment setting, they are restricted by the requirement to accept 'given external agendas' (Barnett, 1997, p101). The use of formal, standard language is one of the criteria for acceptance into the academic world and students are often penalised, either implicitly or explicitly, for any deviation, but the values and ideology behind this standardisation go largely unquestioned by the majority of undergraduates and indeed by the majority of academic staff.<sup>7</sup> What needs to be acknowledged openly is that students *are* accepted into higher education without fulfilling the language criteria and that they are also allowed to graduate without fulfilling this criteria, but if they want to be accepted fully into 'academia' or graduate employment, then the competent production of Standard Written English is a powerful asset if not an absolute requirement.

Barnett argues that higher education needs to be part of the wider world but can still retain its critical stance if students are encouraged to reflect on their own learning in a wider context: 'A higher education for the new century has to have an eye to the students as actors in the world not just as thinkers' (Barnett, 1997, p103). This clearly acknowledges the link between academia and employment but the nature of that link is contentious. Ainley and Barnett are in agreement on the importance of critical reflection which emphasises the importance of the individual in higher education and they share a concern that an emphasis on 'key skills' will result in simply viewing higher education as a production line or, as Melanie Walker deems it in her perceptive contextualisation of higher education, a source of 'human capital' (2005, p11).

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<sup>7</sup> See discussion on Bourdieu's rationale for this later in this chapter.



Helen Peters gives an insightful view of this discussion of the purpose of key skills in higher education but then follows it with the question:

Do key skills open up possibilities for our students, or are they a means of mass producing employees to meet the demand of a fluctuating job market? (1999, p59)

This pejorative attitude towards a supply and demand purpose for higher education is understandable but if the possibility that the student is aiming for is, in fact, a job which requires certain attributes then a certain pragmatism comes into play. Ainley's work with the Youth and Community students, documented earlier, illustrates the benefits in linking cognitive skills and cultural awareness with practical application in order to work towards a genuine goal. Unless each student is made more aware of their own purpose and potential in gaining higher education, it is difficult to see how the purposes of higher education or what is taught within that framework can be fully determined. The majority of students do not come into higher education with a view to what they can contribute to society but to what higher education can do for them. The benefits to society of a less exclusive higher education system are almost incidental to individual needs. In a successful system, these benefits to society would stem from benefits to the individual which would embrace a range of useful competencies, including critical thinking, and would result in more confident, engaged and fulfilled human beings who have developed their own potential. Students do not need to lose the ability to think critically if they are taught key skills; critical thinking must be one of the skills which enables students to see the advantages of developing other skills, including that of producing written communication which falls within the conventions of formal academic or business English. The social practice of exclusion resulting from the concept of a standard language is not going to change in the foreseeable future. As discussed in more detail later, one of the keys to being accepted into the 'educated discourse community' is competence in

Standard Written English and therefore students need to have a genuine opportunity to develop that competence in order to have the power to conform or to challenge the status quo.

In line with Ainley's more practical approach, John White (1997) refutes Barnett's assessment of higher education as 'emancipatory' in any way that differs from other forms of post compulsory education. He argues that Barnett's claims for higher education are based on a false premise that the word 'higher' can only be defined in a way which connects it with cognitive superiority, whereas higher education in Britain can mean many things; White sees no real distinction between further and higher education, 'only a continuum of orientations and courses'(1997, p15). He questions whether or not students could be equipped to critically reflect much earlier in their education or whether Barnett's 'emancipatory' aims should be a part of all post-compulsory education as students reach an age where they are capable of such reflection. I would argue that this is not an 'either/or' situation. As learning is such an individual activity, every opportunity should be taken to develop critical reflection; some students will respond earlier than others; some will never respond but that does not mean that the effort should not be made. Whilst agreeing with Barnett that any form of higher education must involve critical thinking and reflection, there is no reason why it should not be introduced at any stage in a student's career. As language is central to each individual's perceived place in society, this reflection should encompass the ideology behind a system that continues to label users of non-standard language as deficient.

In exploring arguments regarding the purpose of higher education, it becomes apparent that there is not only one solution and that higher education can and does serve more than one purpose. As Walker points out: 'there are different perspectives or weightings on what is

valuable about higher education. There is not one hegemonic mantra' (2005, p7). Also, as Sir David Watson, vice-chancellor of the University of Brighton, has said:

universities have always changed in response to perceived social and economic needs, and they have always remained the same. There has always been both a worldly, "instrumental" side to our business and an independent deeply ethical side. (Watson, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2002)

As discussed earlier, the aim of producing 'critical beings' who are capable of and willing to challenge the ethics of our society is still valid, but in a system of mass higher education it has to be recognised that society is made up of individuals with needs and aspirations who do not necessarily want to challenge the status quo but simply want to become established within it. By challenging the meaning of 'higher', White opens up a discussion on what is expected from those who have continued their education through to degree level. In the past, having a degree, especially from an 'old' university was a means to establish and maintain superiority over the majority or it was regarded as a passport to a better position in society:

In a world where a third of the new workforce entrants are graduates, the nature of the degree and its immediate purchase on the requirements of employers is obviously more central. (Watson, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2002)

In the UK, where as many as half the population are now expected to graduate, students need to examine their own motives and aspirations in a realistic context.<sup>8</sup>

In this competitive graduate market, employability is a contentious issue and much of the literature aimed at graduates suggests that there are essential skills that employers are looking for, irrespective of degree discipline. In a Higher Education Academy report on employability, Mantz Yorke described most of the writing on the issue of these 'transferable skills' for graduates as "wish lists" constructed by interested parties'. His contention that

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<sup>8</sup> It might be pertinent to introduce the notion here that academics also need to examine their own motives and position in a higher education environment which has changed considerably since many of them graduated and which might threaten to devalue or destabilise their own place within it and this point is discussed in some detail in Chapter Two

‘employability goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills’ (2006, p13). is patently true but that does not mean that general skills are unimportant and, in a recent report produced by The Royal Literary Fund (RLF), *Writing Matters*, Louise Page argues that the ‘good writing skills’ of graduates are ‘invaluable’ to an employer (Page, 2006, p37). Derek Alsop (2004) questions the ‘assumption that employers in the “real world” are looking for an ability to write clear, elegant English’, contending that the “real world” seems increasingly to be adopting a jargonised official language in many areas’ (p17). The point is, however, that English and Media graduates, in line with previously mentioned QAA benchmark statements, ought to be able to know the difference and produce either as appropriate.

As discussed throughout this thesis, what constitutes ‘good writing skills’ is contentious in terms of the value judgement implicit in the word ‘good’, the existence and relative importance of the features of ‘writing’, and the existence and desirability of transferable ‘skills’. Whatever stance is taken, there does seem to be some consensus that many students do not have them, and the perception exists (Lamb 1992, 1998; Winch and Wells 1995; Fairbairn and Winch 1996; Hinkle 1997; Hudson 1998; Ganobcsik-Williams 2004; Hiatt 2006) that many students arrive at university unable to fulfil the writing requirements demanded of them. Much of the work on writing in higher education naturally dwells on what is referred to as ‘academic writing’. Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, in her comprehensive report on the teaching of academic writing (2004), criticises previous researchers such as Winch and Wells (1995) and Hinkle (1997), for referring to Bernard Lamb’s pronouncements on the sorry state of student writing (Lamb 1992) as if they were based on hard evidence rather than on the perceptions of academic staff. Ganobcsik-Williams maintains that her report ‘draws no such sweeping conclusions’, but it identifies ‘64 types of writing’ task and establishes that students ‘are expected to possess or to acquire a working knowledge of a variety of written forms and disciplinary conventions’ (p19-20). Ironically, perhaps, the survey then centres on

*‘grammar, spelling, and punctuation* as the three main areas cited by staff who said they perceive a decline in students’ Academic Writing abilities’ (p22). The relationship between these aspects of writing and other features of academic writing is not clearly defined.

This blurring of boundaries between what is known as ‘academic writing’ and what is regarded as formal, Standard Written English outside the academic world, is central to this thesis. The method of distinction between those features of writing that are academic literacy practices and part of the higher education culture, and those features of writing, such as spelling, punctuation and grammar, which have become part of a student’s individual schema for producing written communication, is a key problem in negotiating change. The requirements of formal academic writing are clearly linked to higher education and the need for students to acquire discipline conventions explicitly is now being acknowledged, even though there is still some way to go in deciding how this is best achieved. The notion of attaining Standard Written English, however, has social implications that are the basis of long and continuing debate. The proposal that English and Media graduates who wish to be accepted into academia or business need to be able to use Standard Written English in formal writing is relatively easy to argue for, but that they might need to be taught to do so within the curriculum is far from a straightforward proposition and needs to be explored within the whole question of the changing face of higher education and its role within society.

This continuing debate on the issues surrounding the use of Standard English has several overlapping strands, making it difficult to separate the arguments into clear opposing factions and any discussion is unlikely to result in a simple dichotomy. Tony Crowley (1999), in his incisive critique of the issues surrounding Standard English, identifies two main areas of confusion: one is that the word ‘standard’ ‘shifts in its meaning between “uniformity” and “level of excellence”’; the other is ‘the failure to distinguish between speech and writing’

(p271). With regard to both points, Crowley cites John Honey as one of the main protagonists and goes on to criticise Honey's failure to respond adequately to 'the Milroys' assertion that "the structure and function of written language is *altogether different* from that of spoken language" (p273). The blurring of the distinction between spoken and written English is shown to seriously undermine Honey's arguments on standardisation, as does his assertion that the general perception of 'educatedness' is and should be based on the language used by 'high status figures (like royalty)' (Honey, 1997, p162). Although the criticism of Honey stands, this also clearly illustrates the problem of trying to encapsulate the properties of language. Since the Milroys produced their third edition of *Authority in Language* in 1999, some forms of written language, such as e-mail and texting, have indeed moved much closer to the functions of spoken language and bear much less relation to the conventions of written language which they describe as: 'solitary [...] careful [...] planned [...] and] recorded' (pp54-5).

Honey's rather muddled defence of Standard English as a superior form, which should be force-fed to children in order for them to replicate the communicative traits of 'educated' people, is also skilfully demolished by the respected sociolinguist Peter Trudgill. In countering Honey's tirade against the 'enemies' of Standard English, Trudgill points out that his own contention that no dialect is linguistically superior from any other, in no way denies the 'benefits of [the] mastery of Standard English' (1998, p457). This thesis concentrates on those benefits, whilst acknowledging that they are based largely on social discrimination and not on superiority of one language form over another. It does not suggest, as Honey does, that Standard English is the 'Gateway to Liberty' (1997, p65) but it does suggest that the inability to make writing 'invisible' by obeying conventions can result in discrimination. This idea of making writing invisible is not a new one. Joan Turner (1996) contends that 'the transparency of language is so taken for granted in academic discourse that language only becomes

“visible” as a problem’ (p5), but it is reiterated here as it resonates with the ideas discussed later in this chapter that standardisation is so habitual that it is ‘misrecognized’ as natural and normal rather than learned behaviour.

An important distinction is that this thesis deals exclusively with formal written English which, as Crowley points out, is normally accepted as requiring a standard in terms of uniformity: ‘If there are educationalists or linguists who argue against literacy in standard written English, I would be interested in opposing them’ (1999, p275). One of the main strands of the discussion then is not whether there are elements of writing that are considered to be standard in written English at any one time but whether or not those elements can be fixed. Tony Bex, in his wide ranging discussion of variety in written English, posits the idea that:

Within any language there will always be new ways of expression which are in competition with the old forms and for this reason the only fully standardised language will always be a dead language. (Bex, 1996, p26)

Those who suggest the need for Standard Written English, however, are often accused of trying to set the language in stone and labelled ‘prescriptivist’. As Marnie Holborow points out: ‘Political labelling has become the norm in what has been written on Standard English’ (1999, p151). She sums up the range of views on Standard English with a quote from Ronald Carter, a respected educationalist who has had a major influence on British schools, despite government rejection of the materials produced by his Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project in the early nineties:

From a view that standard English is correct English and must be uniformly enforced in all context of use (with dialects extirpated) and that children not drilled in the rules of standard grammar are both deviant and disempowered (strong right wing position) to a view that Standard English is a badge of upper class power and that to require children to learn it is a form of social enslavement (strong left wing position I) to a view that Standard English must be taught to working class children so that they can wrest linguistic power from those more privileged than themselves (strong left-wing position II). (Carter, 1997, p8, in Holborow, 1999, p150)

Labelling these views as ‘strong right’ and ‘strong left I and II’ leaves the question of what is in between. Alison Wray, in a much quoted article on the patterns of error in undergraduate writing summarises the arguments for prescription in two main points: that students who cannot access ‘the variety of educated English which we expect from graduates’ will be disadvantaged in the employment market, and that the requirements of the National Curriculum cannot be met if trainee teachers are unable to use this variety (1994, pp96-97). In opposition to the prescriptive view she suggests that linguists believe their role to be the description of how language is used, not to say how it should be used. She also suggests that there is a difficulty for these descriptive linguists in resolving this preference with ‘the defence of standards they have achieved themselves and the protection of students in a cruel, judgemental world’ (Wray, 1994, p105). This dilemma of the descriptive linguist clearly relates to the arguments in this thesis and it leads to the pertinent question: ‘But who gets to prescribe and who gets prescribed to?’ (p105). I would suggest that it is not only the prescriptive grammarian who decides what is acceptable and what is not. Descriptive linguists, academics, employers, in fact any educated readers, are just as likely to reject or object to formal writing which does not conform to their ideas of ‘appropriateness’.<sup>9</sup> By questioning whether current non-conforming students may ‘be the spearhead of an escape from the conservatism of the over-educated few’ Wray introduces an interesting concept, but all the evidence suggests that those ‘few’ still hold the power to exclude and reject those who are unwilling, unable, or more pertinently not given a realistic opportunity, to conform.

A typical example of an anti-prescriptive stance is that of Professor Jean Aitchison, who wrote an article for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in which she suggests that the ‘linguachondriacs’ should ‘stop moaning’ because knowing how to surf the web is ‘more

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<sup>9</sup> The notion of appropriateness itself is disputed and this is discussed in Chapter Two.



valuable than the placement of a semi-colon' (21<sup>st</sup> May, 1999). She argues this from a powerful position as a professor of language and communication at Oxford University who would be recognised as a figure of authority largely on the basis of what she has written. I would argue that her command of the conventions of Standard Written English would be crucial in reaching that position. That those conventions can and do change is not contested but, at any one time, in a restricted environment such as the UK establishment, I would suggest that there is a general view of what is acceptable or unacceptable in formal written English, and universities and senior business personnel are likely to be traditionally conservative in that view. To offset the use of the semi-colon against the ability to surf the web is spurious as they are in no way mutually exclusive; the use of the semi-colon is not the main worry of those who are concerned that students should be able to choose and use a formal writing style where appropriate. Graduates in English and Media might be reasonably expected to be able both to surf the Internet and to know how to use a semi-colon.

Norman Fairclough, writing of critical language awareness and language in power, says that:

There is an element of schizophrenia about standard English, in the sense that it aspires to be (and certainly is portrayed as) a *national* language belonging to all classes and sections of the society, and yet remains in many respects a *class dialect*. (1987, p57)

It is perhaps because of this that the call for the acceptance and maintenance of a standard written language always has connotations of protecting the status quo and therefore maintaining the class divisions. The more people that are enabled to use formal written English, the more it becomes standard in the sense of shared and the less it can be used as a badge of superiority. This is still problematic, as language is so integral to individual self-perception that any attempt to change it can be construed as depreciatory, therefore it has to be perceived as a useful, additional skill rather than as a forced conformity.

Colin Lankshear, in his work on changing literacies, maintains that ‘It is never simply a given dialect that is stigmatised but, rather, the entire way of life and the integral identities associated with its discursive practice’ (1997, p37). This is said in the context of world languages and the presumption could be made that this stigma would not apply to users who share the same first language in a UK academic setting. The enduring class system in the UK and the prestige accorded to Standard Written English, however, means that even small deviations can result in identifying the writer as outside the academic or ‘educated discourse community’. David Barton, a leading researcher into adult literacy, suggests that ‘We assert our identity through literacy’ (Barton, 1994, p48). Although he appears to endorse Halliday’s contention that ‘we should not get too obsessed with the medium’ (1985, p92 in Barton, 1994, p90), he also acknowledges that ‘there is no such thing as writing separate from a reader and a purpose. Writing can only be evaluated in terms of the purposes for which it is intended’ (p167). One of the purposes of academic, and even formal business writing, is to give authority to the writer; this authority and identity as an educated member of the community can be undermined by features which may be perceived as non standard. The justification for this can be debated (see Part Two) but the reality of it is repeatedly illustrated and it is in this real world that graduates have to compete.

If it is accepted that in order to compete, English and Media graduates should be able to produce formal Standard Written English, the debate then moves on to how this can be achieved. In a bid to ‘move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing’, Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998b, p157), have taken the lead in the UK in developing approaches which result in grammar, spelling and punctuation being referred to as ‘surface features’ (Hilsdon, 1999; Peters, 1999; King, 2000; Lillis, 1999). Lillis, (2001) sums this up thus:

Focusing on what actual writers do in texts constitutes a methodological/epistemological shift. It leads, not least, to a challenging of the idea that

writers' problems are predominantly to do with language as surface features, grammar, syntax and punctuation, and brings to centre stage the complicated history of writers' intentions around meaning making in texts. (Lillis, 2001, p27)

The implication is that the 'deeper' features are those that relate to the students' thoughts and not to the writing techniques used to present those thoughts. Any concentration on these surface features is said to detract from the real purpose of writing, which is communicating ideas.

In marginalising these aspects of writing, researchers seek to focus on the importance of encouraging tutors and students to see writing as a means of developing and expressing meaning (Creme and Lea, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998b; Jones, 2000 (ed); Lillis, 1999; 2001). This important work acknowledges the right of the student to be part of a dialogue in which their voice is heard and valued; it also acknowledges that academic discourse is not a 'transparent' medium relying on common sense<sup>10</sup> but is a negotiated discourse which has conventions steeped in tradition and heavy with social implications. It also recognises that some conventions can be peculiar not only to a particular country, institution or discipline but often to a particular course or even tutor, so that a dialogue is needed to situate the student literacy within that framework rather than assuming that the student should be able to access these conventions automatically and it being their failure if they do not do so. Although I agree wholeheartedly with the necessity for exploring ways to value the student voice, moving away from a notion of student deficit to one which acknowledges a variety of 'literacy practices' (Lea & Street, 2000, p33) and opening a more equal dialogue between student and tutor, it is still important to state that without being able to adapt some of their literacy practices, graduates are unlikely to be fully accepted by the wider academic and educated community.

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<sup>10</sup> See Turner (1996) for an exploration of the 'transparency' of language and Fairclough (1989) Chapter Two for a discussion of assumptions of 'common-sense'.

There are obvious problems associated with marking out differences in student writing as errors. Emergent writers of any age, can be discouraged and demeaned by emphasis on the technical aspects of their work rather than the content (Shaughnessy, 1977; Hinkle, 1997; King, 2000). This is why it is important for any dialogue to be honest in evaluating the socio-political aspects of language and the power that it holds (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991, 1996; Fairclough, 1989,1992). There is also evidence that writers cannot concentrate on all aspects of writing at once (Kellogg, 1999; Smith, 1982), so focussing on technical aspects could deflect writers from the main, overt purpose of their writing. The purpose of conveying authority, however, is central to all academic writing and this can be undermined by even minor deviations from convention. Whilst the encouragement to promote students into being participants in a discourse rather than receivers of knowledge is positive, this should not mean that the technical aspects are seen as unimportant or that they are intrinsically easier to deal with.

Mina Shaughnessy's ground-breaking work with American Basic Writing students (1977) illustrates both the political and practical complexities involved in identifying difference, and developing student writing to a point where it ceases to interfere with the reader's reception of the message it contains. Although Shaughnessy was working thirty years ago, in a different country and with students who were far more easily distinguishable from the mainstream, the actual writing 'problems' she describes are surprisingly similar to those that face today's students in UK higher education. She makes the point that usually 'understanding comes about when the writer is able to view his own work from the reader's perspective' (1977, p39) and this is still the case in requiring students to take the transcriptional elements of writing seriously. Frank Smith (1982) makes an excellent case for separating out the process of author and secretary, and perhaps it is this separation into *important components* of writing rather than a hierarchy of features, seen as surface and deep, that is necessary. This thesis does

not advocate concentration on spelling, punctuation and grammar at the expense of content but it does argue that dismissing them as insignificant or trivial is patronising and dishonest in a society that often judges whether or not a text is worth reading by how it is written.

Bernard Lamb, Chairman of the London Branch of Queen's English Society, is well known for his condemnation of the state of student writing in the UK. As a scientist he maintains that:

Spelling is important. Bad spelling gives the impression that the writer is ignorant, careless and unintelligent. It can mislead, confuse and frustrate the reader, and delay or prevent comprehension. (1998, p11)

This attitude may be seen as reactionary and retrograde and, as Hinkle (1997) suggests, may not be popular with students who wish to concentrate on content, but surveys in higher education (Winch & Wells, 1995; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004) and business (Beason, 2001; Hadley, 2007) suggest that his preoccupations with spelling, punctuation and grammar are widely shared as being indications of the quality of education. A 2003 report on a survey of higher education institutions, funded by the English Subject Centre, showed that 44% and 54% of respondents, respectively, viewed grammar and punctuation as 'matter[s] of concern' amongst undergraduates (Alsop, 2003). What is interesting about this report is that tutors appear to be willing to accept responsibility for features regarded as part of academic convention but not for 'basic skills'. Alsop mentions that 'Several colleagues noted that the skills involved in constructing arguments and referencing are higher level skills which new undergraduates soon improve with proper guidance' (Alsop, 2003, p3) but 16% of Alsop's respondents felt that it was "too late to make much impact on poor writing/study skills at university" ( p12). I would argue that this assumption is based on an often unacknowledged perception that changing the writing habits of an adult is very difficult. In discussing the 'acquisition' of skills, there is a major difference between introducing new skills that are

perceived as a progression, such as that from ‘A’ level to Higher Education, and requiring students to relearn the writing habits of a lifetime amidst the competing priorities that higher education presents.

Arguments regarding the acquisition of good written communication skills often centre on whether or not those ‘skills’ can be transferable and whether or not writing can even be taught as a discrete skill:

Research on writing centres and WAC<sup>11</sup> suggests that writing is not an autonomous set of easily generated skills but a very complex, developing accomplishment, central to the specialised work of the myriad disciplines of higher education, and to the professions and institutions students will enter and transform. (Russell, 1999, p1)

In his keynote speech at the Writing Development in Higher Education Conference (1999) David Russell, of Iowa State University, suggests that the American experience shows that problems have been caused by trying to ‘separate writing out’ rather than raising awareness of writing issues within the curriculum area. He puts the solution squarely in the hands of academic staff who need to devote time and energy to developing a curriculum and teaching strategies which acknowledge the diversity of writing requirements both within disciplines and for individuals.

In line with this approach, Dr Ursula Wingate, Language in Education lecturer at Kings Institute of Learning and Teaching, makes an impassioned plea for ‘Doing away with “study skills”’ (Wingate 2006). With regard to academic writing she makes use of Theresa Lillis’ argument that, unlike the North American approach, which recognises the need for writing courses to teach students how to write academic texts, the UK retains a focus on technical

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<sup>11</sup> Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) is a term used extensively in America. It began in the 1980s as a response to a perceived problem with literacy among college students which was not being addressed by the separate ‘freshers’ writing courses prevalent at the time. It is closely linked to WiD (Writing in the Disciplines) and will be discussed in more detail later.

aspects of writing such as spelling, grammar and referencing. She argues, in line with Lea and Street's suggestion (above), for a move away from the teaching of writing skills which are surface techniques towards 'developing students' deeper understanding of knowledge' (Wingate, 2006, p467). There is a strong case made for fostering students' understanding of their own learning through embedding the teaching of writing within the curriculum and acknowledging the epistemological issues surrounding student writing. Whilst supporting this stance, I would emphasise that this is not a substitute for teaching the practical skills necessary to produce writing that is in line with current conventions, but should be in addition to it. A tutor who works hard to acknowledge issues of differing academic literacies and identities to focus on making meaning through writing will no doubt enable students to produce better academic writing. However, the current situation regarding the negative perception of student writing abilities illustrates that students do not pick up by osmosis those features which are relevant to all formal writing: accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar. The call to change that perception from one of student deficit to student development is imperative but it must also acknowledge that these features of writing still need to be addressed and taught if students are to benefit fully from higher education. That they should be taught through illustration of successful writing rather than through a remedial process is one of the central themes of this thesis.

In contrast to this body of research on academic writing which suggests that these surface features can not be separated out into transferable skills independent of meaning making, The Royal Literary Fund (RLF) Report (2006) uses language which suggests that writing is indeed a set of transferable skills:

Students are arriving at University without the basic skills [...] Writing skills taught with a passion transform the performance of students across the disciplines [...] Once students discover that such skills are not the magical prerogative of a few. (Wall, 2006, pxi)

One important difference here is that the RLF are referring to spelling, punctuation and grammar as ‘the fundamentals of literacy’ (Wall, 2006, pxi); whether intentional or not, there is a discrepancy between this description and that of ‘surface features’ (Lea & Street, 1998b; Hilsdon 1999; Lillis, 1999; Peters, 1999; King, 2000; Wingate, 2006). This thesis relates closely to this RLF designation that celebrates these features as the necessary resources of a competent writer and sees the need to ensure that ‘the skills are perceived as acquirable and attractive’ (Wall, 2006, pxiv). This attraction should be clearly related to the needs and aspirations of the individual student. Related closely to this is the notion of one-to-one work which ‘takes account of the student’s own level’ (pxiv). Writing is obviously ‘a very complex, developing accomplishment’ (Russell, 1999, p3); there are multiple reasons why any writer writes the way they do at any particular time. Kellogg (1999), in his depiction of the psychological processes involved in writing, discusses the problems of ‘attentional overload’ (p32) where different features of the writing process compete for attention.<sup>12</sup> It is only by awakening each student to the possibility and rewards of change that they may be motivated to put in the extra effort necessary to develop their technical writing skills, when, as will be illustrated in the results in Chapters Four and Five, the pressure and primary motivation is often to focus on content.

Angier and Palmer, in the same Literary Fund Report, support Murray’s idea that, ideally ‘every department would have its own writing tutor, or better still, it would integrate the skills of writing into the very fabric of learning (Murray, 2005)’, but then go on to suggest that this is impractical, as it ‘would require a wholesale change in the ethos and practice of higher education’ (2006, p18). Their solution is to establish ‘centralised Writing Development Centres’ but without the remedial stigma which is so often attached to such resources. The

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter Four for a more detailed account of this.



emphasis on ‘developmental’ rather than remedial is to be welcomed but in suggesting that Writing Centres are the answer because the ‘ideal’ answer would be too difficult, the RLF loses an opportunity to take a radical stance which might help to bring about the change in ethos that they initially advocate. In also making the recommendation that: ‘students should display a minimum standard of correct and effective written English as a condition of acceptance for undergraduate study’ (Thornton and Coppard, 2006, p43), they perhaps betray a contradiction in their assumption that people who can not yet reach their ‘standard’ are incapable of benefiting from, or contributing to, higher education. One clear example where this is not the case would be students with undiagnosed dyslexia who might well fail any diagnostic assessment of writing skills but might still be intellectually capable of higher level study. There is also the problem of deciding what that ‘minimum standard’ would be based upon.

According to David Russell (1999), the American system of requiring every student to ‘take a general writing course in their first year’ has not resulted in decreased complaints about student writing, and he quite clearly says that he does not recommend that the UK follow the US in this approach (p4). He goes on to document the evolution of US writing centres from ‘writing hospitals’ to places which are ‘focused on building partnerships with academic staff in the disciplines (p4). The theorising of writing centre work, ably undertaken by Nancy Maloney Grimm (1999) in her book *Good Intentions*, has led to challenges against the concept of writing centres which are simply there to ‘help’ students, to seeing them as ‘sites of participatory research into students’ literacy practices and as sites of knowledge about the ways that discourse regulates who we are and who we can be’ (1999, pxvi). Significantly, the US Writing Centres have gradually moved from a remedial position to a ‘Writing Across the Curriculum’ (WAC) or Writing in the Disciplines (WiD) approach as they endeavour to

involve all academic staff in writing development. In a wide ranging discussion about the future of WAC in the UK and its relationship to the US experience, Viv Ellis of Southampton University and Donna Le Court of Colorado State University (2002) document the establishment of 'composition' in the US as a discipline with its own scholarship and compare it with the emergence in the UK of a more fragmented but growing call for a more embedded approach to the development of writing. Le Court points out that freshmen writing courses meant that initiatives in the US were already closely linked to English Departments which gave them an overriding responsibility for writing throughout the University; the disadvantage of this being that other departments absolved themselves of that responsibility. In the UK, there are myriad combinations of people with some accountability for improving student writing.<sup>13</sup> Many of these are in centrally based skills or learning development units; others are more specifically directed towards writing, such as the academic writing centres at the universities of Westminster and Coventry, but are still centrally based.

This does not mean that the US experience is being ignored; as Ganobcsik-Williams (2004) points out, there are several schemes involving a WiD approach which aim to integrate writing development into subject learning either through staff development or module design.<sup>14</sup> It is well documented that the response to the perceived lack of writing skills in undergraduates has resulted in the provision of study skills support outside the curriculum. Any investigation of writing development therefore needs to include an exploration of such support. Blythman *et al.* (2003) give a comprehensive overview of provision both in UK and the US. They particularly emphasise the need to situate such support within the curriculum rather than in any peripheral area such as counselling. The key issues they identify are discussed in Chapter Seven but their call 'to position study support so that it can make a full

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<sup>13</sup> See ALDinHE survey available on line from <http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/> and Chapter Six for discussion.

<sup>14</sup> See Ganobcsik Williams, 2004, 3.4 for an overview and details of initiatives being funded.

contribution to student success' (p206) is in line with the ethos followed in my own institution, which, rather than having a centrally based unit, has Academic Skills Tutors working within individual Schools.<sup>15</sup> What this has in common with the majority of current models is the aim to work more closely with discipline staff to provide a combination of strategies both in and alongside modules in order to develop 'academic writing' in a more subject-integrated manner and with more relevance for the student and less focus on remedial aspects.

In concluding the transatlantic discussion on WAC and WiD, Viv Ellis links widening participation in higher education to this more subject-focussed approach, which again moves away from a separate study skills solution and towards introducing 'a changing sense of literacy into an institutional system wherein writing is only beginning to be seen as inextricable from learning' (2002, p57). She suggests that the new diversity in higher education 'can easily function to disrupt assumptions about the privileged status of certain literacies' (p57). Whilst acknowledging the challenges in this, her recommendation is to expand the 'amount of teacher-student interaction about writing, and the exchanges between researchers and teachers' (p57). This echoes Theresa Lillis's call for 'dialogues of participation' (2001, pp132-159). These are positive recommendations but it is still difficult to envisage a climate in which those who have the power engendered to them through their command of writing conventions would be willing to accede that those conventions are negotiable. As James Paul Gee has said 'The teacher's job [...] is to properly *focus* attention' (1996, p89). In the present circumstances these exchanges could be used to raise student and teacher awareness and to promote writing development that may close the gap between student production and formal requirements, but it is difficult to see any avenue for a radical

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed account see Catterall, Hill and Tinker (submitted).

change that would alter those formal requirements in any meaningful way. This is the challenge outlined in this thesis, for as Grimm suggests, the goal should be not only ‘granting students membership to the academic literacy club but also for changing the gates of that club when change is necessary’ (1999, pxviii).

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s perspectives on this supply a framework for exploring how and why the power relationships that support these requirements are difficult to change.

Bourdieu’s ideas on the way that the education system legitimizes a standard language through ‘symbolic power’ are particularly relevant. In establishing his theory, Bourdieu does not get involved in the arguments between linguists who propose nature or experience as most fundamentally important in language acquisition<sup>16</sup> as he says that:

So long as not everything is inscribed in nature and the acquisition process is more than a simple maturation, there exist linguistic differences capable of functioning as signs of social distinction. (Bourdieu, 1991, p259)

Bourdieu discusses language in terms of a ‘linguistic market’ where some have more ‘capital’ than others through virtue of their background. Michael Grenfell, in his useful exposition of how Bourdieu’s theories on education can be applied, defines three terms: ‘habitus’, ‘field’ and ‘capital’, which are important in any practical application. He maintains that these terms can be used to show that ‘human action is constituted through a dialectical relationship between individuals’ thought and activity and the objective world’ and also emphasises ‘structure as a dynamic effect: as a structured structure *and* a structuring structure’ (Grenfell, 1998, p14). This is important as it supports the notion that this hegemonic system is not static and can be changed and even challenged (Janks & Ivanič, 1992 p315). As Melanie Walker puts it: ‘capital is arbitrary and the determination of what capital is valued is constantly being defined and redefined’ (2004, p38).

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapman (2000, Chapter 5) for a clear overview of the different positions.

Grenfell quotes Bourdieu in saying that habitus is ‘an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted’ (1977a, p95 in Grenfell 1998, p14). This is significant in that the habitus which enables us to adapt our writing to the situation and the audience has built up over a number of years and is used largely unconsciously or as Grenfell puts it as ‘habit or unthinking-ness in actions’ (Grenfell 1998, p14). Even though writers usually edit and proof-read formal writing, their conscious effort is underpinned and inextricably linked to an unconscious ‘knowing’ of what is appropriate, what Lillis (2000) calls ‘implicit life routines’ (p48).

Although habitus relates to individuals, Grenfell points out that ‘social action always has a time and place’ (1998, p15) and this is where the terms ‘field’ and ‘capital’ can be introduced.

Thompson, in his introduction to Bourdieu’s writings, collected in *Language & Symbolic Power*, explains that:

practices or perceptions should be seen, not as the product of the habitus as such, but as the product of the *relationship between* the habitus, on the one hand, and the specific social contexts or “fields” within which individuals act, on the other. (1991, p14)

Thompson sees these fields as places where different types of capital, which have been accrued through life experience and social background, can be converted into another type. Although there are different types of capital, this thesis concentrates on one small aspect of ‘cultural capital’, defined as ‘knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions’ (1991, p14), that is the ability to use formal Standard Written English. This thesis maintains that this is significant enough to contribute to “symbolic capital” (accumulated prestige or honour) and also ‘economic capital’ (1991, p14) in terms of a better job. Those who have this capital may not perceive it as such because it is, to use Bourdieu’s term, ‘misrecognised’ as the norm and

furthermore this system can only work if those who are disadvantaged by it also recognise it as the norm. As Bourdieu suggests:

Social order owes some measure of its permanence to the fact that it imposes schemes of classification which, being adjusted to objective classifications, produce a form of recognition of this order, the kind implied by the misrecognition of the arbitrariness of its foundations. (1991, p127)

Arbitrariness in language is often discussed in English and Media Courses with reference to the structuralist view advocated by Saussure. It might even be used to question the notion of the value of and need for Standard Written English, but it is done so within a framework that constantly reinforces the prestige of Standard Written English by its use and acceptance in every area of academic discourse. John Hilsdon maintains that:

the social-functional view of language in HE (and in the construction of discourse-as-knowledge) is more important than one which favours a return to “grammar-grinding” or looking only at the surface features of students’ texts. (1999, p93)

But he has to acknowledge that ‘additional workshops or study skills sessions...can be useful or essential in some cases’ (1999, p93). These sessions can only be essential if the ‘standard’ is recognised as essential. The fundamental point here is that, as many researchers advocate, it is crucial to discuss and debate issues of power in relation to writing conventions; what needs to be recognised, however, is that in the lifetime of current students there is unlikely to be a massive shift towards accepting non-standard writing as equal in value to conventional forms. The system, as Bourdieu’s theory suggests, is maintained by those who benefit from it and even those who suffer from it. It follows, then, that even if students are introduced to the concept of gatekeeping through convention, they also need to be given the opportunity to acquire the key.

One of the major strategies through which students are expected to acquire the necessary knowledge to enable them to develop their writing is through tutor feedback, but the

effectiveness of feedback is a much debated topic. Often cited work by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (2001), at King's College School of Education, suggests that formative assessment in the classroom is vital if our education system is to move away from the gatekeeper role focussed on stratification of marks to one which genuinely offers opportunities of progression to all students. They stress, however, that it would need major curriculum changes and staff development to enable this transformation and that it would be a slow process. In the development of writing in higher education the changes would need to be even more radical because of the widespread elitist attitudes that assume that undergraduates should have the required level of literacy on entry.

A three year research project on feedback at Sheffield University concluded that moving towards formative feedback was essential but that certain guidelines needed to be followed if it was to be effective: feedback should be given as soon as possible; it should be explanatory and suggest improvements and not simply point out errors; it should include peer assessment, more discussion between students and tutors and more open dialogue between tutors (Higgins *et al.*, 2001, p20). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick expand these guidelines in the form of 'seven principles of good feedback practice' (2003).<sup>17</sup> The principles outlined are manifestly useful recommendations for enhancing student learning but one objection often made to their use is lack of time. One response to this is, as Ivanič *et al.* suggest, that it might be necessary to introduce quite radical changes to make feedback meaningful: 'Give thought to the quality, quantity and timeliness of feedback – if necessary, change the way you run the course' (2000, p63). In support of this position, Mantz Yorke, Professor of Higher Education at Liverpool John Moores University, depicts the theory behind the increased use of formative assessment whilst acknowledging the pressures against it. His conclusion that 'space needs to be made in

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<sup>17</sup> Detailed in Chapter Six of this thesis.

curricula for more (and better) formative assessment’ (2003, p497), despite those pressures, emphasises again the need for curriculum change which allows room for genuine learning. This means not only the simple transfer of discipline content but the development of all of those ‘skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment’ (Knight and Yorke, 2003, p7).

Whilst agreeing strongly with this move towards more formative feedback, there is a critical difference in approach that needs to be addressed here. Higgins *et al.* (2000) suggest that feedback should concentrate on ‘fostering “higher order” critical skills’ and should not ‘focus solely on spelling and grammar[...]as students may not view comments on “surface” aspects of their work as particularly relevant or useful’(p62). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick also say that ‘feedback information is often about strengths and weaknesses [...] or about aspects of performance that are easy to identify (e.g. spelling mistakes) rather than about aspects that are of greater importance to academic learning’ (2003). A major thread within this thesis is the idea that the constant contrasting of ‘deep’, ‘higher order’ and ‘important’ features of writing with ‘basic’ ‘surface’ and ‘easy to identify’ features such as spelling punctuation and grammar serves to encourage the perception that attention to transcriptional writing skills is low level work which has no place in higher education. There is a clear need to make students more aware of how relevant these fundamental aspects of writing are, and to give instruction and feedback in a way that enables them to develop these skills alongside others. Higher order thinking and critical skills can be fostered with respect to all aspects of writing as well as content, as the scholarship on Critical Language Awareness already discussed points out. The use of formal conventions of writing is a far more important sociological phenomenon than much of the literature suggests. The fact that these features are ‘easy to identify’ adds to their importance as a method of exclusion rather than the opposite. The capacity to adapt to these



conventions is also far more problematic than many academics suggest. Academics who have a talent for writing and have absorbed these conventions from an early age (Lillis 2000, p144) may not be able to empathise with students who have absorbed different conventions and who are required to change a virtually lifetime habit whilst also dealing with myriad new learning experiences which compete for their attention.

Peter Knight, from the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University has called for radical reform in higher education assessment (Yorke, 1995; Knight & Yorke, 2003). His contention, that in order to be effective this should be ‘a combination of tinkering and radical overhaul’ (1995, p18) means that everyone in an institution needs to take some responsibility for ensuring that assessment and feedback are educationally sound, in that assessment fosters learning as well as giving a fair judgement on ability. The issue, expounded by David Boud, is that all assessment leads to learning: ‘Every act of assessment gives a message to students about what they should be learning and how they should go about it’ (1995, p37). What the student learns, however, is not necessarily what the tutor intends, and this is partly because tutor and student expectations and interpretations often diverge (Branthwaite, Trueman & Hartley, 1980; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001; Hounsell, 1987; Ivanič, Clark & Rimmershaw, 2000). This gives a strong impetus to the need for more dialogue between student and tutor on exactly what is wanted from assignments and explicitness about what is important.

The significant word here is ‘dialogue’, as academics often feel that they have fulfilled their obligations if students are told, either through speech or writing, what is expected. If students do not understand or share the same interpretation as the tutor there is often no space for these differences to be explored. In her detailed analysis of student writing practice, Theresa Lillis

clearly documents the value of genuine student/tutor dialogue which creates ‘a talkback space’ in which student-writers may be able to ‘contest dominant conventions’. In illustrating current approaches to student writing in higher education, Lillis advocates a model of language with ‘Emphasis (explicit) on language as socially situated discourse practices’ (2001, p159). This thesis suggests that one of the most dominant of these practices, because of rather than in spite of its surface nature, is the use of Standard Written English. The use of terms such as ‘surface’ and ‘basic’ serve to preserve the perception of these conventions as normal, easily attained and less important whereas, especially in terms of the English or Media graduate, they can be discriminatory, hard to attain and crucial to success.

## **2.2 Writing Requirements**

As introduced earlier, one of the fundamental questions in deciding what we require from undergraduates is to establish the purpose of higher education in the UK. As referred to earlier, The Dearing Report of 1997 was commissioned to put forward a vision of higher education which would reflect ‘a learning society’ and ‘to make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years’ (Chairman’s forward). Crucially to this thesis, this was within a government framework demanding that ‘learning should be increasingly responsive to employment needs and include the development of general skills, widely valued in employment’(Chairman’s forward). The Dearing Report was accepted by the Government as a basis for the further expansion of higher education but, as Peter Wright of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) pointed out at the time, the success of the strategies would be largely dependent on a greater degree of ‘explicitness’ from institutions about what students, employers and the public could expect

from an expanded system (1997, p3). This thesis contends that this explicitness has not been forthcoming with regard to student writing. Turner even suggests that writing development is an issue ‘which the institution of higher education would prefer not to exist at all (1998, pp38-9). The need for institutions to consistently defend themselves against arguments of ‘dumbing down’ has led to a glossing over of genuine issues related to the needs of current graduates to be given access to one of the more obvious and outward signs of education: an acceptable formal writing style which makes their writing inconspicuous.

Any discussion about the purpose of higher education must be closely related to a discussion of who the participants are. The changing face of British higher education over the last fifty years is clearly documented by Reay *et al.* (2005) as they chart the impact of growing numbers of students in relation to issues of class, gender and race. Before the 1960s a university degree distinguished a small elite from the rest of the UK population. As discussed earlier, there are those who suggest that this elite was, and is, necessary as a conduit for the brightest and most able students. The elite consists of students who can gain advantage from existing knowledge and take it forward, thus contributing to the improvement of society by exercising critical reflection and suggesting solutions to its problems. Others would argue that this elite was largely class based and that the Robbins Report of 1963 was rightly used as a basis for ‘rapid expansion’ so that entry into higher education was more to do with ‘ability and qualifications’ than privilege of birth. But although ‘there was a rise of 50 per cent in university entrance between 1963 and 1968’ (Reay *et al.*, 2005, p2), it was still a very small percentage of the UK population that had the advantage of higher education and it was still an elite.

Whoever comprised this elite, this narrow perception of higher education has since been challenged by the British Government's continued promotion of a widening participation agenda, which has seen a massive expansion in UK student numbers. This expansion has inevitably led to a change in the nature and purpose of higher education. The view of higher education which depends on the principle of education as a gatekeeping process, identifying the most intellectually gifted through stringent assessment and furnishing the next generation of leaders, is not sustainable when nearly fifty percent of young people are targeted.

Charles Clark,<sup>18</sup> in his foreword to *The future of higher education* (2003), celebrates the fact that 'a university place has ceased to be the preserve of a tiny elite' and goes on to place new emphasis on the link between higher education and employment by talking of 'harnessing knowledge to wealth creation' and 'help[ing] to turn ideas into successful businesses'(Clark, 2003). This link between higher education and employability has always existed but as Blackburn and Jarman point out:

When degrees were held by less than 2 percent of the labour force, they may have been extremely important for the careers of qualified men and women but they were too rare to have a major impact on the labour market as a whole. As the number of graduates has grown the degree has become an increasingly common entry qualification for a growing number of high-level occupations. Thus higher education has played a progressively greater part in the reproduction of the occupationally based class structure. (1993, p205)

So although the massive expansion of student numbers has obviously had an impact on the relationship between higher education and employment it has not necessarily resulted in a more egalitarian system. The widening participation agenda in the UK has been focussed largely on class issues and, as Mike Bygrave suggests:

British higher education remains a lightning rod for social attitudes in a country still divided, 50 years after the loss of the empire, between an old, top down, hierarchical,

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<sup>18</sup> Then the Secretary of State for Education and Skills.

class ridden society and a new mass consumer democracy, and deeply ambivalent about moving from one to the other. (Observer, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2003)

This ambivalence is reflected in the fact that widening participation is often confused with simply increasing numbers whereas one of the main drives behind it was to give access to those groups which were traditionally under-represented (Tonks and Farr, 2003, p2). The proportion of working class students, however, is still very low compared to those with middle class backgrounds (Reay *et al.*, 2005, p6). A report from the London School of Economics (LSE) found that in the late 1980s and 1990s, ‘the proportion of people from the poorest 20% of society getting a degree rose from 6% to 9% but for the wealthiest 20% it rose from 20% to 47% (Taylor, Guardian, 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2005). The expansion through widening participation, therefore, has mainly increased the number of middle class students whilst maintaining a small elite of potential leaders based on a higher social class; as discussed earlier, this is often congruent with the status of the institution attended. Added to the elite there is now a newly created layer of graduate employees that consists of skilled, transient workers, largely from new universities, who fulfil the Government need for a more flexible work force (Ainley, 1994). Even though this new higher education system can be shown to be still elitist, research suggests that all types of graduates are still better rewarded financially than non-graduates (Ford, Guardian, 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2005). So, although it is important that we acknowledge that a degree in a mass higher education system is very different from a degree in a minority system, this does not make it a less desirable commodity for those who aim to succeed in an increasingly competitive environment.

Walker (2005) clearly documents the need to challenge this ‘human capital discourse’ that promotes such fierce competition. She urges:

the possibility for higher education and universities to make a difference to the viability and quality of the societies in which they are located and to human flourishing as an intrinsic good, as well as preparation for work. (p11)

Walker cites Barnett (1997, 2000, 2003) as one of those who fights against ‘pernicious ideologies (entrepreneurialism, competition, quality, managerialism)’ (Walker, 2005, p11). Whilst this defence of education for its own sake is important, these ‘pernicious ideologies’ arguably hold sway in the present climate<sup>19</sup> and it is with this in mind that ‘preparation for work’ holds particular significance for this thesis. I would argue that this preparation should include giving undergraduates as many of the tools to enable them to compete in the employment market as possible. Although Barnett’s argument for producing ‘critical beings’ is compelling, it is important that this includes not only making them aware of the existence of, and the need for proficiency in, dominant literacy practices which are the hallmark of a graduate level education but also the wherewithal, in terms of the time, knowledge and expertise, to acquire such proficiency.

Reay *et al.* argue that ‘elitism is built into the very fabric of higher education whether elite or mass’ (2005, p163) and that working and middle class students have very different choices and opportunities within higher education. Along with Ainley, they argue that nothing will change ‘until the ethos and culture of higher education radically alters’ (2005, p163). I would argue that this change is unlikely whilst the power is still in the hands of those who have thrived on an elitist system. As Bourdieu maintains:

It is the most *visible* agents, from the point of view of the prevailing categories of perception, who are best placed to change the vision by changing the categories of perception. But they are also, with a few exceptions, the least inclined to do so (1991, p239).

But if any change is to be effected it is necessary to identify those elements of culture that serve to perpetuate that elitism.<sup>20</sup> In a more pragmatic approach, which attempts to deal with

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<sup>19</sup> See survey results below on reasons for attending university.

<sup>20</sup> See discussion on cultural capital later in this chapter.

the situation as it is, rather than how it should be, this thesis identifies attitudes towards the use of Standard Written English as one of those tools of discrimination. The more competitive nature of employment and the prevailing ethos of higher education as a selection process mean that even middle class students have to be differentiated and those who do not share this most obvious, outward and visible sign of belonging will be disadvantaged, whatever their class background.

In line with the much stronger link between higher education and employment that, although lamented by some educationalists, is undeniable, graduates have expectations of a more rewarding career than they would have had without a degree. A 2006 survey found that ‘over two thirds (68%) of respondents said that their primary reason for going to university was to improve their job prospects’ (www.prospects.com). In order to obtain these better jobs, students need to meet employer expectations successfully. There have been many reports on what employers expect from graduates (Harvey *et al.*, 2002; Brennan *et al.*, 2003; Harvey and Knight, 2003; Yorke, 2004; English Subject Centre 2004) and they clearly expect them to have qualities that they would not get from non-graduates. As discussed in the introduction, some of these qualities are viewed as generic and some are considered to be discipline specific (Brennan 1992). Although I have argued earlier that writing is discipline specific for English and Media students, even in terms of generic requirements written communication is often described as a ‘key’ skill: ‘written communication skills are highly valued...[and] include being able to write grammatically, and punctuate and spell correctly’ (Harvey & Knight 2003, p3). Tom Hadley of the Recruitment and Employment Commission (REC) discusses ‘good basic<sup>21</sup> written skills’ as an expectation of university students but says that

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<sup>21</sup> The use of the words ‘key’ and ‘basic’ here is an important area for discussion in this thesis as spelling, punctuation and grammar are often portrayed as insignificant in comparison to ‘deeper’ undergraduate writing issues. The tendency to concentrate on either ‘deep’ or ‘surface’ features of writing and whether or not focusing on one can be detrimental to the other is an area that is explored in some detail later.

‘results show this isn’t the case’. He goes on to say: ‘Having a degree is no substitute for basic skills. If people can get into university and graduate without needing them, it is a bad sign for the future’ (2007). The important point to be made here is that although it could be argued that there are many more important attributes for a successful graduate than the basic writing skills of spelling, punctuation and grammar, there are few attributes that can be so easily recognised, subjected to such early and immediate judgement and with such far reaching repercussions. Writing is made ‘visible’ through perceived errors and this allows discrimination to occur.

As previously stated, Yorke asserts that ‘employability goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills’ (2006, p13); he endorses the definition of employability given by the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team [ESECT] as:

a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Knight & Yorke, 2006)

In acknowledging the complexity of what makes a successful and employable graduate, it must still be the case that one of the most important of these achievements for Humanities graduates must be good written communication skills. This leads us to one of the central questions of this thesis: if an entrant into higher education does not produce acceptable, formal written English and academics are not willing, or indeed even able, to transfer this skill to them,<sup>22</sup> then how are undergraduates going to acquire it in order to fulfil employer requirements?

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<sup>22</sup> This notion of transferability can be viewed in two ways: the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student and the transfer of knowledge from one context to another. Both of these interpretations require acknowledgement of the complexity of learning and this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four with specific examples.



As documented earlier, written communication skills are consistently rated as being extremely important to employers (Hesketh, 1998; Harvey and Knight, 2003; UCE, 2006; [www.graduatecareers.com](http://www.graduatecareers.com), 2006). Employers want students who can communicate well in writing and, particularly for English and Media students, this includes being able to produce a range of writing styles including competence in using formal written English. This is usually expressed as a need to be able to use Standard English; the problems surrounding this terminology are explored below, but however contentious the use of this term is, this thesis rests on the basis that the perception of its existence and desirability is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

The expectation of competence in producing an acceptable level of formal written English based on a perceived standard clearly exists in the business world and although it also exists in the academic world, it is often contested. As suggested earlier, there are not only problems with defining Standard English but also arguments surrounding its place as an instrument of power in a class based society. As has been shown, attitudes in the United Kingdom range from those who consider Standard English to be the only acceptable language form, inherently better than other dialects,<sup>23</sup> to those who regard it as one of the mainstays of class oppression, ‘a prestige and dominant language [...] related in particular to the power and wealth of the educated middle classes and, [which] conversely is used to exclude others from certain roles and professions’ (Stubbs, 1986, p85). The middle position between these two boundaries suggests that ‘standard’ means ‘shared’ and that having a shared language is a sensible idea to aid clear communication.

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<sup>23</sup> This is presuming that they would accept it as a dialect rather than simply the ‘legitimate language’ (Watts, 1999, p66) by which all dialects should be measured.

The problem here is in the choice of a standard based on the language of the middle class, thus ‘othering’<sup>24</sup> those who do not use it naturally but have to learn it in addition to their own dialect as the language of education and formality. Widdowson (1993, p323) suggests that there is nothing wrong with ‘the recognition of standard English as an appropriate educational objective...serving the institutional needs of the state’ as long as we respect other forms of language. Unfortunately, this is very difficult to sustain; to label something as a standard, whatever nuances are put on that word, inevitably reflects pejoratively on dialects that deviate from that standard. As Richard Watts points out in his exposition of the social construction of Standard English, this has long been the case. He uses a quotation from Thomas Sheridan’s eighteenth century lecture on elocution to illustrate the hierarchical framework that sets Standard English apart from other dialects:

All other dialects are sure marks, either of a provincial, rustic, pedantic, or mechanic education; and therefore have some degree of disgrace annexed to them. (Sheridan 1762, p30 in Bex, 1999, p67)

The arguments which illustrate that the roots of Standard English are founded in an ideology seeking to impose ‘order, stability and control’ (Honey 1997, p143) from above are well established (see Fairclough, 1992; Bex, 1996; Holborow,1999) and, as Sheridan’s statement demonstrates, certainly not new.

But explanations for the evolution of this attitude can do little to change general attitudes in the short or even medium term.<sup>25</sup> As Deborah Cameron points out, even those who are sensitive to language discrimination and who are prepared to respect all dialects, will still make a judgement about background and status based on individual language use as they have

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<sup>24</sup> Used in the sense of constructed social identities which ‘make the distinction between *Us* and *Others* (or *Them*)’ (Duszak., 2002, p1).

<sup>25</sup> Although, as Crème and Fairclough suggest, education through Critical Language Awareness and Knowledge about Language in the national curriculum could make some impact on simplistic attitudes to language change and variety over time.

‘internalized certain norms to such an extent that [they are] no longer capable of experiencing them as arbitrary (Cameron, 1995, p14). As language is part of a complex web of social interactions based on ‘different cultural practices’ (Gee, 1996, p54), it is impossible to separate our perception of a person from the language that they use. In making Standard English one of the requirements for acceptable formal writing, we are also saying something of the type of person we require – essentially, one of ‘us’, a member of ‘our social or cultural group’ (Gee, 1996, p 69).

In discussing ‘essay-text literacy values’, Gee clearly demonstrates his claims for ideology in discourse as opposed to an autonomous model of literacy. I would argue the need to acknowledge that the requirement for Standard Written English is also part of that ‘armoury of concepts, conventions and practices that privilege one social formation as if it were natural, universal, or at least the end point of a normal development progression...’ (1996, p58). Gee goes on to cite Bourdieu (1979/84, 1990, 1991) in pointing out that the elite maintain their power by ‘keeping up appearances to signal allegiance to the centres of power and status in society...’ (1996, p93). The use of formal Standard Written English is a fundamental example of a sign that connotes membership of a particular social group or, perhaps more accurately, the use of non-standard forms is a clear sign that one does *not* belong to a particular social group. What is interesting about Bourdieu’s argument is that he suggests that in order for this particular social group to maintain power, the powerless must be complicit in acknowledging the superiority of the powerful (1991, p23). In higher education, there is little discussion about the necessity to conform to Standard Written English requirements. There is a growing condemnation of the tendency to label a lack of these conventions as ‘failure’ but this also tends to minimise the consequences of difference. The positive move to acknowledge and value other literacies does nothing to alter the balance of power if it fails to emphasise that the

dominant literacy practice still prevails and is not a norm but a construct of society. This thesis, therefore, acknowledges the use of Standard Written English as one of those

credentials or qualifications [which] become a mechanism for creating and sustaining inequalities [and...] by concealing the link between the qualifications obtained by individuals and the cultural capital inherited by virtue of their social background [...] provides a practical justification of the established order. It enables those who benefit most from the system to convince themselves of their intrinsic worthiness, while preventing those who benefit least from grasping the basis of their own deprivation. (Bourdieu 1991, p24)

Despite the difficulty in supporting a homogenous view of language against which usage can be measured, the very fact that employers feel that they have the ability to distinguish ‘good’ from ‘bad’ English, and, as shown earlier, are willing to reject applicants on that basis alone, means that there is a notion of appropriateness in the real world which has to be negotiated by the graduate seeking employment. The important distinction made by Fairclough is where language is ‘said to be appropriate rather than “judged to be appropriate”’ (1992, p52). It is important because the first implies a view that is transparent and shared and the second implies evaluation based on criteria which are personal and changeable. Despite the societal constraints on language discussed throughout this thesis, language use is individual both in perception and production and this is what makes the term ‘Standard English’ a misnomer. Individual judgements are made by people who have the power to make them, and even though those judgements may be founded on idiosyncratic or outmoded notions based on a reader’s own education and idiolect,<sup>26</sup> they are still powerful and have to be acknowledged. This explicit acknowledgement of the effects of power relationships associated with language use, not only within society as a whole but also within higher education itself, forms an important backdrop throughout this discussion of student writing development. The arguments against the notion of the possibility of an entirely standard language, however

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<sup>26</sup> Another contested term but I use it here to mean the sum of an individual’s repository of language use.

valid, will not prevent a reader from assessing the authority of a writer based on their own perception of the quality of the writing. The reality that this perception might be specific to the reader, rather than shared as standard, makes little difference to the student who is perceived as illiterate, or to the potential employee who is rejected without an interview.

As suggested earlier, this uniqueness of language use does not mean that there cannot be a broad consensus about appropriate style in formal written English in a particular ‘discourse community’.<sup>27</sup> As Watts suggests: ‘The social institution of public education is instrumental in prescribing which forms of SE are socially acceptable and which are not’ (1999, p62). It may not be possible to gauge whether or not a potential reader will be offended by a split infinitive or the ending of a sentence with a preposition but, within the relatively small sphere of the UK establishment, there is the possibility of compiling a list of ‘solecisms’<sup>28</sup> which, if used, would be enough for the majority of employers to regard the writer as poorly educated, or unacceptably careless; both of which might result in rejection. It must be acknowledged that these judgements are often social rather than based on any genuinely intrinsic superiority of one form over another<sup>29</sup> and are made ‘despite the arbitrary nature of rules of language use’ (Turner, 1999, p38) but judgement will still be made. It is clearly in the students’ interests that they are aware of the risk they take in ‘going against dominant judgements of appropriate usage’ (Fairclough, 1992, p54).

One of the important aspects of this debate is ‘credibility’. In making judgements based on the writing of a person, the reader is, consciously or not, assessing that writer in terms of reliability and authority. Irrespective of the acknowledged difficulty in classifying any

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<sup>27</sup> This term is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Following Cameron, (1995) who says that she ‘at least know[s] enough to put terms like “solecism” in scare quotes’ (p14).

<sup>29</sup> Although there is an argument regarding clarity which will be discussed in more detail later.

particular usage as an error, the reader will still hold a view of what is acceptable and will judge the writer based on that perception. As Elbow points out in his work on how to develop writing: ‘Writing without errors doesn’t make you anything, but writing with errors –if you give it to other people- makes you a hick, a boob, a bumpkin’ (1998, p167). Following a survey of American employers, Professor Larry Beason points out:

While there are no quantitative formulas for anticipating reactions to errors, people's negative reactions to errors in business discourse seem to center<sup>30</sup> on the writer's credibility and how it is jeopardized by errors. Image problems ranged from that of the hasty, careless writer to the faulty thinker, poor oral communicator, or a representative of the company who can be a liability. (2001, p33)

As stated previously, many student writers have the goal of improving their job prospects by gaining a degree but they do not necessarily make the connection between aspects of their writing and the perception of their abilities gained by any potential employer. A student who has been awarded an Upper Second Class Honours degree in English or Media may well presume that their writing is of an acceptable standard and will serve as an asset rather than a liability. The requirements of higher education and employers could be judged to be similar in many aspects of formal writing. They both affirm that the use of the conventions of Standard Written English is necessary, higher education through written criteria, and employers through their vetting procedures. If higher education does not follow the RLF proposal of barring entry to those who do not already meet these criteria, the question of how they will maintain credibility for the students so that they are not rejected by employers is a valid one. It is not only the credibility of the student that is at risk but also the institution from which the graduate emerges.

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<sup>30</sup> This is an example of an American spelling variety, as discussed below, which would not necessarily have a negative impact on a British reader’s assessment of the writer as it is acceptable in an educated community elsewhere.

There is an important distinction to be made here between ‘variety’ and ‘error’. Ganobcsik-Williams (2004, p25) documents the differences between American and English use of commas that would result in a different perception of the number of errors in the same piece of writing. She also discusses the diverse attitudes to language that make some traditionalists cling to what others consider to be outmoded views of error, such as the ending of a sentence with a preposition or the use of split infinitives. Despite agreeing with her that ‘judgements of error in student writing are time- and context-bound’ (2004, p25), there are some aspects of language which would be deemed ‘errors’ by most competent users of formal, British Standard Written English in the twenty first century and that, unlike some types of comma usage and American spelling, these aspects would not be given the benefit of the name ‘variety’ but would constitute an ‘error’ with all of the implications of that judgement. In his article ‘The Phenomenology of Error’ (1981), Joseph Williams suggests that some rules are more noticeable than others. Some examples of this from my data include the use of ‘been’ for ‘being’; the wrong choice in spelling of their/there/they’re or were/where; lack of subject/verb agreement; misuse of apostrophes and inappropriate verb endings. Some of these might be more readily ignored or easily forgiven than others, but in formal writing they would be ‘visible’ and constitute a lack of competence and therefore credibility. Many researchers point out (see Shaughnessy, 1977, p39; Fairbairn and Winch, 1996, pvii; Wall cited in Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004, p24), that these errors may stem from lack of care rather than lack of knowledge, but the reader’s evaluation would still be negative. Formal writing requires a level of attention to detail and this is also noted as one of the attributes of successful graduates (Harvey and Knight, 2003, p2).

It is not enough, however, for students simply to be made aware of the fact that Standard Written English is expected in formal writing and that they will be disadvantaged if they do

not use it. Proponents of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) such as Fairclough, Clark and Ivanič, would argue that simply making students aware of the position 'is not liberatory enough' for those who are disempowered by a discriminatory language system (Janks & Ivanič, 1992, p305). They suggest that once students are made more aware of a system that regards their choice of language as non-standard then that system can be challenged (1992, p315), as even a hegemonic system is susceptible to change and 'subject to social forces'. The examples they give include 'working-class people publishing in their own vernacular'. They go on to discuss importance of the 'socio-historical context' of this emancipatory discourse and contend that when the struggle is at its height 'every individual choice helps to shape the future possibilities for others' (1992, p317). The interesting word here is 'choice'. Many people have no choice other than writing in the vernacular and even the terminology 'their vernacular' has the connotations of 'othering' mentioned earlier. The concentrated and demanding work necessary to change literacy practices, thus giving them a choice, is too often dismissed as if it were a simple case of picking up new knowledge rather than changing the habits of a lifetime. As argued earlier, by minimising the importance of the 'surface features' of spelling punctuation and grammar, whilst arguing for more concentration on content, these same writers, who aim to champion the excluded, risk underestimating the task associated with gaining a command of language which would allow for a conscious choice between the vernacular and the prevailing formal convention.

The use of non-standard forms of written English by undergraduates, as documented earlier, is perceived as widespread and generally lamented. The requirement for students to obey convention is rarely overtly challenged, but much of the prevailing scholarship suggests that it may not be academically or pedagogically sound to concentrate on these conventions at the



expense of discipline content, as this may undermine the worth of the student's contribution.<sup>31</sup>

In support of this, the often quoted models outlined by Lea and Street: 'Student writing as technical and instrumental skill [...] Student writing as transparent medium of representation [...] Student writing as meaning making and contested' (2000, p34) are viewed as a hierarchy with the latter being the most important and encapsulating the other two. Their argument, that writing practices within academia 'are located in relations of power and authority and are not simply reducible to the skills and competencies required for entry to, and success within, the academic community' (2000, p34) is a strong one. Their rejection of the notion of writing as a set of generic skills which can be easily transferred from one context to another is clearly supported by their exploration of differing requirements and interpretations within academia.

In advocating an approach which acknowledges the complex and value laden nature of writing, Lea and Street have inspired a number of researchers to adopt a rather pejorative attitude to what they term the more 'straightforward' approaches of skills and socialisation (1998b, p159). The important point here is that Lea and Street acknowledge that their model is meant to 'encapsulate' the other two models. This means that although writing is not *simply* a set of skills or *only* a matter of being socialised into a discourse community, these skills and socialisation are still elements of writing that students need to negotiate in order to be successful. The academic literacies approach might well be a step forward in acknowledging, and even challenging, the power relationships that exist within academia but it does not eliminate the need for students to learn how to conform to existing requirements if they want to succeed.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> There is a similarity here between this approach and the one which constructed concentration on transcription as a block to creativity in the schools of the 1980s and which is often said to be partly responsible for the lack of formal writing skills in today's students and even teachers.

<sup>32</sup> The notion of 'success' is discussed later in relation to inclusion in a discourse community.

The strategies which are currently employed in developing student writing to meet those requirements are dealt with in Chapter Six, but it is important here to identify those elements of reading and writing which impact on the ability to devise, employ and evaluate those strategies. As noted earlier, Hinkle insists that ‘it is impossible to completely fragment writing’ (1999, p164) so that content and the expression of it are seen as discrete elements. My earlier contention, that it is impossible for readers to separate their perception of a writer from the language the writer uses, suggests that the expression of content always has an impact on the reader, both in terms of the reader’s understanding and in terms of the reader’s attitude. It is possible, however, to assess the value of the content of a piece of writing whilst *consciously* overlooking transcriptional elements of the writing; the inability to completely separate the different elements of writing does not mean that those elements cannot be reacted to differently<sup>33</sup>. It is useful in this context to examine in more detail what the writing process involves<sup>34</sup> and what might affect attitudes towards it.

The writing process involves conceptualising, organising and expressing ideas in a form which enables the receiver or reader to decode a message which is as near as possible to the one that the writer intends to convey, usually without the advantage of immediate feedback or opportunity for clarification. Fairclough names the means we have to decode these messages as ‘members’ resources’ (MR). He maintains that we do not simply decode an utterance but that we ‘arrive at an interpretation through an active process of matching features of the utterance at various levels with representations you have stored in your long-term memory’ (1989, p11).<sup>35</sup> He includes in this all aspects of language use and states that these MR are ‘socially determined and ideologically shaped’ (1989, p11). An important point here is his

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<sup>33</sup> See Chapter Four for example of tutor recognition of understanding *despite* written expression.

<sup>34</sup> There is more discussion of the cognitive aspects of writing in Chapter Four where it is related to the problems students face in meeting writing requirements.

<sup>35</sup> This links closely with the notion of schemata, which is also discussed later.

contention that we resort to MR automatically without a conscious realisation that we are doing so. This allows our interpretation to be viewed as ‘common sense’ and general when in fact it is very much an individualised activity with myriad contextual and cultural nuances impacting on our reading of the text. One of the implications of this for the writer is that it is impossible to produce a piece of writing which will match every potential reader’s concept of Standard Written English. The ‘best fit’ in this case is likely to be where reader and writer share as many socio-cultural components as possible. Age, gender, class, ethnicity, experience, education and other contextual factors will all impact on the reader’s ability to identify with the writer and judge the credibility of the writing. In this context, it is important to point out that so called ‘surface features’ of writing are some of the most easily identifiable measures by which academics might recognise a member or potential member of their own ‘discourse community’.

Thus, whilst each individual reader has to make decisions on the meaning of a written message, they will also decide on the authority invested in the writing. The UK education system, through the National Curriculum, gives ‘Standard English a neutral authority, deriving exclusively from its “intrinsic” strengths rather than its relationship to social power’ (Jones 1991, p58). Despite identifying strongly with Jones’ challenge to this gloss which the educational establishment gives to the complexity of Standard Written English and its authority, it is, in some ways, irrelevant for the purpose of this thesis whether or not that authority is justified or whether or not any one form of language is superior to any other; the important point is that society does invest that authority and, despite the problems of definition, the link between particular ways of writing and socially acceptable educated practice is a powerful one.

As discussed earlier, the expansion of higher education in the UK, often referred to as ‘widening participation’ has meant increased participation but not necessarily that the disadvantaged and non-traditional groups are now proportionally and fairly represented. It does mean, however, that first year undergraduates now come with a variety of literacy experiences and abilities. Current thinking suggests that these individual literacies need to be acknowledged and made explicit but it is important to point out that this does not only apply to non-traditional students: those from ethnic minorities or more mature students, but also to those students who fall within the traditional boundaries of age and qualifications. Different literacy practices, for instance using e-mail and mobile phone texts, have an impact on how students write (Wray, 1994). Technological advances and changing literacy patterns mean that there is likely to be a much larger gap between the literacy of many current students and the traditional formal academic literacy required at university than there was for their tutors when they were undergraduates. It is not enough to simply say that the students must conform as the previous generations did; it is important to open an explicit dialogue about how and why they are expected to do so.

Whilst academics are being persuaded towards an acknowledgement of these different literacies, the tendency is still to do so from a negative perspective of student deficit (see Survey Appendix 5 and in Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004, pp15-19). In doing so, they often lay blame onto the students’ previous education or they are critical of students for not having been able to acquire their own level of expertise in language.<sup>36</sup> Many surveys of academics (Winch and Wells, 1995; Anglia Polytechnic, 1998; Alsop, 2003 and Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004) have illustrated this mismatch between their expectations of formal academic writing and that which students produce. Over the last decade, as discussed earlier and in more detail

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<sup>36</sup> The tendency to directly relate this lack to intellectual ability is discussed later.

in Chapter Six, various scholars have begun to press for a change in attitude which accepts that with widening participation there is inevitably a widening variety of literacy practices and that positive and quite major steps need to be taken if, as indicated, the prevailing will is still one of standardisation and conformity.

Rather than dwelling on the reasons why there may be a gap between the writing performance of first year students and tutor expectations of it, Chapter Four explores what difficulties these students have to overcome if they are to develop their writing sufficiently to be accepted into the wider educated 'discourse community' but it is important firstly to define some of the terms in which these difficulties are expressed. In a discussion of academic writing the notion of a 'discourse community' is usually referring to a specific academic discipline so that 'particular identities are privileged within different academic discourses'; this is used potently by Lillis (2001) to illustrate how 'non-traditional' students are disadvantaged. Her insistence on 'discourse practice' as a term that emphasises the importance of context and culture in writing and confronts 'the notion of language as a transparent and autonomous system' is crucial if we are to acknowledge the complex pressures and subtexts inherent in seemingly straightforward exhortations for students to write 'correctly'. The tensions discussed in this thesis, however, arise not only from the notion of a fixed set of characteristics which a new entrant has to acquire before being accepted into a particular academic discourse community, but, more tellingly, it deals with the notion of resistance on the part of the academic community to genuinely assist students in this acquisition, or to change their own discourse practice in order to accommodate them. As Cameron points out, 'Linguistic conventions are quite possibly the last repository of unquestioned authority for educated people in secular society' (1995, p12). So although this links very clearly with the idea of the need to

acknowledge and cater for different literacies put forward by Lea and Street, it also poses questions about what motivation academics might have, or not have, for doing so.

As Lillis (2001) suggests, the notion of a 'discourse community' is problematic and she focuses on the need to challenge a 'dominant addressivity' by using the term 'discourse practices', and by advocating more face to face contact between tutors and students so that the academic writing process can be demystified (Lillis, 2000, p158). More interaction and discussion is obviously a positive step but unless there is a shift in the power relationship between tutor and student it will not necessarily produce students with the confidence to challenge and negotiate rather than to simply accept the status quo; a status quo which positions the tutor as gatekeeper to a community to which the student has to be admitted rather than a community which works towards mutual progress.

The use of the term 'discourse community' has been thoroughly evaluated, particularly amongst US scholars, but also in the UK (Bizzell, 1990; Swales, 1990; Kent, 1991; Lunsford & Ede, 1996; Clark, 1998; Hyland, 2000; Borg, 2003), to explore the relationship between tutor and student. The denotative meaning of the word 'community' as a group who share something in common has been shown to include the corollary that there will inevitably be those excluded from this shared space. There have also been objections raised to the term on the grounds that in changing practice in order to access one discourse community, students might be excluded from their previous communities. In challenging this idea of static communities that exclude through maintaining boundaries, and that engage students in leaving one community behind in order to be accepted in another, Clark (1998) extols a change of metaphor from that of 'territory' to that of 'travel'. In doing so, Clark maintains that this change would prompt us not to be concerned with boundaries but to

envision that collectivity as a pragmatic encounter of fellow travelers whose itineraries are their own but who find themselves sharing temporarily some problems and some opportunities, [so that] our students might learn to read and write as if they were embedded in an expansive social space where they must account for relationships of agency, obligation, and interdependence (1998, p23).

By replacing 'place' with 'process', Clark maintains that students would become more 'constructive citizens' as they see their education as part of a social process rather than an end in itself and in this way 'success' becomes related to self improvement rather than status. This is becoming even more relevant today when higher education and employment are so closely linked and there is a growing emphasis on life-long learning. It is also important to emphasise here that rather than focusing on the 'specialised discourse competencies' which allow participants to belong to particular academic discourse communities (Hyland, 2000, p8), this thesis is concerned with those practices that allow membership of the wider discourse community which labels itself as 'educated' and includes those in the employment arena. In much of the discussion on academic discourse communities, the use of Standard Written English is taken as a given and is not included as one of the 'rhetorical strategies' (2000, p9) that define a community, but in the larger educated discourse community it is one of the central and most easily discernible features.

What is also useful about this metaphorical shift from territory to travel is not only how tutors perceive students and students see themselves but also how tutors perceive themselves.<sup>37</sup> If academics constitute themselves as travellers, they need to confront the notion that they have found and must maintain their place in a static community. They must also challenge the idea that their job is to police boundaries to ensure that only those who fit the criteria will be admitted, thus guarding against the devaluing of its, and therefore their own, status. In Bourdieu's terms, instead of protecting their own 'cultural capital' within their specific 'field'

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<sup>37</sup> The role of tutor perception is also discussed in more detail later .

they would need to see their movement within the education system as a co-operation with other travellers who may have different and distinct traits, including language practices which make the terrain difficult, but who rely on tutors to work with them in achieving their passage towards particular goals. This has major implications for power relationships between students and their tutors. It would allow tutors to engage with students from an acknowledged acceptance of difference rather than a hierarchical structure that they must defend as part of a closed discourse community to which students are seeking access. It would necessitate a much more candid acknowledgement of difference rather than an assumption of deficit. It would necessitate a more open acknowledgement that subject knowledge is only one of the ingredients necessary for both educational and social progress.

In forcing the acknowledgement that tutors are working *with* students, however, this shift to a metaphor of travel also recognises responsibility in giving practical, viable feedback and assistance in order that they might make this progress. As discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, feedback such as ‘Grammar!’ and ‘Lacks clarity’ is obviously not sufficient to do this. Great strides have been made by theorists such as Lillis, Lea and Street, and Creme; they identify and expose the inherent inequalities in a higher education system that maintains power through mystification and implicitness rather than explicit and relevant teaching. Unfortunately, intentionally or not, this shift often serves to minimise the importance of competence in formal Standard English as a social marker or a source of ‘capital’ in higher education and graduate employment. In doing so, it maintains the establishment of a discourse community from which those who cannot conform are excluded. The way in which researchers suggest that students should have the ‘choice’ (Janks & Ivanič, 1992, p317) of using the vernacular or Standard Written English shows a too casual disregard for the immense problems many students face in isolating and changing any features of their written



language which could be identified as non-standard. The adoption of the travel metaphor can only be useful if students are not relegated to travelling second class because they do not have the right currency or a valid passport.

In focusing on ‘deeper’ issues, many academics move towards a ‘tolerance’ of non-standard English as they regard it as being less important than features of content associated with ‘meaning’. In doing so they may feel that they are promoting a more egalitarian system where the student voice is heard and acknowledged as being valuable. My contention is that ‘tolerance’ in these circumstances is loaded with a similar cultural and ideological significance as writers such as Ghassan Hage (2000) and Preston King (1976) apply to racial ‘tolerance’. In order to be tolerant, one must have the power to accept or reject, therefore also have the power to be intolerant. Hage suggests that the promotion of ‘tolerance’ obscures the fact that only those with power can be tolerant and does nothing to challenge ‘their *capacity* to exercise this power’ (2000, p87). He maintains that ‘It is a strategy aimed at reproducing and disguising relationships of power in society, or being reproduced through that disguise’ (2000, p87). In the same sense of disguise, tolerating non-standard English in a higher education setting ignores the social aspects of writing. The ‘surface’ quality of writing, far from making it less important, actually makes the use of formal Standard Written English crucial in conveying a message that will be taken seriously in academic terms. In other words, the ‘cultural capital’ in being able to use Standard Written English is far more important than the word ‘surface’ suggests. It is precisely because it is on the surface that it has a clear and incontrovertible impact on the educated community’s perception of students and their credibility.

Whilst underlining the gap between what academics require of student writing in higher education and what students produce, extracts from student interviews in Chapter Four also clearly illustrate the self-esteem issues which make the development of writing such a sensitive and contentious issue. Richard Higgins *et al.* (2001) suggest that ‘factors in the feedback process are related to issues of emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse’ (p271). This is explored in more detail in Chapters Four and Six, but it is important to reiterate that writing is a social tool and students take judgements of their writing personally. Language used by these students such as ‘all say you’re crap’ (Int 7a) shows very clearly how they identify criticism of their writing as criticism of themselves.<sup>38</sup> Although the issues surrounding feedback are discussed in detail later, it is useful to point out here that the way a tutor makes writing requirements known is crucial to the students’ confidence and motivation, so that a focus on pre-empting errors rather than simply correcting them on finished work would seem sensible.

Lillis (2001) discusses in some depth how the notion of language as ‘discourse practice’ contests any simple idea of language as fixed or transparent. She uses Fairclough and others to illustrate the importance of context and culture in any analysis of writing. Lillis foregrounds the need to raise awareness of student writing, not as an easily transferable skill, which can be dealt with through handouts and short courses, but as a social practice full of complex and competing tensions which can serve to exclude those who do not share the same discursive practices. So in documenting what we require from students, there is first a need to acknowledge the ‘myth’ that ‘there is one way of academic writing’ (Creme and Lea, 1999, p7), and in doing so the need for explicit and specific guidance, which relates to actual student literacy practices and not to a mythical standard, becomes paramount. The problem with

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<sup>38</sup> See James, 2000, p153-6 for similar evidence.

much of the extant scholarship is that in rightly exposing the complexity of academic writing requirements between disciplines, it relegates the problems associated with the notion of a shared concept of Standard Written English to a lower level of importance than it deserves.

It is within this framework that any contention that students should be taught the current conventions of formal written English is often seen as a retrograde step that harks back to conservative, prescriptive and traditionalist views of language. The important point here is that whilst fully endorsing a view of writing as a complex process which needs to be viewed in terms of the student writer's attempt to make meaning, the very nature of writing as a social practice, which Lillis explains so compellingly, means that we cannot afford to ignore these visible or 'surface' features. The power relationships inherent in the very notion of different discourse practices means that these features are seized upon as a relatively straightforward process of discrimination and removing this difference would present real challenges for the present system. If these non-standard features were neutralised by being made invisible through conformity (Elbow, 1998, p168; Turner, 2000, p150) this would force the reader/tutor into more engagement with the content and meaning within the writing. It would challenge the tutors who rely on any deviation from their notion of 'standard' as a tool to differentiate students. It would also deny them the opportunity to equate different writing practices with impaired cognitive ability.<sup>39</sup> The need for conformity in formal writing is unlikely to disappear. Even a respected, professional linguist such as Deborah Cameron admits, 'I still find there are things that leap to my eye as if emblazoned in neon. I can choose to suppress the irritation I feel when I see, for example, a sign that reads 'Potatoe's'; I cannot choose not to feel it' (1995, p14). It is important to consider then how students can be made more aware of the importance of these conventions whilst also moving away from the stance of student

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<sup>39</sup> See discussion later in this chapter.

deficit which impacts on their self esteem and motivation. It is also important to acknowledge the scale of difficulty they face in adjusting their writing practices and explore how they can be assisted in doing so.

When Lillis (2001) documents the disparity between what tutors want and what students understand that they want, she suggests that the ‘implicit induction’<sup>40</sup> method is still prevalent in higher education, despite being shown as being unworkable with anything other than the small number of students in an elitist system. She also notes the attitude taken in many higher education institutions in the UK: that their function is not to explicitly teach academic writing, and that this serves to discriminate against those students whose literacies are far removed from those of the lecturers. Where this discrimination has been acknowledged, the response has been to designate writing as a ‘skill’, the lack of which can be catered for by supplying remedial provision (Wingate, 2006, p457). This has rightly been shown to be at best limited and at worst counterproductive:

Non-embedded skills teaching, such as non-curricular writing classes, tends to be perceived negatively by many students. To attend them at all is seen to be a public admission of failure...to attend the writing class on grammar or punctuation, referencing or structuring an essay, is to admit that you can’t do it. You are at university, perhaps even studying English Literature, and you cannot perform the basic routines of competence in your subject. (Wall, 2006, p.xii)

The tendency in recent years, as documented in Part One, has been to look towards the North American experience, and to encourage the embedding of writing development within the curriculum as a way of distancing the pedagogy from a remedial standpoint to one which values writing as a learning tool, as well as a process of transmission. Whilst this is a positive step, Ganobcsik-Williams (2004) points out that it is one which will need a major change in attitude and a great deal of staff development if it is to be successful. One of the major

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<sup>40</sup> ‘akin to a notion of “environmental osmosis” (see discussions in Wyatt 1990), amounting to breathing in education through the atmosphere (Newman 1959)’ Lillis, 2001, p 54.

problems inherent in this change in practice is the tension between competing priorities of content and process. For those involved in teaching English and Media, however, as I have argued earlier, the gap between content and process should be less clearly defined, as the medium of written communication is central to the discipline.

Scott maintains ‘Universities are value-laden institutions’ and suggests that modern universities shy away from acknowledging this (Scott, 2004). It is important to tease out some of these cultural values, as they must impact on practice within higher education, whether acknowledged or not. Haggis (2006) gives a clear overview of the various views that are held about the role of higher education; she particularly highlights two positions that are central to the argument in this thesis. The first is the cultural acceptance of higher education as ‘the highest point in an education system which legitimately functions through processes of selection and exclusion’ and the second is to do with the respective ‘status of intellectual activity, in comparison to physical or manual work’ combined with the belief ‘that only a minority of people are capable of doing high-level intellectual work’ (Haggis, 2006, p524). These two attitudes are crucial in the attempt to uncover reasons why the writing development of all students might not be given priority, even on courses where the use of written language is central to the discipline such as English and Media.

As explored earlier, the notion of higher education as a selection process is well established, and in a competitive arena the expansion of student numbers has not eradicated the need to differentiate the most able from the rest: ‘Achievement is a relative matter; the concept of excellence implies being better than nearly all others; ‘the best’ can only mean ‘better than the rest’ (Radford *et al.*, 1997, p45). How this is achieved, however, is a major area of contention. Leaving aside the difficulties in comparing a First in biochemistry with a First in Sports

Studies or a degree from Oxford with a degree from any post 1992 University, there is the problem of how a student within each degree programme, or even each module is assessed in relation to others.

In line with many other countries, the UK higher education system has, in theory at least, moved away from norm-referencing towards criterion referencing (Atherton, 2002; Dunn *et al.*, 2002). Following an international survey, Sadler (2005) clearly expresses the rationale behind this change:

Students deserve to be graded on the basis of the quality of their work alone, uncontaminated by reference to how other students in the course perform on the same or equivalent tasks, and without regard to each student's previous level of performance. These two conditions set criteria-based grading apart from all forms of norm-referencing and self-referencing, but they do not specify how it should be done. At the point of beginning a course of study, students deserve to know the criteria by which judgements will be made on the quality of their work. This has a primarily prospective purpose, which is to enable learners to use the information to shape their work intelligently and appropriately while it is being developed. However, specifying the bases for grading also serves retrospectively in that stated criteria help to provide a rationale for grading judgements after they have been made and the results given back to students. (p5)

A detailed discussion of feedback and assessment is given in Chapter Six, which includes arguments for and against criterion referencing, but in order to discuss the writing requirements for higher education it is accepted here that one of the criteria available to markers is a consideration of the student's ability to use Standard Written English. According to Sadler, these criteria are there to help students 'to shape their work intelligently and appropriately while it is being developed'. For students whose command of the conventions of Standard Written English is limited, this 'appropriate development' would inevitably necessitate some learning taking place, particularly within the first year.

In Chapter Four, the problems students face in effecting this learning are documented and this is followed by a discussion of the various strategies employed in student writing development,

including feedback, but for the present the focus is on what we ask of students and why. As discussed earlier, the requirement for the conventions of Standard Written English is 'misrecognised', to use Bourdieu's term (1991, p153), as 'legitimate' and therefore unquestioned. This allows the academic establishment to regard any difference as deviance; it also allows, as Lillis suggests regarding the wider term 'essayist literacy practice', an attitude towards non-users of such practice 'constructing them as "illiterate", or by associating use of this literacy with cognitive development, construing them as intellectually inferior in some way' (Lillis, 2001, p39-40). If higher education assessment is meant to assess what is taught and learned at this level, and the requirement for Standard Written English is a criterion of assessment, then it follows that those who do not begin their course with the ability to engage in this dominant literacy practice need to be given the opportunity to achieve it within their degree course. Otherwise, students are being unfairly assessed in relation to the cultural capital that they bring with them, and the gulf between them and those whose social background provides a habitus that conforms to the dominant group will be maintained. As shown later, negative feedback is not an adequate framework for teaching and learning these literacy practices and Mina Shaughnessy, although she was dealing with basic writers whose English was often much further from standard than the students discussed here, showed genuine perception in stating that 'errors reflect ...linguistic situation, not ...educability' (1977, p121).

It is not simply at student deficit, therefore, that we need to look when asking why students do not meet the writing requirements of higher education but at teachers who deny or ignore their responsibility. As illustrated throughout this chapter, this can be related to many causes. These include: a sense of linguistic superiority which often links writing to cognitive ability; a desire (conscious or otherwise) to maintain an elitist system; an objection to additional workload; a feeling of inadequacy or lack of knowledge; a resistance to change; resentment at

being asked to do a job they believe should have been done earlier; a belief that it is too late to change student writing habits, and a reliance on writing practices as an easy assessment tool. This thesis maintains that if the writing requirements of higher education, particularly for those engaged in disciplines for which writing is a major component, include the use of Standard Written English, then it is the responsibility of every tutor to engage with students in working towards the fulfilment of that requirement. Current strategies are discussed in Chapter Six but this is preceded by an exploration into the problems students face in understanding the necessary conventions and actively developing their writing to meet them.



### 3. Methodology

The impetus for this piece of research came from working closely with students and identifying consistent idiosyncrasies in their written English throughout their undergraduate career. These idiosyncrasies are visible to the reader as non standard and it has been argued earlier that a judgement of the writer can be made based on these visible signs of non conformity. The initial research question was centred on whether or not there was any development in the writing of English and Media students in their first year but, as discussed below, this was found to be too broad a question in one way and too limiting in another. Evaluation of the pilot study led to the decision that rather than focusing on all of the academic elements of writing in the first year, the features of formal Standard Written English:<sup>1</sup> spelling, punctuation, and grammar, should provide the focus, but that for reasons discussed below, the longitudinal study would also need to be expanded beyond the first year. The requirement for the use of Standard Written English has been discussed in part two of the literature review and it has also been established that there is a perceived difficulty for many students in meeting this requirement. Many higher education professionals have obviously recognised this difficulty so in order to set this in some context, it is also necessary to document some of the strategies that are being used to address this problem. The final research questions are therefore:

Does student work meet the requirement for Standard Written English with regard to spelling, punctuation and grammar?

If not, what problems do students face in meeting this requirement?

Are there changes in the use of spelling punctuation and grammar in student work during their time at University?

If so, what might have influenced these changes?

What are the main strategies employed in order to develop student writing in UK higher education?

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<sup>1</sup> The complexity surrounding the use of this term has been discussed in part two of the literature review.

This chapter details the stages of the methodology, including the significant developments from the pilot study; it also documents the reasons for choosing particular methods and establishes where the researcher is situated within an educational research framework.

### **3.1 Pilot Study**

The research was approached from the point of view that there was a perceived gap between the abilities of students and the requirements of lecturers (Wray 1994; Winch and Wells, 1995;; Mercer and Swann, 1996; Bryan, 1998). I aimed to establish what level of formal writing English and Media undergraduates should have by the end of the first year and to measure any development towards this. As a first step, I attempted to establish a norm for first year undergraduate writing. This was based on the work of Crystal (1979) who outlined the following procedures for developing a norm working with children who have problems with writing. The guidelines appeared to need no adaptation for use with adults, although the pilot study encompassed only (a) to (e):

- a) identifying the range of linguistic problems in a sample of work of an individual;
- b) describing the problematic features in a consistent and coherent manner;
- c) judging the typicality of these features for the child's language use as a whole (or as near as one can get), i.e. classifying the problems into types;
- d) comparing individual children with respect to particular problems and types, i.e. ultimately establishing normative characteristics for groups;
- e) setting up developmental scale in terms of which each individual can be rated;
- f) selecting immediate teaching goals, arising out of a comparison between target standard and present attainment;
- g) devising and evaluating remedial techniques (p106).

In developing a norm, then, my initial strategy was to collect student work, identify typical problematic features and compare individual student work with others in the sample to establish general characteristics and to then set up a scale against which students could be rated.

### 3.1.1 Pilot Study Methodology

The data for the pilot study was drawn from three pieces of first semester work written by 50, first year students who were on pathways including English or Media in the title. The available resources did not allow for a probability sample that could claim to be quantitatively representative of the whole of the undergraduate population (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Instead, a 'judgement sample' (Shipman, 1997) was used; this was based on a 'convenience' model (Blaxter *et al.*, 1996) in that there was a body of data available to me through my work that appeared to be an appropriate starting point. No attempt was made to distinguish between variables such as age, gender or background at this stage and the limit of fifty students was based purely on resources and opportunity. There is always a danger, even in probability sampling, that the sample is unrepresentative of the population, but experience of teaching undergraduates over several years pointed to the research data being similar in quality to work assessed outside the project.

There is an extremely wide spectrum of views on the validity and usefulness of quantitative and qualitative research of various types, including Glaser and Strauss's very influential 'Grounded Theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which emphasises that theory should emerge naturally from the data, and criticisms of it, which largely centre on the need for more detailed rules in the treatment of the data. (see Haig, 1995; Kinach, 1995; Babchuk, 1997). The data for this pilot study was collected with a view to learning from the experience which particular method would be most practical and beneficial in answering the research questions. The general notions of validity and reliability, however, hold true for any method, and within that framework I experimented based on previous models such as Wray (1994); Winch and Wells (1995) and Hinkle (1997).

The sample was chosen from students that I came into direct contact with through my teaching and, with their permission, work was photocopied before returning it. Perceived writing errors were catalogued onto a database where students were given numbers to preserve anonymity.<sup>2</sup> For Media students, the three pieces used were a series of log entries, a 1500 word essay and a documentary review. For other groups (English/Media, Theatre/Media), the first of the three pieces scrutinised was a very short personal response written under time constraints in class; the second piece was an academic essay and the third piece was an autobiographical extract.

Following Hinkle (1997), the data was divided into two categories: **compositional** (organisation, style, content) and **transcriptional** (spelling, punctuation, grammar). I originally added 'typographical' to the latter category, as errors such as missing or duplicated letters and words occurred in many scripts. These types of error were felt to be significant in that they draw attention to the level of proofreading, which can be perceived as lack of effort rather than ability. Mina Shaughnessy's well-known and extensive work on categorising student error suggested that there is a difference between students who cannot and students who do not:

There is a difference between the punctuation of a writer who knows but does not care and the writer who, no matter how careful he may be, lacks the information he needs to make secure judgements about written sentences. (Shaughnessy, 1977, p27)

However, the current research project illustrates how complex the notions of knowing, caring and judging can be, and would suggest that the situation is not a straightforward dichotomy but is subject to myriad contextual influences.

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<sup>2</sup> See discussion later in this chapter on what constitutes an error.

In categorising transcriptional errors for the pilot study, a decision had to be made on whether or not to count an error every time it occurred. Following Wray (1994), and Winch and Wells, (1995), I decided not to count multiple occurrences of one spelling error by the same person in the same piece of work. Punctuation errors, however, were felt to be individual enough to be counted separately; simply counting misplaced commas as one error did not seem to acknowledge the variations such as using a comma instead of a full stop or omitting them altogether. A problem with sentence boundaries in general was identified as a common phenomenon, as students used commas where conjunctions, semi-colons or full stops would be more appropriate.

Grammatical errors were even less straightforward to categorise. Shaughnessy again highlights the problem:

If syntax is defined as a system for indicating relationships between words in sentences then almost any error except some misspellings reflects a syntactic problem. (1977, p.47)

An ungrammatical sentence might show that a student had problems with syntax but could often be defined as a generally poor style or simply inadequate proof reading. The lack of skill or effort in proofreading and editing is also evidenced by the fact that students were not always consistent; for example, there were instances of spelling the same word in two different ways and using apostrophes correctly and incorrectly in the same piece of writing. Poor paragraphing could be categorised as ‘punctuation’ or ‘organisation’, and where an essay was poorly organised in terms of paragraphing I tried to ascertain whether the writer had actually sequenced points logically but failed to lay them out correctly on the page. If so, this was treated as a punctuation error each time a new paragraph should have been started; if not, it was categorised under organisation.

As in Hinkle (1997), and to be consistent with transcriptional categorisation, compositional errors were tabulated as negative marks, but counting these was much more problematic. Colloquialisms and unacademic vocabulary were included under ‘style’, as were unwieldy sentences. Again, it was difficult to decide whether to include every instance as sometimes that would give a negatively high score for an essay which was actually quite acceptable apart from the fact that the student might use first person inappropriately or be a little verbose. ‘Content’ was even more difficult to tabulate in this way. An error was counted where a student included incorrect factual material and if there was something significant missing. However, this resulted in some students having no content marks against them whereas, in fact, the content was lacking overall because it was simplistic or unchallenging; other students included far more interesting and useful content but averaged a worse score because of factual errors. The necessity to add notes to give an overall impression of the student and in order to explain some of these anomalies was the first step towards a change in strategy and a more qualitative approach. The implications of researching student writing by simply counting errors in one or two pieces of work also became apparent.<sup>3</sup> One obvious problem is that where mistakes are made in spelling, punctuation and grammar, it is clearly difficult to ascertain whether the students do not know how to conform or whether they simply have not taken enough care in that particular instance.

### **3.1.2 Pilot Study Results**

The results from the pilot study (see Appendix 1) simply denote the number of perceived errors in three pieces of work per student, but it is impossible to clearly evaluate development because of the variety in assessment requirements. It was noticeable that many of the pieces which specifically stipulated spelling, punctuation and grammar as elements of assessment

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<sup>3</sup> See discussion in part two of the literature review and later in this chapter..

generated more carefully presented work, but this did not always result in fewer errors as a number of apparently conscientious students seemed unable to follow the conventions of formal Standard Written English. In contrast, some students submitted roughly handwritten, poorly proofread work, lacking in content, when they had previously submitted work of a reasonably high standard. This supports the view that attitude and approach, as well as ability, are important criteria in producing acceptable undergraduate writing (Hinkle, 1997; Hartley, 1998).

In some cases, the academic essay generated fewer transcriptional errors in comparison to the other two pieces, and was written in a more formal style. This suggests that those students associate academic essays with a need for greater formality and care and that they are making some effort to conform to expectations. Other students, however, made fewer errors in their autobiographical piece, and it appears that the freedom of constraint in the content matter may have allowed them to adopt a more natural style in which they used language that they felt comfortable with and structured it appropriately. This is obviously an area where a more qualitative approach was necessary, as simply tabulating the number of errors per student did not give a full enough picture. In the compositional category, when figures were adjusted to allow for word counts, the later piece often had a higher percentage of errors. These were mainly in style and organisation; this could reflect the fact that where students were being asked to produce work in an unfamiliar format they resorted to inappropriate conventions.

### **3.1.3 Pilot Study Evaluation**

In analysing the data, it became apparent that other variables related to the requirements of the particular assignment were affecting results. For instance, for many Media students, comparing the number of errors from initial to later pieces, pointed to overall transcriptional

improvement, particularly in spelling. However, it must be relevant that the first piece was a 1500 word series of log entries, written over six weeks and that the last piece was a tightly edited, word processed, 500 word review for which students were told that they would lose marks for transcriptional errors. The use of computer spell checks also had an impact on the comparison but the improvement in punctuation was less dramatic; this appeared to be partly owing to over-compensation on the part of the student. For instance, where feedback pointed out an omission of apostrophes or commas, this resulted in the opposite problem of too many apostrophes or commas in subsequent work.

Working on the pilot study pointed to a narrower focus than the initial survey of writing development than was first envisaged. The importance of particular academic conventions within the discipline became less significant than the need to be able to follow the conventions of Standard Written English, as this would have implications for English and Media students after they had graduated. The feedback that was given on student work seemed to have little impact on the students' ability in this area, and in some cases it even appeared to cause deterioration. In order to explore this, a decision was taken to look more in depth at a smaller number of students' work, with the opportunity to discuss their writing development.

The pilot survey highlighted that where quantitative data is to be used for comparison, 'normative characteristics for groups' would be less useful than acknowledging expected criteria and charting individual student progress rather than comparing them to each other. The data also suggested that a combination of increased language awareness and improved skills might be needed in order for this progress to be achieved and this was supported by



relevant research. Anglia Polytechnic University, through their 'Speak-Write' project, aimed to raise student awareness through a dedicated writing course:

by combining these two approaches of analysis and practice. We train our students to analyse perceptively the styles and range of texts, giving them the terminology to do so, before asking them to apply what they have learned to their own writings [...] The students' language awareness and writing skills are thus acquired from an understanding of language as craft where the student-as-writer learns the craft from other practised writers. (Bryan, 1998)

This raising of student awareness also has implications in terms of 'literacy and empowerment', as discussed by Lankshear (1997) in his work on changing literacies. There is an argument that in focusing entirely on the rules of 'dominant discourses', for which the overt explanation of the rules '...can never be done exhaustively, since we cannot put all that is involved into *words*', we, as educators, could miss the opportunity to enable students to adopt 'powerful literacies'(p73). This seems to suggest that teaching must make explicit the 'meta-level' knowledge that students need to acquire in order to consciously manipulate language practices for effect. It appears not to be enough to encourage students to adopt practices in line with the rules of the 'dominant group', in this instance, academic writers; they must also be able to understand and control these rules. A relevant point here is that the rules of formal Standard English are 'acquired' by some as a 'primary Discourse', that is as part of acquiring their first language, but for others these rules have to be learned as a 'secondary Discourse' (Gee, 1991, p146). This is discussed further in subsequent chapters in relation to student and tutor perceptions and problems faced in developing writing and giving and using feedback.

It became clear during the pilot study that the idea that the standard of writing can be 'developed' by external intervention must also be tempered by the acknowledgement that

even if the writers understand the requirements, they each have the choice to ignore, accept or partially accept such ‘development’, for a variety of reasons, and it seems inevitable that student motivation will be a key factor in determining student progress (Avery and Bryan, 2001, p179). This motivation can be affected by other phenomena, not linked to the tutor’s intervention, such as personal characteristics, cognitive and learning styles and personal preference (Hartley, 1998, p36). Add to this such pressures as competing deadlines, non-academic work commitments, personal issues and practical problems and many students appear to feel that simply completing the assignment to any standard is achievement enough. This again pointed to the need for interviews with students.

The problems encountered in generating a ‘norm’ through quantitative data have also highlighted other points. If studies by Lamb (1992); Wray (1994) and Winch and Wells (1995) are to be accepted, then the ‘norm’ developed by assessing the work of our first year undergraduates might fall short of what is commonly thought of as an acceptable level of English for higher education. Incidences of certain errors, particularly in spelling and punctuation, were found in a high proportion of students. The inference here is that Crystal (1979) in establishing a norm, was considering remedial work with pupils who are working below that norm, whereas previous studies, and current debate, suggest that the conventions of Standard Written English are not the norm for many undergraduates and that the writing standard for undergraduates needs to be raised generally.

Overall, the pilot study led me to mistrust reliance on quantitative tabulation of errors in a database as a sound basis for assessing the writing capabilities and development of students. Studies based on a small individual sample of work, no matter how many students are involved, would appear flawed, as the material produced by a single student shows significant

variation across a range of work. The very worst and the very best students are still apparent but where the aim is to document the capabilities, progress and development of the average undergraduate, the figures can be very misleading. As the purpose of this research was not simply to detail the standard of writing for undergraduates but also to understand how and why changes occurred and to suggest ways in which the quality could be improved, it appeared to necessitate tracking individual students and detailing their writing habits in a more comprehensive, qualitative manner.

This is not to say that some quantitative data is not useful in assessing performance alongside a more qualitative approach. As Brown and Dowling suggest:

the adoption of a dual approach involving both qualitative and quantitative techniques can help in overcoming such tendencies to what we might refer to as naïve empiricism. The qualitative imagination will demand that quantitative analysis explains itself in terms of the non-statistical concepts that it is claiming to measure. The quantitative imagination will demand a degree of precision in definition that qualitative work may slide away from. It is our position, then, that the best option will always be for a **dialogical** use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. (1998, p83)

This highlighted the need to use ‘that combination of both which makes use of the most valuable features of each’ (Merton and Kendall, 1946, in Cohen and Manion, 1994, p40).

The need for triangulation, or a multi-method approach, also became evident from the pilot study so in order to validate my assessment of student writing development and explore reasons, it became clear that interviews with the participants would be useful in strengthening my interpretation of any causal links between teacher input and improvement and identifying other phenomena which might have affected performance. Although the decision had been made not to include pre-university sociological factors related to individual students, it also became apparent that the empirical data could not be explored in a vacuum and that in order

to make it meaningful, it would be necessary to document factors that appeared to affect performance if the research was to fulfil its aims.

## **3.2 Main Study**

### **3.2.1 Introduction and Literature Survey**

Although the original project was conceived to explore all aspects of undergraduate writing development, during the pilot study the need for a narrower focus emerged. The importance of charting the difference between those requirements that were seen as aspects of academic convention and those that could be seen as features of Standard Written English in any forum became apparent. Despite research which suggests that tutors put too much emphasis on ‘surface features’, my concern was that this emphasis did not always lead to improvement and the reasons for this were more complex than had previously been acknowledged; it was this complexity which pointed towards a more qualitative strategy. In deciding on a methodology for the final project, I was conscious of learning a great deal from the pilot study about the problems of assessing something that is as difficult to qualify as writing development. The quantitative approach that had been followed by several of the researchers I had investigated (Lamb,1992; Wray,1994; Winch and Wells,1995; Hinkle, 1997 and Hartley, 1998) appeared useful for establishing that problems existed but did little to establish whether or not they persisted, what attempts were made to address them, and what success was obtained.

The pilot study also illustrated the need to focus on educational rather than purely linguistic research. The work of Cohen and Manion (1994) and Bell (1999) on educational research methods was useful in presenting a variety of methods and highlighting the reasons why some methods were more appropriate than others for the intended purpose. This confirmed that in-depth qualitative research on a relatively small scale could be as useful and valid as larger quantitative projects or surveys. However, as noted in the previous section, if quantitative and

qualitative methods are combined, this allows for a fruitful blending of ‘imagination’ and ‘precision’ (Brown and Dowling, 1998, p83). With this in mind, a sample of fifteen students was decided upon and this is explained in more detail later in this chapter. *Educational Research: principles, policies & practices* (Shipman, 1985) gives an overview of historical developments and, in particular, Atkinson and Delamont (1985), in their thorough critique of the ‘case-study’ method in educational research (pp26-45), explicated the problems of assuming that the more qualitative approach can exist without ‘an adequately formulated body of theory or methods’. Research since then does appear to have attempted to produce such a body of theory, and the problems associated with case studies and other qualitative methods are quite clear in Shipman’s collection of essays on their limitations (1997). Informed by this it became important to reassess the reliability and validity of my original methodology and this is discussed in more detail below.

One of the major themes of validity is objectivity; the subjective nature of my assessment on student writing is acknowledged, and the comparison of chronological data is done within that subjective and interpretivist framework. It is the individual nature of writing which makes it extremely difficult, as Cohen and Manion put it, to ‘devise general theories’ or produce normative characteristics. Research in this context is more likely to produce ‘multifaceted images of human behaviour as varied as the situations and contexts supporting them (p37). An interpretivist approach is said to be ‘aiming for detail and understanding rather than statistical representativeness’ (Bartlett, 2004, p22) and the interviews and surveys used in this research rely on individual perceptions, both of the writing requirements and the reasons students might fail to meet them. However, it is also acknowledged that statistical visual representations can be extremely useful in illustrating patterns. The graphs used in this study depicting the number of student writing errors (see Appendix 4) are therefore used to give a

clearer sense of the individual writer's development. They can only be interpreted, however, within the context of 'explor[ing] the complexity, ambiguity and specific detailed process taking place in a social context' (Bartlett, 2004, p23) and not as a basis for generalisation.

The requirements of undergraduate writing are dealt with in some detail in the previous chapter but what constitutes 'development' is again largely subjective. Throughout this research project I have endeavoured to be explicit and open about controversial areas. These include:

- the fact that the validity of my findings is constructed in my individual notion of what is acceptable in terms of the different perceptions of Standard Written English and the purposes of higher education;
- the fact that the definition of and the requirement to produce Standard Written English is a contentious issue involving complex social and power related nuances;
- the ethical considerations and implications of analysing teaching and learning in the institution in which I am employed;
- the impact of power relationships and the academic environment on the interview data;
- the problems associated with any generalisations of such a limited sample.

Delamont (1992, p8) suggests that the researcher 'should not waste time in trying to eliminate "investigator effects" but instead she should concentrate on understanding those effects'. It is the attempt to acknowledge and understand these factors that support the validity of this thesis.

### **3.2.2 Choosing the sample**

A longitudinal, cohort study (Cohen and Manion, 1994, pp68-72) appeared to be the most appropriate method to assess the development of student writing in relation to the ability to produce Standard Written English, as a single assessment would have the disadvantages outlined in the evaluation of the pilot study. A cohort study would allow examination of 'individual variations in characteristics and traits' (p69) and a more qualitative approach that could examine possible reasons for change. A cross-sectional study was considered, in which samples from three consecutive first years were compared, but the difficulties involved in comparison of different subjects and the unsuitability of the method for establishing 'causal relationships between variables' (p69) pointed to the advantages of the cohort study.

There were several factors to be considered before deciding which students would form the cohort. In taking a more qualitative approach, it was necessary to limit the sample to a number that could be reasonably dealt with in a detailed manner. A thoroughly in-depth case study of a very small number of students was rejected, as the variety of student writing was one element of complexity that I wanted to illustrate. Based on the work done for the pilot study, I felt that approximately fifteen students would be the optimum number. The amount of written work that each student generates in the first year is approximately 20,000 words. The logistics involved in copying and assessing the material plus the time to interview the participants were taken into account. This sample is not large in terms of the student population (Hartley, 1998, p9) and this obviously has implications regarding the ability to generalise, but even though large-scale studies can be useful in establishing that there is a problem, a more in-depth approach is necessary to explore complexity and to produce valid notions about possible solutions, largely because of the many variables involved.

The individuality of writing as a process works against any simple solution and the number of variables necessarily involved in producing writing might suggest that any insights need to be based on as much relevant information as possible about the writer and the situation in which the writing is produced. Lillis reiterates Russell's comment that :

Writing is not an autonomous set of easily generalized skills but a very complex, developing accomplishment, central to the specialised work of the myriad disciplines of higher education, and to the professions and institutions students will enter and transform. (Russell, 1999 in Lillis, 2000)

However, this profile of students' writing development is based firmly on the analysis of writing produced within the mainstream undergraduate context for English and Media students at one university. The interviews<sup>4</sup> do, inevitably, reveal some aspects of the students' lives that might have an impact on their writing development, but there has been no attempt to do any analytical study based on variables such as previous education, class, gender or other commitments. One of the strengths of the study is that any suggestions to improve the system of writing development are such that these inevitable variables will be acknowledged and provided for. There may be solid educational reasons for establishing why students of any particular background may have problems in developing their writing at university but this is not one of the main aims of this project. One of the effects of a massive expansion in student numbers appears to be that a much larger number of students, not simply those labelled, 'non-traditional', have literacy practices which are not acceptable within the academic or educated discourse community. In light of this, any strategies adopted must be wide reaching rather than specifically targeted.

The sample of fifteen students was extracted from a larger convenience sample of eighty students to which I had access through my teaching. Initially, twenty students were chosen to allow for those who did not wish to take part or those who might drop out. The choice was a

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<sup>4</sup> See discussion later in this chapter.



‘purposive’<sup>5</sup> sample based on early written work. I concentrated on selecting from the mainstream student population with normal matriculation. I planned to exclude mature students as studies have shown that these students often present particular and specialised problems (Street and Lea, 1997; Lillis, 2000), but, following Hartley and Chesworth (1999), I decided that mature students should be classed as aged 25 and above, as those under 25 appeared to be more easily identified with the general mainstream population.

I also decided to exclude any students with a diagnosed learning disability such as dyslexia. I did consider whether students who had English as a second language should also be excluded but, as the level of writing ability is just as varied as for those who have English as their first language, I decided not to use this as a discriminating factor. One bilingual student was initially included but, as explained later, she did not continue in the final sample. Gender difference was not to be an integral part of my research, but, coincidentally, the sample included equal numbers of male and female students, and the final sample included eight males and seven females. I acknowledge that the data might yield some interesting points for discussion on gender traits but would be wary of making any assertions relating to gender difference based on such a small sample.

In selecting the individual subjects, I looked for students who had some recognisably typical difficulties with regard to the features of standard spelling, punctuation and grammar but also scrutinised other aspects of style such as inappropriate vocabulary as Standard Written English generally requires a certain level of formality. Some of the students were obtaining good marks generally and would not necessarily have been identified as poor writers (see individual profiles at the end of this section for why particular students were included). This

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Researchers handpick cases’ on a ‘judgement of their typicality’ (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p 89).

allowed me to be honest in telling prospective participants that I was including a cross section of students and not only those who were perceived as having obvious problems; this was important so that there would not be any remedial stigma attached to those taking part. Other students were included in the initial sample because they came up in discussions on writing style with colleagues, but these were followed up discreetly so as to preserve anonymity.

Burgess (1989) was a useful guide to ethical considerations and emphasised the need for tact and discretion in approaching staff and students within the university. It also gave rise to more consideration of the relationship of trust that would need to exist between the students involved and myself as both researcher and tutor. This is discussed more fully in the evaluation of the interview data. A paper given by Rock (1998) at a Postgraduate research seminar at Lancaster University entitled 'Ethical Issues in Applied Linguistics' also gave a first hand account of the problems which could be encountered later if sensible procedures were not followed from the outset.

Student identity was kept from staff as far as possible and aliases have been used so that students felt free to comment, and so that staff did not feel constrained to act differently because their feedback might be scrutinised. All members of staff were made aware that the research was taking place and care was taken to emphasise the focus of the research on developing positive outcomes rather than engaging in criticism. As mentioned earlier, it was also important that students did not feel they were taking part in a remedial programme. Emphasis was placed on the developmental aspects of the research and the inclusion of students who were not perceived to have general academic problems encouraged this perspective. All the students were chosen from those with whom I had direct contact in the first semester. These included students on pathways in English Studies (including options in

Literature, Language and Creative Writing), English and Media, Media Studies (with specialisations including Print Journalism, Television and Radio), History with Media, Modern language with Media and Politics with Media.

The main piece of work I analysed, from the initial cohort of eighty students, was from a Media module entitled *Perception and Inquiry*. This was a collection of six weekly log entries of 250 words each. The other assignment used was an essay generated for an English Studies module named *Writing One*. For this module, students were also asked to keep writing logs but not all students complied with this as it was not compulsory; where logs were available, they were used to give a further insight into the writing profile of the students (see Appendix 2).

For the Media log entries, the students were given a different aspect of the topic ‘Perception’ each week. The module handbook explained that in 250 words they were required to ‘show critical understanding of seminar presentations and key ideas and texts’. They were told that they would be expected to improve the standard of their work, with the help of feedback, over six weeks, and that more weighting would be given to the later pieces. The *Writing One* module assignment involved submitting a draft essay on a negotiated title on the topic of popular culture. A week after submitting the draft they were asked to reassess it in class before receiving tutor feedback and then producing the final version. As both these assignments involved giving feedback before the final version was produced, it was felt that this would give a clearer picture of the students’ writing capabilities, allowing for an initial settling in period. These pieces of work, however, would still be included in the data to be analysed in more detail, and the impact of this early feedback could be included in any assessment.

All classes involved were alerted to the fact that this research was being conducted and given a broad outline of what it entailed. It was stressed that no student would be under pressure to take part and that material used would be made anonymous. Students agreeing to take part were required to sign an agreement form (see Appendix 3a) and were given aliases, but they are referred to by student number within the body of the research. After the initial agreement, I was careful not to approach students in the University as I felt this might put them under undue pressure. All communication regarding interviews and collection of work was carried out by letter, unless the students made the initial approach.

### **3.2.3 Student profiles for original sample of twenty.**

The following students (aliases used) were included in the sample for the reasons stated:

<b>Student Number.</b>	<b>Alias</b>	<b>Degree Course</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Derek Allan</b>	<b>English and Media</b>

This student was chosen on the basis of his essay in the *Writing One* module. Although he had an obvious grasp of the content and produced generally competent work, there were errors in punctuation and spelling. There were also examples of unusual or colloquial expression.

Derek agreed to take part in the research.

<b>2.</b>	<b>Diane Andrew</b>	<b>English Studies</b>
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This student came up in discussion with a colleague as someone who did not appear to be working to her potential. Her writing was well presented but some pieces were written in an informal style and appeared rushed. Some of her work was handwritten and there were some spelling errors and instances of subject/verb non-agreement. She misused apostrophes in some pieces but not in others. I felt it would be interesting to see if someone who generally

appeared to have the ability to produce an acceptable writing style would develop a more academic approach and produce Standard Written English more consistently.

Diane agreed to take part in the research.

**3. Barbara Anthony English and Media**

This student transferred from another degree three weeks into Semester One and was chosen on the basis of her work in *Writing One*. She appeared keen to learn and took the opportunity to use the writing diary to reflect on her own writing style. She wrote with insight about the lack of formality in her first draft and acknowledged problems with organisation and style but interestingly ignored the most obvious fault that was her spelling (see Transcript 3b, Appendix 2). Barbara agreed to take part in the research.

**4. Paula Douglas German with Media**

This student was chosen to take part on the basis of Media logs and *Writing One*. Punctuation and spelling were obviously a problem even though a spellchecker was used. Her writing style was very informal with many colloquial expressions and a very personal and subjective viewpoint. As the work in German is mainly translation this has not been included in the data. Paula agreed to take part in the research

**5. Peter Ivan German with Media**

This student illustrated some problems with spelling and punctuation in the Media logs and *Writing One* essay. As his problems did not appear major, he may not have been chosen but he was very keen to improve and volunteered to take part in the research. It was felt that it would be useful to include a highly motivated student in discussing the reasons for writing

development. Again, only the Media work has been included. Peter agreed to take part in the research

**6. Christopher James Media (Print Journalism)**

This student was chosen on the basis of the log for the Media module but only three of them were submitted on time; they showed poor secretarial skills as well as lacking research and organisation. The student admitted that he had not put much effort in as he had personal problems that necessitated absence. He implied that more effort and time would easily sort out any writing problems he had and it was felt that it would be interesting to see if this was indeed the case. Christopher agreed to take part in the research.

**7. Naomi Jordan English Studies**

This student was chosen on the basis of her Media logs that were variable in quality. Spelling was an obvious problem with hand-written material, although word-processed work showed that she could use a spell check effectively. The most interesting feature of Naomi's writing was a tendency to produce rather odd expression that appeared to be linked to her efforts in trying to produce a formal 'academic style' (see examples Chapter Five).

Naomi agreed to take part in the research.

**8. Stephen Joseph Media (Television)**

This student was chosen on the basis of the Media logs which indicated definite spelling problems but it was difficult to tell at this stage whether other errors, such as missing and duplicate words, were the result of rushed and poorly checked work or something more basic. Much of the early work was handwritten and poor presentation added to the impression of rushed work. Stephen agreed to take part in the research but subsequently left the course.

**9. Jane Laurence French with Media**

This student was chosen on the basis of the Media logs and *Writing One*. She produced well-presented work but it was inconsistent with regard to punctuation, sentence structure and missing and duplicated words. It was difficult to assess at this stage whether problems were simply resulting from rushed work and poor proofreading or something more fundamental. As above, only her Media work was collected. Jane agreed to take part in the research.

**10. Francis Martin English and Media**

This student was chosen based on his work in *Writing One*. His essay contained several spelling errors and colloquialisms plus non-agreement of subject and verb. Francis agreed to take part in the research.

**11. Oliver Max Media (Radio Journalism)**

This student was chosen on the basis of his Media logs that illustrated problems in most areas of writing. Some pieces were better than others but were so short that it was difficult to fully assess competence. Oliver declined to take part in the research.

**12. Theresa May English Studies**

This student was chosen on the basis of her Media logs. The work lacked care in presentation and had several spelling errors. The quality of the material indicated that she was able to cope with the academic requirements but appeared rushed. Theresa declined to take part and left the course before the end of the first semester.

**13. David Michael English Studies**

This student had problems with syntax, spelling and punctuation. He would have been included in the sample based on the Media logs but was also flagged up by colleagues who found his writing style unusual as he appeared to have problems producing writing in a formal, academic style; he fluctuated between an informal, casual approach and a businesslike note form. When he did attempt a formal academic style, he often produced poorly structured sentences. David agreed to take part in the research.

**14. Phillip Miles History with Media**

This student was chosen on the basis of his Media logs. His work was handwritten and poorly expressed. Spelling was careless. Philip was also interesting because his work involved another discipline (History) and a different department, but with hindsight this was not useful as it made it more difficult to obtain sample work when the History and Media departments were moved to separate campuses. Philip agreed to take part in the research and although there is a smaller sample of writing than for the other students, it was felt that the insights gained from this and the interviews were sufficient to justify inclusion.

**15 William Richard English Studies**

This student was chosen on the basis of his Media logs. Punctuation was idiosyncratic and syntax was awkward in places. Another interesting feature here was that the logs were meant to be around 250 words each. William's first effort was ten times that, and subsequent efforts still did not manage to get within range of the word limit although the content was relevant and showed evidence of keen understanding and thorough research. The style was formal, but there were indications that he was not completely at ease with it as his use of punctuation and vocabulary made his writing difficult to follow in places (see examples in Chapter Four and



Five). William was thought to be an interesting case study, as his level of engagement was often in advance of what one might expect from a first year undergraduate but he had some genuine problems in fulfilling some more basic requirements. William agreed to take part in the research.

**16. Mary Robert Politics with Media**

This student was included on the basis of her Media logs. She regarded English as her first language as she was born in this country, but she does speak a second language (Gujerati) at home. Although initially I included Mary in my sample, I felt that her problems were serious enough to warrant specialised help. I counselled her to that effect and she was referred to the Disability Service to be tested for dyslexia. Mary had agreed to take part in the research but her data has not been included

**17. Sally Silvester English Studies**

This student was chosen on the basis of discussion amongst colleagues and at her own request. A bright and enthusiastic student, she was extremely disconcerted when she received feedback on some of her early written work. Although the content was good and she had obviously worked hard on research and presentation, the sentence structure detracted a great deal from the sense of her work. Short pieces such as the Media log entries were not too bad but longer essays were littered with verbless sentences and poor expression. Punctuation was also erratic. Sally agreed to take part in the research.

**18. Anthea Thomas English and Media**

This student was chosen on the basis of her draft and essay for *Writing One*. She had obvious problems with secretarial skills: presentation, spelling and punctuation. Her work was also

disorganised and poorly structured, and missing words were a problem. Her ideas were relevant and she had positive points to make, but she obviously needed help in getting her thoughts onto paper coherently. Anthea declined to take part in the research.

**19. Matthew Trevor English and Media**

This student was chosen on the basis of *Writing One*, which showed general competence but errors in spelling and punctuation. Subject/verb agreement was also a problem. The difference between the draft and the finished essay did indicate some improvement and I felt again that the student's apparent enthusiasm and motivation might add an interesting element to the assessment of the effectiveness of feedback. Matthew agreed to take part in the research.

**20. Catherine Zadir English/Media**

This student was chosen based on her work in *Writing One* and discussion with colleagues. She had definite problems with sentence structure/punctuation (see examples Chapter Five). It was difficult to tell, at this stage, how much of her problem was based on her lack of knowledge of punctuation conventions, but she also had problems with spelling and missing and duplicate words which suggested that she did not revise her work. She had very critical feedback from her first piece of writing from another tutor and was very defensive in the *Writing One* seminars, citing her grade B at GCSE level English as proof of her writing ability.

Catherine agreed to take part in the research but subsequently did not attend for interviews.

From the original twenty students approached, one left the course (Student12) and two (Students11 and 18) declined to take part. Student 8 left at the beginning of year two and

Student 16 was withdrawn. This left fifteen students in the cohort. These fifteen students are as follows:

Alias	Subsequently referred to as:
<b>Derek Allen</b>	<b>Student 1</b>
<b>Diane Andrew</b>	<b>Student 2</b>
<b>Barbara Anthony</b>	<b>Student 3</b>
<b>Paula Douglas</b>	<b>Student 4</b>
<b>Peter Ivan</b>	<b>Student 5</b>
<b>Christopher James</b>	<b>Student 6</b>
<b>Naomi Jordan</b>	<b>Student 7</b>
<b>Jane Laurence</b>	<b>Student 8</b>
<b>Francis Martin</b>	<b>Student 9</b>
<b>David Michael</b>	<b>Student 10</b>
<b>Phillip Miles</b>	<b>Student 11</b>
<b>William Richard</b>	<b>Student 12</b>
<b>Sally Sylvester</b>	<b>Student 13</b>
<b>Matthew Trevor</b>	<b>Student 14</b>
<b>Catherine Zadir</b>	<b>Student 15</b>

### **3.2.4 Collecting the written data**

Once the sample had been chosen, students were asked to submit their returned written work to me for photocopying so that a file could be assembled. The work collected included copies of feedback sheets written by tutors. The initial intention was to collect all first year work and

to use this as data to complete the aims of the project in assessing how the students' writing had developed towards producing Standard Written English. On first analysis, however, the results from the first year work showed results where some features appeared to have improved and then deteriorated (see Appendix 4 for examples of graphs illustrating error rates). Along with this, initial interviews<sup>6</sup> suggested that all students did not necessarily produce the work they were capable of in the first year, with such remarks as: 'When you know the marks don't count towards anything you think "Well as long as I pass"' (Int. 6a) and 'To be honest with you I haven't put that much effort in this year' (Int. 9a). Therefore, it was decided at this stage to extend the study to follow the students through the second year and where possible into the third year. This allowed for a more reliable longitudinal study that would include a more thorough assessment of writing development towards the production of Standard Written English and a more in-depth investigation of possible reasons for change.

A large sample of first year work was collected for the majority of the fifteen students in the final sample and this has been used to detail the frequency and type of errors relating to the use of Standard Written English. Non-standard usage of punctuation, spelling and grammar was marked with a fluorescent pen.<sup>7</sup> Student 16 continued to illustrate such severe writing problems as a second language speaker with the possibility of dyslexia that she was referred for specific help and her work has not been included in the sample.

It became more difficult to obtain second year work in the third semester of the study as I did not teach the students directly. Letters requesting students to bring in work were largely ignored, although some students were conscientious and produced work before being asked. A further letter was sent (see Appendix 3b) which requested permission to photocopy any

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 2 for transcripts of all interviews.

<sup>7</sup> See later discussion on assessment of error.

returned work before it was retrieved from pigeonholes. It was sent to both term-time and home addresses. It asked for any students who objected to this to simply return the letter via the pigeonhole without the necessity for discussion. As no students returned the letters, I obtained more data in Semester Four. For Student 11, who was based on a different part of the campus, only one piece of second year work was collected, but, as previously noted, it was felt that this could still be assessed for development, and as his interview material was interesting it was decided to keep him in the study. As the letter did not specify which year but only referred to 'Advanced level' work, it was possible to collect at least one piece of final year work from eight of the fifteen students.

### **3.2.5 Data Analysis**

The definition of Standard Written English has been shown to be complex, and the analysis of these essays is carried out specifically to show this complexity. Each collected piece of work was scrutinised and any perceived errors relating to the conventions of Standard Written English were marked, and notes were made on the main type and frequency. The problems associated with the decision of what an 'error' might be have been discussed in part two of the literature review and, as Williams writes in his article on the phenomenology of error mentioned earlier, there is 'Great variation in our definition of error, great variation in our emotional investment in defining and condemning error, great variation in the perceived seriousness of individual errors' (1981). This acknowledgement that the perception of error is a personal one in any given context led me away from using any predetermined list of common errors such as the one devised by Connors and Lunsford (1988). The notion of a standard suggests that there are features that are non-standard but individual notions of non-standard will differ and are not only 'time-and context-bound' (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004) but are also clearly dependent on individual perception. The term 'error' itself has been used

reluctantly as it is pejorative in essence, but it is consistent with other literature in the field (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004, p22). The counting of ‘errors’ in this data is in fact the counting of incidences of writing made ‘visible’ to me by differences from my notion of correctness; this would not necessarily correlate exactly with others’ notion of error. Despite the use of the term ‘error’, it is important to emphasise that the purpose of this exercise is to measure development rather than to denigrate the writer.

The resulting data was used to produce graphs illustrating error rates per 1000 words in spelling, punctuation and grammar for each semester’s work collected (see Appendix 4 and discussion of results in Chapter Six). So rather than being purely a quantitative exercise, the aim was to gather a general picture of the main errors, supported by evidence of whether this was an isolated instance or a general element of the student’s style that could be tracked through the work collected. Although it has not been included in the graphical representation, work was grouped under three broad headings of Analysis/Report, Theory/Essay and Creative Writing as I thought this might produce some interesting variations for analysis and could be helpful in addressing the question of whether changing or unfamiliar genres might be one of the factors which constitute a problem for students in trying to meet writing requirements. This could obviously only be a loose genre grouping as some work crossed these boundaries, but where text analysis and empirical data were involved, these were generally put into the first category, whereas assignments based purely on secondary research were put into the second. There could also be some contention about what constitutes ‘creative’ writing but for the purposes of the current research this heading was applied to material which was written within creative writing modules such as short stories.

All spelling errors were marked, but the same error was only counted once per piece of work. American spellings were accepted where they were used consistently but not if the English and American variants were used in the same piece of work. As in the pilot study, all punctuation errors were noted. There were some instances where it was difficult to decide if something was a punctuation or spelling error, for example the use of ‘families’ for ‘family’s’, but it was felt that as long as there was consistency this would not constitute a problem. There were also some instances where isolating commas for an introductory or embedded phrase could be seen as optional but, in general, their omission was counted as one error.

In terms of grammatical errors, it was sometimes difficult to differentiate the types of error. Missing words or poor punctuation could result in an ungrammatical sentence that could be remedied in a number of ways. An example of this would be:

Thus the meaning of the advert was a success it’s main objective; to portray their watch as a symbol of strength (10.1.1).<sup>8</sup>

This could be corrected by inserting the word ‘in’ after success and changing the semi-colon to a colon, or it could be changed by inserting a comma after success, removing the semi-colon altogether and inserting the word ‘being’ (of course the possessive apostrophe would also need to be removed from ‘it’s’ in both cases). Allowances were made in creative writing pieces as these would not necessarily be in the style of formal Standard Written English. An instance of this would be the use of sentence fragments for effect in a short story:

And maybe it might show me. Standing in the background, daydreaming about Lou. Thinking about our life that might have been (14.2.10).

Many instances of grammar errors were related to missing or extra words and these could have been counted as typographical errors but, as with spelling, it was often impossible to know, and therefore the decision was taken not to have a separate counting system for

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<sup>8</sup> As explained more fully at the end of this section, this notation relates to Student, Semester, and Assignment numbers.

typographical errors but to include them within one of the features. This counting system gave a high score in some cases, as students who missed out words and used commas indiscriminately usually did so throughout their work, but it is important to note that the data is used to gauge development rather than as a measure of poor writing.

It may be that colleagues in other disciplines would find my assessment too fastidious, but this assessment was based on the fact that these are students of English and Media Studies and that, arguably, their use of language is inextricable from the discipline content. I would suggest that the errors noted are those which would be apparent to most writers of formal British Standard English within the educated discourse community although, as detailed below, there is room for some variation and, as Williams (1981) maintains, there are some ‘errors’ noted in grammar books which are flouted so often that they can no longer be maintained as errors except by the most fastidious.

Measures of quality are admittedly subjective and impressionistic, but I have tried to ensure consistency of approach so that it is still possible to measure development. As a first class graduate in English and Communication Arts and a teacher of English at all levels from GCSE upwards through to MA, I have to believe that I can reasonably assess what is appropriate English at this level and in this context, but as discussed earlier, this will still be an individual decision. Where there was any doubt on grammatical features, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk *et al.*, 1985) has been used for guidance, which is in keeping with the conservative nature of formal writing. As a measure of validity, before I had marked the papers, an independent researcher with thirty years experience of teaching English was also asked to assess samples of three students’ data. This was later compared to my appraisal to affirm that my assessment was not completely idiosyncratic. It was noted that



there was some difference between our assessments in that errors that I had labelled ‘punctuation’, she had labelled ‘grammar’ as the problem centred on what should be included in a sentence. She always counted the omission of a comma before a conjunction whereas I allowed the omission where the flow of the sentence seemed unaffected. Generally, the assessments were very similar in proportion and type of errors, and comments on the ability of each student were in keeping with my own.

In a rapidly changing world, many forms of writing have moved towards a less formal style, particularly as the use of electronic devices such as e-mail and mobile phones has moved writing much closer to speech in terms of spontaneous communication. This made it necessary to consider whether or not a slightly more casual style was still within the boundaries of formal Standard Written English, but generally a fairly conservative approach has been taken on appropriateness. As discussed earlier, it would be virtually impossible to gain an overall consensus of exactly what constitutes a writing error, as style, discipline, and even age, can be factors. Even though I have endeavoured to take into consideration comments and feedback from colleagues (see e-mail survey responses, Appendix 5), the split infinitive may have passed unchallenged. I have also conceded the use of ‘amount’ with count nouns, as several tutors and the general media appear to condone this usage (see Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p264). Apostrophes in decades such as ‘1950’s’ were also ignored for the same reason.

Each piece of work was scrutinised and, as noted earlier, was given a number relating to the student number, the semester number (one to six) and the chronological order of the assignment. For example, 5.4.12 would relate to an assignment for Student 5 from Semester 4 (end of Year 2) that would be the twelfth piece of work collected overall. The errors counted in each piece of work were then grouped into semesters. A summary of each semester’s work

was made which included examples of feedback and examples of student writing and this was then collated in a general summary. These summaries have been used along with the graphs to give an overview of student development in producing Standard Written English, and in tandem with the interviews are used to illustrate the complex nature of change.

### **3.2.6 Interview data**

As mentioned previously, it became clear that in order to further the aims of the research project, some analysis of student perception of their own development would be extremely useful in serving to corroborate or challenge my own interpretation of the written data. Cohen & Manion, (1994), Blaxter *et al.* (1996): Brown & Dowling, (1998) and Bell, (1999), all give a clear indication that it is impossible for any method of empirical investigation to give a completely objective account, and Brown and Dowling's 'epistemological paradox'<sup>9</sup>, appeared valid both in relation to the researcher's account and that of the subjects. However, Brown & Dowling also pointed out that triangulation, in itself, does not necessarily overcome this paradox but 'may be of value in expanding the empirical setting' (1998, p9). The data alone seemed to provide as many questions as answers so that the student perception of the factors involved seemed essential.

On researching the variety of interview approaches, a semi-structured interview technique was regarded as the most useful for this study. Drever (1995) outlines the considerations relevant to using this technique in small-scale research, and his pointers on developing a research schedule, planning and processing the interviews and analysing the resultant data were clear and practical. Interviews were conducted as informally as possible in a small private room that was otherwise used as a restroom for office staff. I felt that this was

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<sup>9</sup> The act of making your experience explicit of necessity entails its transformation (p8).

preferable to conducting interviews in my office that may have been more intimidating and was shared with other teaching staff. Although I suggested thirty minutes as a guideline for interviews, I made sure that I had more time available if necessary.

Data was recorded with the use of a tape recorder or notepad depending on the preference of the interviewee and some practical considerations.<sup>10</sup> Different question formats were explored and a semi-structured format using open, mainly direct questions was decided upon. I did consider using indirect questions (Tuckman, 1972) as I was conscious of the power relationship that might inhibit honest answers, but I was also conscious of time constraints as the students might become restless if the interview lasted for more than thirty minutes (see Appendix 3c for sample questions). The advantages of open questions, as detailed in Cohen and Manion (1994), are:

They are flexible; they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up any misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondent's knowledge; they encourage co-operation and establish rapport; and they allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes. (p277)

Open questions were supported by 'prompt' questions that were brought into force if the interviewee needed encouragement. The initial strategy was to interview students at the end of each semester and to talk to them about their work in order to develop a clearer picture of any development and to gain insight into the reasons for it. The interview covered all aspects of their writing and not just features of Standard Written English, as this was felt to be more useful to the student and more conducive to a relaxed discussion. Copies of their work were used in the discussions and particular attention was given to the written feedback they received, how they interpreted it and what effect this had on their future work; this was

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<sup>10</sup> Only one student declined to be taped but because of noise interference some other interviews were recorded only in note form.

particularly useful with regard to the research question of what may have influenced changes in their writing.<sup>11</sup>

Obtaining interviews with the students was more difficult than anticipated as, although they were initially interested, the pressure of work seemed to outweigh this, and I felt unable to put any pressure on them to attend. Students 1, 2, 3, 4,9,10, 11 and 14 were interviewed once either in the February or June of their first year which started in September. Students 7 and 8 were interviewed twice in February and June of the first year. Student 6 had one interview at the end of his second year and a short review during his third year. Students 5, 12 and 13 were interviewed in the first and second year and student 5 gave a third interview at the end of Year 2. Student 12 had a short review in the third year when he and Student 6 called in to tell me of their future plans. No other third year students responded to interview invitations and gave pressure of work as the reason (see Appendix 2 for full list of transcripts).

The initial interviews typically ran for between half an hour and an hour, but in order to relax the student there was some discussion on personal topics that was not particularly relevant to the writing and these sections were not transcribed. I felt it was important to reassure the student that I was interested in them and not just how they could further my research. The students' written work, with feedback, was used as a prompt to ascertain student perceptions of what they were required to do, their own performance and the response to it. I was aware of the possibility of the power relationship inhibiting the interviewees but was soon reassured in that they seemed to have no hesitation in admitting to academic practices that could be seen as negative, such as proofreading on the bus on the way to handing in work or not proofreading at all. I was also conscious that my intervention might have an effect by 'sensitizing them to

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<sup>11</sup> Oral feedback may have been given but inclusion of this relied on student recall and does not form a significant part of the research.

matters that have hitherto passed unnoticed' (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p69) but felt that this could be explored as a valid area of writing development. At the end of year two I offered the students a written account of observations I had made over the two years and highlighted possible areas for development within their writing. Students 5,6,7,10,12 and 13 took advantage of this.

All of the interviews were transcribed orthographically from tapes or typed up from notes as soon as possible after the interviews were done so that memory would help in terms of any ambivalent interpretation. Cohen and Manion (1994, pp292-296) give a clear summary of guidelines in dealing with interview data through phenomenological analysis citing Hycner, (1985). Several of these guidelines were adopted. These include making a note of paralinguistic features such as laughing, as this contributed to the understanding of the student attitude towards writing and feedback, listening to the tapes and reading transcripts several times in order to get a sense of the whole, and conducting a second interview. However, the option of coding the interviews in a more systematic way was rejected, as it was felt that the interviews were not the central focus but were used simply to shed light on specific points relating to the written data. As the number of respondents was reasonably small, it was a relatively easy process to pinpoint particular responses relating to different aspects of the written data. Extracts from the interviews have been used to support ideas on how and why students develop their writing but also to provide more insight into the complex and varied reasons why students might not produce writing which is 'invisible' and would allow them to be more readily accepted as members of the 'educated discourse community'.

### **3.2.7 Surveys**

In addition to scrutinising collected written data in response to the research question regarding whether student work meets the requirement for Standard Written English in spelling, punctuation and grammar, a short e-mail survey was carried out with Humanities staff at my own university which asked them to ‘list [their] main frustration with the writing [they] assess’ (see Appendix 5). The perception that students are falling short of writing requirements has been discussed in some detail earlier but it was felt that even a small amount of empirical data would be useful in supporting this. Out of 18 replies only three concentrated on content issues without specifically mentioning features relating to the production of Standard Written English.

A survey was also considered as a means of addressing the research question regarding strategies used for developing student writing, but it was decided that use could be made of relatively recent surveys (Alsop, 2003; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004, ALDin HE, 2008) in order to identify ways in which UK universities have attempted to close the perceived gap between higher education writing requirements and the writing which students produce.

## **4. Results Section One: Problems Students Face in Meeting Writing Requirements**

In the literature review I have explored issues surrounding the writing requirements for English and Media students in UK higher education. I have exposed tensions between those requirements that focus on the assessment of discipline content and those related to the need for graduates to be able to write in a way that allows them access to the 'educated' discourse community. This discourse community does not exist solely in academia but generally in any employment requiring graduate status. I have concentrated on disciplines such as English and Media where I have argued that writing is not an additional 'skill' but instead part of the core content. As documented, the argument that writing is not simply a transferable skill but an integral part of how students learn and make meaning is accepted. This does not mean, however, that the ability to write within formal conventions is not a desirable and sought after skill in most graduate employment. For students in English and Media, furthermore, the ability to be able to produce an acceptable level of formal written English is not only desirable but essential if they are to be accepted as competent writing practitioners. A journalist or teacher of English, for instance, will certainly lack credibility if their command of formal written language conventions is questionable.

The relationship between student expectations and tutor expectations has been shown to be a vital aspect of the students' ability to recognise, understand and meet, or indeed challenge, the writing requirements in higher education; Mina Shaughnessy has been much quoted in her contention that students 'will always live up to expectations' (1977, p292). This relationship will be considered in closer detail as the data is used to demonstrate aspects of that relationship that contribute to a lack of concord. In this chapter and the following one, the problems relating to competing priorities, both within the actual writing process and within

the larger student experience, are scrutinized. These conflicting priorities are shown to be a significant but often unacknowledged factor in a student's ability to negotiate change. Alongside this, aspects of student, tutor and institutional motivations for change are contextualised within a hierarchical framework that serves to privilege the establishment and to exclude those who do not conform. Student interviews (see Appendix 2), a staff e-mail survey (see Appendix 5) and examples of student writing are used to illustrate attitudes and responses to information given in handbooks and feedback; how students consciously and unconsciously prioritise different aspects of their writing; the impact of assessment, and to explore issues of power and self esteem which may affect student writing development. The data is used here to show how simplistic notions of the learning process can result in a crucial lack of development in important aspects of student writing. In the following chapter, the quantitative data is examined in more detail in order to further demonstrate the complexity involved in evaluating undergraduate writing and the changes that occur.

As argued earlier, employability is a major motivation for students entering higher education; it is, therefore, an important aspect of the university's contract with undergraduates that they should enhance the students' chances of suitable employment. Many discussions of employability, although they put written communication somewhere on a 'wish list', often concentrate on aspects that are seen as more important, such as problem-solving abilities and leadership qualities.<sup>1</sup> I would suggest, however, that if a student does not have the ability to produce writing that follows the conventions of Standard Written English, they are likely to fall at the first hurdle of the letter of application and CV writing. In consequence, they may never get the chance to illustrate their other qualities. It is with this in mind that this chapter demonstrates how and why it is that students graduate from university without the range of

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<sup>1</sup> Knight and Yorke (2003, Chapter 10) give an in-depth discussion and comprehensive list of desirable graduate attributes.



writing ability that would make their writing ‘invisible’.<sup>2</sup> The argument being that this invisibility is crucial in enabling the reader to concentrate on the message rather than the form, but also that it is necessary to allow the writer to be perceived and accepted as a member of the educated discourse community.

As already documented, the expansion of higher education in the UK has meant that students are less likely to enter into higher education with the formal writing skills that are generally regarded as the mark of a well educated person. Also established is that recent scholarship has exposed as simplistic the notion that these different literacy practices can be labelled as poor literacy skills, and then be readily fixed by access to remedial courses or by traditional forms of feedback. The current dissatisfaction with the level of undergraduate and graduate writing confirms that these strategies are ineffectual. Approaches to dealing with this dissatisfaction will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters but one of the salient points, that needs to be reiterated here, is that much of this scholarship aims to focus development on writing as ‘making meaning’ rather than seeing writing as a ‘transparent’ form of communication (Lillis, 2001, p33). These arguments, whilst usefully critiquing current strategies for developing student writing, consistently lament the concentration on transcriptional features of writing as being detrimental to that development (Hinkle, 1997; King, 2000; Lea and Street, 2000; Lillis, 2001). This thesis emphasises that the answer is not simply to turn attention away from surface features altogether, but to find a more effective development strategy which includes all aspects of writing practice. It is important to point out that in arguing for the need for students to be taught the transcriptional conventions of formal written English, this thesis does not advocate a return to the ‘student deficit’ model or the ‘fix it’ (Nightingale, 1988, p265) strategies which are mentioned above, and in more detail

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<sup>2</sup> See Lillis and Turner (2001, p65) for an account of how ‘embedded, yet invisible’ values mean that student writing only becomes ‘visible’ as a “problem” when it does not conform.

in the next chapter; however, in acknowledging a gap between expectation and performance, there is an obvious need to explore why and how that gap should and could be closed. This is done without apportioning blame or making accusations of inadequacy, but in the knowledge that if strategies are not developed, then those students who fail to close that gap will not have an equal chance of using their graduate status to full advantage.

As argued earlier, the expanded higher education system has retained the gatekeeping ethos. Rather than creating a more equitable system, this has actually increased the need for ways to continue to differentiate graduates, as ever increasing numbers and rising grades make it more difficult for employers to select the ‘high-fliers’. One of the ways in which this is done is through a hierarchy of institutions in which published league tables and notions of ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities are used to handpick those students who would have been part of the established elite under the previous system. There has been a shift ‘from a concentration upon who goes and who does not go to University to questions about “who goes where”’ (Reay et al., 2005, p162). It is my contention in this thesis that there is *another* gatekeeping strategy that is perhaps less openly discussed and acknowledged: the use of a standard written dialect. This has effectively been a way of excluding and marginalising social groups, especially within education, since the notion of a standard language was introduced:

Dominant social and cultural groups have been able to establish their language, and their knowledge priorities, learning styles, pedagogical preferences, etc., as the ‘official examinable culture’ of school. Their notions of important and useful knowledge, their ways of presenting truth, their ways of arguing and establishing correctness, and their logics, grammars and language as institutional norms by which academic and scholastic success is defined and assessed [sic]. (Lankshear, 1997, p30)

For a variety of reasons, even students with traditional entry requirements do not now conform to those dominant conventions.<sup>3</sup> The breaking of established norms in spelling,

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<sup>3</sup> See Avery and Bryan (2001, p172-3) for further discussion of possible reasons for this.

punctuation and grammar furnishes employers and academics with a relatively quick and easy method of discrimination which is socially acceptable and goes largely unchallenged, even when it is remarked upon.<sup>4</sup> Turner says that, ‘the uncritical acceptance of linguistic convention and linguistic bigotry are implicit in the institutional discourse which frames writing development in higher education’ (1999, p38). It is only by making these attitudes explicit and open to challenge that any momentum for change can succeed.

In rightly dismissing the notion that ‘if students learn to spell and/or punctuate they will be literate at last’ (Nightingale, 1988, p265), many researchers over the last twenty years also appear to dismiss the notion that without being able to spell and punctuate following the prevalent conventions, students may still not be deemed sufficiently literate to be regarded as part of the academic discourse community, even if their other writing and thinking skills have been greatly enhanced. The current tendency to consider ‘basic skills’ or ‘surface features’ of writing as easy to acquire or less worthy of attention can be as damaging as the tendency to concentrate solely on these features as the markers of ‘good’ writing. In illustrating the difficulties that students face in acquiring these writing conventions, the present and following chapters demonstrate the complexity involved and challenge the perception that the transfer of these skills is easily accomplished or that they are straightforwardly acquired where necessary.

The complexity of the writing process is widely acknowledged and is referred to throughout this thesis. Indeed, as suggested above, this complexity is often used as a reason for moving the focus away from spelling, punctuation and grammar (Higgins *et al.*, 2001, p20) towards an acknowledgment of academic writing as a complicated and demanding process of meaning

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<sup>4</sup> See earlier reference to employers who eliminate candidates based on the quality of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

making. In order for this writing to be successful then, the writer not only has to negotiate content knowledge but also, as maintained earlier, those ‘language practices’ which are ‘important in sustaining and reproducing power relations’ (Fairclough, 1992, p3). For those who have elements in their writing that can be identified as ‘non-standard’, the suggestion that there has previously been an inappropriate focus on surface features is not helpful. It tends to minimise the ramifications of using non-standard language. Without a focus on these features, students are less likely to address the gap between their literacy practices and those of the educated discourse community to which they aspire. The suggestion of a previous over-emphasis on transcriptional features (Hinkle, 1997) might lead one to believe that this concentration would have been reflected in more improvement in these areas of student writing than in others, whereas the ongoing complaints about graduate literacy would appear to contradict this. This indicates that the form that this attention presently takes is unproductive. Student data in the present study is used to illustrate how, and some of the reasons why improvement in the ‘surface features’ of student writing sometimes fails to occur, despite such a perceived focus.

One of the first strands to follow in researching why many students in higher education do not meet the writing requirements is an exploration of how they receive the information that would enable them to change their writing practices. One of the most commonly used methods of making writing requirements known is through the form of a course or module handbook given to the students at the beginning of a study period. Lea and Street (1998b) found that such guidelines ‘took a rather technical approach to writing, concentrating on issues of surface form: grammar, punctuation and spelling’ (p164). Lea and Street continue with explicit criticism, suggesting that students need more than this ‘surface level’ approach in order to match their writing to the requirements of the discipline. The interesting element

here is the implicit assumption that although this approach is not effective in helping students to develop the writing style required for specific disciplines, that it might be effective for dealing with these more 'surface' issues. The data, analysed below, however, illustrates that, for some students at least, advice on spelling, punctuation and grammar given in module handbooks has little effect on these features of student writing. The guidelines for essay writing given to the students in the sample cohort included information on rules of spelling, punctuation, aspects of grammar, style, layout and referencing, in some detail, but there are many examples in the data where this guidance is not followed.

Formal writing requirements often form part of the criteria for written work. One example of this is a set of assessment criteria offered to foundation level students of English Studies including the following statement: 'There are certain qualities which we expect to find in good writing [...] Conventions – includes the use of standard English grammar, spelling, punctuation' (University of Huddersfield, *English Studies Student Handbook*, 2007, p38). Students are given criteria like this, in paper handbooks and on-line, early in their academic life and it is frequently repeated in several places. Some handbooks even give specific lists of the most frequent errors to be avoided in spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Although some students might respond to this approach, it is obvious that it does not work in all cases, or there would be no current complaints about the spelling, punctuation and grammar of students or graduates. Amongst lecturers in the humanities at my own university, a small scale e-mail survey (see Appendix 5) asking for their main frustrations in assessing student writing provoked such responses as:

I estimate that over one third of my Year II students this year (about 50 in all) have \*serious\* deficiencies in basic literacy;

Almost EVERYTHING bothers me about student writing - many students do not know what a sentence is, or what a paragraph is, or how to use semi-colons. They seem to have little sense of how to write formally, as opposed to conversationally.

Although the survey request was obviously worded in a way that might prompt a negative response, all but one of eighteen replies suggested that there were major frustrations with the writing that they assessed

One of the ways lecturers attempt to address this issue is with advice in handbooks and handouts and one of the complaints made in the e-mail survey (see Appendix 5) was the students' 'failure to observe the advice of our Department's presentation and style guide'. The current debate on the problems with these issues suggests that this is representative of other institutions and a survey by Hartley and Chesworth (1999, p69, at Keele University, showed that 80% of their sample denied having ever been given such guidance, despite it being in the first year handbook provided to everyone, so assuming that all students have read, digested and acted upon any guidance given in them appears optimistic.. The reasons why students fail to adjust their writing in line with guidance given are varied and complex and the interview data will be used here to demonstrate and explore some of those reasons.

Even when students admit that they were given the handbooks, there is no guarantee that they will have kept them:

PI Do you mean the booklet from the writing module?

PH Yes or the original handbook that you were given? Did you use them?

PI I think I just did it from what we did in class. I think I looked it up a couple of times in the book but then I lost the book. (Int. 5c)

As an academic skills tutor, my experience would suggest that this is not an isolated incident but is relatively common. For instance, all spare copies (about forty) of the Guidance on the Presentation of Essays supplied to approximately 160 first year students in English Studies for

2006/7 were given to me. At the end of the year they had all been given out to students who said that they had mislaid their original copy. It would be easy to presume that students who lose or do not use their handbooks are unconcerned about their writing but my own experience is that around 50 per cent of the students who make appointments for academic support are self-referred (Hill, 2007, p3) and genuinely want to improve. There is evidence that Student 5, quoted above, did use the general guidance booklet for essay writing until he lost it, as in the first interview he said: ‘I learned some things from the handbook - like double-line spacing and referencing<sup>5</sup> and I still check back to that if I’m not sure (Int. 5a).’ This highlights that while putting information in handbooks may be helpful to some students, tutors need to be aware that without the encouragement and motivation to use them they will often fail to fulfil their intended purpose simply because they are lost or forgotten.

Even students who do retain the handbook might not always feel motivated to read it or be able to use it profitably:

- PH Do you ever look at the writing guidance in your handbooks?  
PD Not really. (Int. 4a)

This was said by a conscientious and hardworking student who genuinely wanted to do well but appeared to find it difficult to adjust to University requirements and seemed almost resentful of any implication that her work might not be of the required standard:

- PH Do you ask if you’re not sure?  
PD Yes, sometimes but if you think it’s right you don’t need to ask. (Int. 4a)

For this student, even admitting that she needed guidance in her writing was difficult and although this will be discussed in more detail in relation to self esteem issues later in this chapter, it is useful to point out here that this resulted in a failure to consult the guidelines she was given.

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<sup>5</sup> Although arguably neither of these two adjustments would affect his formal writing style outside university.

The handbook referred to earlier states that: ‘Used properly, punctuation contributes to the clarity of your writing, but used improperly it can obscure, or even change, the meaning’.

This was followed by a paragraph on how to use the possessive apostrophe, two references to books on writing, and the line ‘Tutors will also be happy to answer your queries.’ The booklet also contains a list of most commonly misspelled words and a paragraph each on structure and paragraphing; the section on grammar gives examples of common errors such as non-agreement of subject and verb, sentence fragments, parallel structures, dangling modifiers and sentence sprawl. Student 9 said that he did use the guidelines, even if reluctantly:

- PH The guide to essay writing, and did you use it?  
FM I’ve read it but not really. I referred back to it but it’s quite dull – if you get stuck-  
PH So when you got it did you just read right the way through it or did you use it when you got an essay –  
FM I flicked through it and then read it again. That was past the start of the year.  
PH And does this tell you what’s wanted?  
FM Yeah it does. (Int. 9a)

This part of the interview with Student 9 was in response to first year tutor feedback of ‘Loose writing’ and ‘Poor phrasing ...too many ‘this’ constructions, incomplete sentences and weak punctuation.’ (9.1.5). So although this student said that he had used the handbook, it had still not had a sufficient impact on his writing to meet the tutor’s requirements. Later in the same interview, however, this student acknowledged that his poor writing style might be holding him back generally:

I’ve noticed that from a lad Paul who’s a good friend of mine on the course. When we both do it at the same time like, if it’s a deadline and we’re doing it really late, we’ll write practically the same essay but he’s just got the flow of language. He’s got such good writing style whereas he’s getting 60s and 70s from the way he’s writing and that’s where I get in the 50s for the same essay. (Int. 9a)

He went on to suggest a strategy for improving his writing style, which was to employ outside help from his friend’s mother who was a teacher and to work on his writing over the summer



break. Despite his acknowledgement of the problem, his reference to the handbook and his good intentions to get outside help, many of these errors were still evident in this student's later work (see details later in this chapter). The use of apostrophes and the basics of sentence structure were demonstrated in the handbook but this student's writing still illustrates these problems in his third year. It would seem that the student handbook, even when read, is not always effective in helping students to change their writing habits to meet requirements.<sup>6</sup> As demonstrated throughout this thesis, the complexities of learning are such that simply giving information is not an adequate strategy to ensure development. Attention and motivation are important factors in learning so specific direction and reiteration are necessary to encourage student focus and for improvement to occur.

Having considered guidance given in handbooks, I will now turn to the next major method by which students are given information on writing requirements which is through feedback on their written work.<sup>7</sup> The assumption that the relationship between feedback and change is clear, causal and straightforward is illustrated from the e-mail survey referred to earlier (see Appendix 5). Tutors bemoan the students' 'failure to actually make the changes suggested (by supervisor, etc.) in redrafting' and their 'appalling spelling, which is not improved however often a tutor corrects it'. Another tutor says 'I do not think they do anything with the critical feedback they receive'. The tutor perception that students do not act on feedback is well documented (see Williams & Gibbs, 1995, p 21; Glover & Brown, 2006). Black and Wiliam (2001), give a clear indication that good formative assessment can and does improve student work, but they also indicate that major curriculum changes and staff development are necessary for it to be generally effective. As Glover and Brown point out, taking note of feedback and acting upon it are not the same: 'students argued strongly that they did attend to

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<sup>6</sup> See McLune, 2004, p270 for similar findings.

<sup>7</sup> Although students may well have been given some oral feedback in addition to written, this has not formed part of this investigation unless students specifically referred to it in interviews.

feedback, but often did not act on it' (2006). The theoretical arguments regarding the effective use of feedback are dealt with in detail in Chapter Seven but the data is used here to document specific reactions to written feedback and to highlight the challenges faced by students and tutors in synchronising their requirements.

What the interview data illustrates is that the frustration that tutors feel in perceiving a lack of student response is mirrored by the frustration of the students, who feel that they are doing what they can to respond to tutor demands but are not always successful. In relation to comments on her style, punctuation and referencing, this student says:

PD I don't always know what they want. I mean it's not always straightforward. You think they want one thing and it's not right. (Int. 4a)

This student is in no doubt that her role is to give the tutors exactly what they want. She is a conscientious student and her confusion results in demoralisation. The assumption that there is a right and wrong way of doing things clearly reflects the power relationship between tutors and the student. This can be linked to notions of 'appropriateness' mentioned earlier. Lillis, in her fruitful discussions on how common sense notions of 'essayist literacy' serve to exclude non traditional students, points out that 'particular identities are privileged in particular practices' (2001, p24). Although Lillis is discussing essay conventions here, her idea of a privileged practice, which is so taken for granted that it is not discussed, is relevant to the use of Standard English as an accepted norm. As discussed previously, Bourdieu's theory would suggest that in order for power relationships to be maintained, the dominated as well as the powerful need to support the system. This student accepts feedback that categorises her writing as 'too colloquial and personal' and needing a 'more academic tone', even though her writing has previously been at an acceptable level: 'I always got good marks for my writing at college' (Int. 4a). She admits in her writing log (4b), however, that she had not 'done a lot of

essays' and that 'she didn't do very well in essays at college' because she found them 'hard to structure'. She maintains that she 'does well in factual pieces of writing and that she does not 'have any problems with grammar or spelling'. This student has ideas on writing based on previous feedback. If expectations of writing in higher education are different from those in college, this begs the question of whether or not she is indeed going to pick up these acceptable writing practices by 'osmosis'; whether she needs to be taught these differences explicitly or whether she will be left to flounder as her writing practices are used against her as an indication of her unsuitability for higher education.

The confusion shown by Student 4 on how she should respond to feedback is symptomatic of the mismatch between what tutors expect to happen, based on their own language ability and literacy, and what students can do based on theirs. The assumption that tutors appear to make is that the students can easily correct the error with more care and that they understand what is wanted: 'Silly and avoidable errors' (5.3.11). 'Your grammar and punctuation require far greater care' (10 .5.1). This is rooted in their unthinking acceptance of their own literary practices.<sup>8</sup> That this literacy has been accrued through a particular socio-cultural path which has given them valuable cultural capital in the world of higher education is misrecognised as the norm, and they fail to acknowledge that 'surface' writing practices have much deeper roots and require much more explicit acknowledgement of difference and its significance.

Many researchers (Lea and Street 1998; Hartley and Chesworth 1999; Lillis 2000) have discussed the problem of student interpretation, and student perceptions are dealt with elsewhere in some detail but it is also important to see how this might link with the inability or even reluctance of academics to be clear about their requirements. The use of words such

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<sup>8</sup> See discussion of 'Members Resources' later in this chapter.

as ‘formal’, ‘standard’, ‘appropriate’, ‘proper’, ‘correct’, ‘acceptable’ and ‘relevant’ in guidelines and feedback allows tutors to rely on a homogenous view of language which assumes not only that the student has a shared perception of what these terms mean but also that there is a consensus amongst the tutors. My work as an academic skills tutor has made it apparent that not only are there different interpretations of these words between tutor and student, there are also differences between tutors and even what the same tutor means by the word within different assignments. For instance, the words ‘appropriate use of language’ are used to point out the *lack of formal* language in a newspaper analysis to Student 8 (8.2.7) but ‘you haven’t achieved an appropriate style’ is also used to point out that her language is *too formal* in a review of a documentary; no explanation is attached and the student is therefore left to work out for herself what is inappropriate about her language use.

It is useful here to take an example of Student 9’s perception of what the feedback on his writing style means and how he should respond:

- FM They say I don’t write in the standard that it should be for an assignment.  
PH In academic-?  
FM Yeah an academic standard. I write as if I’m still-  
PH Right and do you know how to change that?  
FM Yeah I just come out with bigger, fancier words  
PH How do you think you can change it?  
FM I don’t know. There is a style to writing things. I get carried away when I’m writing. I just put points in like I think- (Int.9a).

Tutor comments on this student’s year one work were that his style was ‘too colloquial’ and ‘too informal’. The response by the student was that he should simply be using ‘bigger and fancier words’. This student is not alone in the perception that there is an academic style that can be tapped into simply by using a more complex vocabulary:

- DA It is alright but it could be a bit more like, flowery.  
I need to buy a thesaurus – .(Int. 1a)  
PH How do you make it more formal?

PD Well I use a thesaurus and that. (Int. 4a)

This simplistic interpretation of formality illustrates the lack of knowledge about language that hinders the students from complying with tutor requests to make their language more formal. This is particularly important when we consider that these are English or Media students whose stock-in-trade is language. The difficulty these students face in adapting their language is clearly illustrated in the data:

PH When you say formal, what are you changing?

DM Well I was addressing- I was speaking like I was addressing like myself er I don't know. (Int.10a)

PD I don't know. My style's a bit informal sometimes. I always go for like a newspaper or magazine style rather than a formal –like- I always seem to get the wrong kind of style. (Int. 4a)

This confusion can result in students attempting to use more formal language without having the knowledge and experience to do so. There are numerous examples in the collected data of students' unsuccessful attempts to use more formal language. The following are extracts from the first essay written by Student 7:

'The obvious denotations evaluate a female model in the bar.'  
'Make up tends to be accustomed by females when wanting to look attractive'  
'[...] through the body language they all consume and the expression on their faces.'(7.1.1.)

She received feedback that said 'Sometimes your sentences are unclear'. Another essay later in the semester had the following examples of expression: 'Often, we are implied to "participate" like this as we are occasionally left to imagine.' And '[...] naming and the questioning of identities and families all attribute to the idea' (7.1.5).

Although there was a great deal of feedback on content on this essay, the only feedback on writing was 'You use some rather strange phrases which don't help the clarity of your arguments' (7.1.5). These further examples are taken from her second semester essays:

Thus, not only enlightening, it is important to consider the elements of transcriptions, in order to gain knowledge upon the relationship that language has with the context in which it is used. (7. 2.12)

In context, fraud and deceitment are acknowledged as a social problem, which this particular documentary ceases to reveal such tendencies adopted by certain salesman to cheat the general public. (7.2.14)

Third year essays include sentences such as:

Evidently, it is the teacher's role in developing written language. [...] Therefore, it is the priority of the teacher to inhabit essential teaching skills that lead to the 'good' teaching practice of written language in primary schools. [...] the attainment levels seemed to be in accomplishment at a steady pace. (7.5.27)

Clearly, this student's attempts to write in a formal style are often unsuccessful. Again there was ample feedback on content, but the only feedback on writing was: 'There are a few lapses in expression you need to pay attention to' on the former essay, and a note about not using brackets as punctuation on the latter, plus some underlining in the texts and notes such as 'unclear' 'expression' and 'This is an awful sentence.' It is difficult to see how this feedback alone will feed forward into her future writing. As emphasised elsewhere, the aim here is not to criticise the markers, who have clearly put considerable effort into engaging with the student's writing, but to focus on whether or not there are opportunities for writing development with regard to the features of Standard Written English.

During interview this student showed that she really had no idea how to change her writing style and that the feedback she received simply pointed out her deficiencies:

- PH It says here that some sentences are nonsensical; do you agree with that?  
NJ Yes when I read them again but at the time I knew what I was going to say and the grammar check didn't say it was wrong [...]  
PH Which piece of writing do you think is your best?  
NJ I don't know any more. The one I thought was the best turned out to be crap [...].  
PH What are the main points you remember from feedback?  
NJ That my sentences are all over the place and I use the wrong words sometimes. (Int. 7a)

This cycle of feedback and response results in the student being demoralised and underlines the feeling of powerlessness which stems from the knowledge that they fall short of a perceived standard and have little idea of how to adapt their writing in order to conform to what is required. The knowledge needed to really understand what was wanted would take concentrated time and effort and this student was already struggling to cope: ‘What with working and the travelling in, I don’t always have the luxury to proofread’ (Int. 7a). In the proceedings of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) delegates listed ‘Student problems’ as including ‘getting students to see that writing matters and that it is part of the learning process’ (Graal, 2001). It is very unlikely that this student would successfully direct her energies towards improving her writing without it being an integral ‘part of the learning process’ and, therefore, taught within the curriculum.

Tutors often blame a student’s poor response to feedback on writing on a lack of proofreading: ‘Lots of small errors suggesting need for checking of language’ (15.5.11).

‘Always re-read your work and check grammar’ (7.1.2), but in this case, and that of Student 13, it is apparent that this is not always the case:

NJ     Sometimes when I get stuff back I think ‘How did you not notice that?’ but other times I really don’t think I could have changed it because it seemed alright to me (Int. 7a).

SS     I don’t know. I can read it and think it sounds fine but then if someone sits there and points it out to me I think ‘Oh that’s terrible’. (Int. 13b)

Working with the students in the sample showed that even conscientious students, who proofread their work as thoroughly as they are able, still make fundamental mistakes in their writing because they have become so habitual that the student cannot see them until they are pointed out specifically. In the case of Student 7, this is illustrated by the use of ‘of’ in front of ‘which’ as in these examples:

Both Auden and Spender's poems provide a form of escapism **of which** their thoughts can be revealed. (7. 2.11)

He proposes four maxims **of which** (if obeyed) will strengthen a communication process. (7.2.12)

This is evident as the host(C) frequently asked questions **of which** were then responded to. (7.2.12)

Both abided by 'unconscious' rules **of which** allowed them to converse accordingly.(7.2.12)

(Student 7, Semester 2 emphasis mine)

This idiosyncrasy was pointed out many times in feedback by underlining or comments on grammar but when the student read over her work she was unable to see anything wrong with it and could not explain why she felt that the 'of' was necessary. Her initial solution was to find electronically every instance of 'which' in her work and check that she had not placed a superfluous 'of' before it. This would not always work as she also used 'of' incorrectly where a different preposition was needed before which so that simply removing the preposition would not correct the syntax: 'a form of escapism of [through] which their thoughts can be revealed (7.2.11) and 'an informal address of [by] which to close on a friendly note' (7.2.12). She still has the odd error in Semester Four: 'as he offers her hand in marriage without her consent, of which will subsequently benefit' but by the third year she is clearly following the advice given by the grammar checker and replaces 'which' with 'that' unless preceded by a comma. Whether she understands the reasoning behind this or not, this results in eradicating this particular error (see discussion on the use of grammar checkers in the following chapter).

A further example of an error that was also found to be undetectable by this student through proofreading is the substitution of 'where' for 'were' (and vice versa). Students 5 and 9 also made similar errors. Student 9 usually wrote 'were' for 'where' but occasionally the other way around, and this persisted throughout his undergraduate writing. Although the substitution of 'were' for 'where' is not one of those listed in the common misspellings in the



handbook, it was pointed out by tutors several times in first year feedback on this student's work. An example of Student 9's final year work shows that it was still prevalent:

Also when we follow were he is looking to we see the woman looking right back into his eyes...On the coach station we can see the typical large wooden sign sporting the town's name. And below the fence were the horses are parked. (9.6.19, my underlining)

As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, Student 9's spelling improved overall in numerical terms, but the type of errors he made remained a mixture of typographical and knowledge based, and showed a lack of revision of his work generally.

Student 5 also wrote 'where' for 'were' throughout his first year work. This student had this pointed out in several pieces of work and was obviously aware of it as he mentioned it during his second interview:

- P Are there any problems you still have- anything that you need to sort out do you think?  
PI Spelling.  
P Spelling. You're still having a problem with spelling?  
PI Not really but I occasionally get confused with words like 'where' and 'were'  
P But as long as you're aware – yes 'were' and 'where'  
PI ( ) check it on the spell checker  
P The trouble with a spell checker is that it doesn't pick up things like that does it? (Int. 5b)

We agreed that he would have to look out for this specifically when he was proofreading in future. However, in a later interview he insisted that not only would he have been able to pick up this particular problem if he had proofread the work more thoroughly as he should have done, but also that he had never really confused them in the first place:

- P Do you know why you made the mistake in the first place? Any idea?  
PI Confusing 'where' and 'were'? Don't really know unless I've just not thought- I've always got them confused?  
P Yes.  
PI Hmm No, not particularly.  
P You've done it since the first year here. Do you think it just wasn't pointed out or...  
PI Not sure. It probably was. I can't remember doing it.

- P When you say 'they were' and you write 'where', do you consciously think about what the word means?
- PI Sort of.
- P Where you write things like- You've written: 'The particular categories that I have chosen where done so because they where the categories which appeared' and you've written it 'where'
- PI Have I?
- P Would that not- You wouldn't think about - I find it very difficult to understand that you don't notice the difference and I'm just trying to find out why because sometimes you use 'were' and sometimes you use 'where'. You've used 'were' there.
- PI I don't know. I sometimes forget what I'm typing and just type a word and don't really think about what it's supposed to be.
- P Wouldn't you notice it when you read it through?
- PI I notice it later but I don't actually proof read them as much as I should do.
- P So it's not something you've had pointed out when you were younger?
- PI No. (Int.5c)

This student has no explanation for his confusion other than that he was not really thinking about it and did not revise his work enough, but the majority of writers would not have to think about which one to use, and the absence of this in later works seems to suggest that he had succeeded in internalising the difference as he would otherwise have been conscious of changing it. This is discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

A study by Torrance *et al.* showed that 'only a few of the students in [the] study devoted appreciable time to reviewing their text'. They go on to suggest that any time that was spent may have been 'often only a final check for picking up surface errors which take little time to correct' (1999, p196). The assumption that surface errors are easily and quickly corrected is based on the authors' own abilities and experience whereas this current research would suggest that these surface errors can be undetectable to less accomplished writers. The further assumption, that a student who cannot tell the difference between 'were' and 'where' is intellectually inferior must also be challenged. These students clearly understand the difference in these two forms grammatically. They knew that one was linked to place and one

was a plural past tense of the verb to be. However, their schema<sup>9</sup> for writing did not automatically differentiate these two forms orthographically.

The notion that more meticulous proofreading would automatically result in acceptable writing is shared by students as well as tutors. There were many assertions by students in early interviews that they could have done better if they had given more time and effort to proofreading their work:

FM I'm tending to do it the night [before] -proofreading it the hour before it's due in...at the start I was just going through and then I wasn't really checking them like I should have done. (Int. 9a)

PH How do you think you could improve?

DA Just take my time with it and like you say proof read it first

PH But you've got to know what you're looking for.

DA Oh I know the stuff. (Int. 1a)

JL Proofreading. I make stupid little mistakes but it's because I'm rushing to get things in. (Int. 8a)

DM Yeah as far as grammar's concerned if I had time to do all that, get myself time I'd be fine but at the time I'd leave it till the last night all the time; other times I've got on to it a day before. (Int. 10a)

The tendency to lay the blame for poor writing simply on lack of time and effort masks the fact that students can lack the knowledge to correct their work, no matter how carefully they check it. It is useful to unpick what 'lack of time and effort' might encompass. There are several compelling reasons why the change in writing habits is often not forthcoming. These can be factors which are relevant to the writing process itself; those which are relevant to the learning process; those which are relevant to the institution and its systems and those which are relevant to the student's life in general. Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, can be

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<sup>9</sup> See discussion of this term below.

seen as an overriding and changeable consideration that makes it extremely difficult to predict where change is likely to occur.

Much research on the writing process concentrates on the cognitive rather than the technical aspects. The American term 'composition' is often used in order to link the planning and thinking processes to the act of producing writing. Bereiter and Scardamalia emphasise the difficulty involved in writing by referring to it as 'producing discourse without a conversational partner' (1987, pxiv). In discussing writing as 'making meaning' there is a tendency to try to separate these cognitive aspects from technical or secretarial elements. Without these secretarial aspects, however, it is not writing at all, but simply thinking; the complexity of writing is such largely because these elements cannot be completely separated. The processes of reading and writing are dependent on the particular resources available to each individual writer and the expert writer may rely on resources which allow concentration on making meaning because the secretarial aspects are largely automatic (Kellogg, 1999, pp 64-65). As discussed earlier, Fairclough refers to these resources as 'members' resources (MR)'. That these MR are 'socially determined and ideologically shaped' (1989, p11) has been established in previous chapters. The relevant point here is that these MR are brought into play automatically and as Fairclough points out:

Routine and unselfconscious resort to MR in the ordinary business of discourse is...a powerful mechanism for sustaining the relations of power which ultimately underlie them (1989, p11).

The MR that the student relies upon are based on different and probably far fewer experiences of reading and writing than the tutor has. Fairclough emphasises the need for self-consciousness in any analyst and the need to be aware of ones own MR when interpreting the communication practices of others (1989, p167). If this concept is applied to student writing, the tutor needs not only to be self-conscious of their own resources and the possibility of

difference but also to encourage the students to be self-conscious in their writing so that they will question their unthinking application and consider how they can expand and develop those resources. Whether one uses Fairclough's MR or Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', by the time a student is in higher education it is evident that writing practices will be firmly established and will be difficult to change. It is useful here to introduce the concept of schemata.

Again, the concept of schemata, upon which a writer relies to provide the necessary resources for writing, is often discussed in relation to the composition process, where it is acknowledged that past experiences and understandings will inevitably influence what the writer produces. It is important to acknowledge that schemata also encompass the technical aspects of language. Kellogg defines a schema as 'generating personal and consensual symbols that refer to properties of the knowledge representation' (1999, p19). The relevance to this thesis is contained in the consensual or shared aspects of writing which Kellogg titles 'discourse knowledge'; this operates at 'the word, sentence, paragraph and text' levels.<sup>10</sup> Schemata are designated by Kellogg as 'tacit' forms of knowledge which only become explicit when we use them to communicate:

The schema is an unconscious procedure for generating the personal symbols of mental activity, such as perceiving, remembering, imagining, and thinking. It also generates the consensual symbols of communicative activity, such as writing and speaking. (1999, p19)

So a writer is producing work based on tacit knowledge; this is important because as Student 4 was quoted in saying earlier, 'If you think it's right you don't need to ask' (Int. 4a).

Assuming that only 'lack of time and effort' has made the difference in producing acceptable writing can therefore be misleading, as what is actually needed is enhanced motivation to

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<sup>10</sup> He notes, however, that at word level there is an overlap with 'content knowledge' in that a wider range of vocabulary allows the writer more distinction in lexical choice (1999, p74).

change, a greater degree of knowledge and language awareness, along with clear guidance and direction.

As illustrated earlier, even when students recognise that they have a problem, the complexity of the writing process works against a simple solution. Students will usually prioritise content knowledge:

Those are just spelling mistakes and punctuation-. (Int. 2a)

Oh it'll be all right' because I think 'Oh I've got the information in'. You sort of think you can get away with it because- (Int. 8a).

but I'm not worried because the knowledge is – I am worried about it but I'm not desperate because the knowledge is there. (Int. 13a)

This concentration on content is understandable given the complexity of the writing process. Kellogg maintains that there are four main processes in producing writing: 'collecting, planning, translating and reviewing' (See Figure 4.1 below)

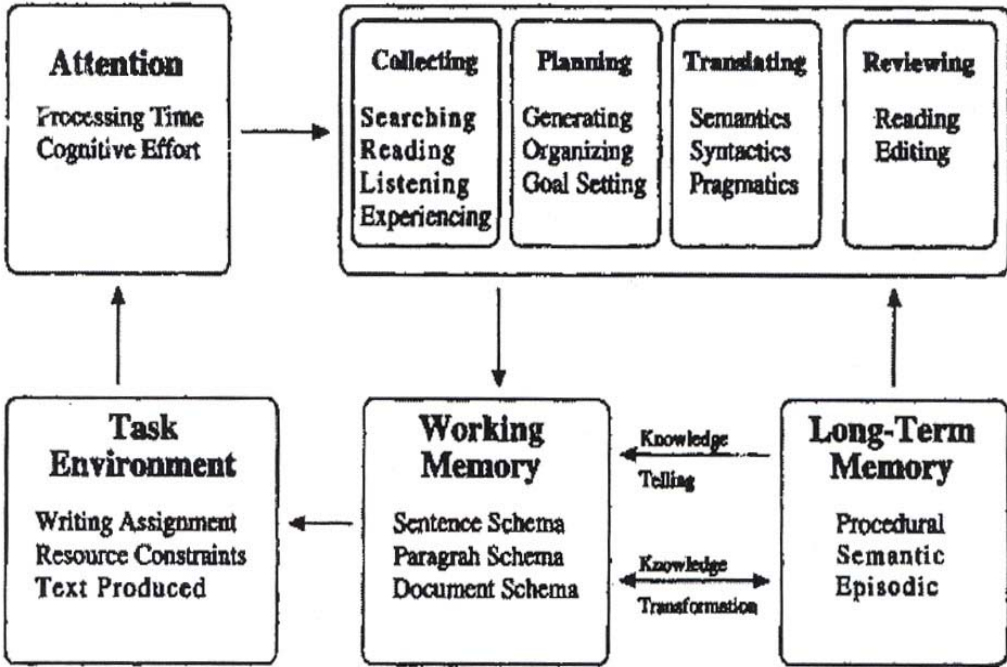


FIGURE 2.1. Cognitive components of writing skill.

Figure 4.1 Cognitive components of writing skill (Kellogg, 1999, p26)

These activities are not simply followed in chronological order but can happen throughout the different stages of production. Although there are arguments that processes such as planning and translating overlap, Kellogg rightly suggests that the distinctions are useful in teasing out the difference between ‘thinking privately, on the one hand, and communicating publicly, on the other (1999, p30). He goes on to discuss the tensions that a student might be under in deciding where to allocate ‘limited attentional resources’ of ‘time and cognitive effort’ (1999, p32). Translating is when the writer uses their own discourse knowledge to put personal content knowledge into a form that others can read. Experienced academic writers may well produce acceptable writing on a first draft without needing to concentrate on spelling, punctuation and grammar. Their attentional resources can be focussed on choosing the most apt and concise phrasing in order to convey a particular message. This is not to say that they do not need to redraft, but their reviewing will be largely based on content and structure and proof reading will be a straightforward exercise of putting into practice what they already know.

In deciding ‘what is important’, student writers will often focus on certain aspects of their writing because they, perhaps unconsciously, realise that focusing on transcriptional features may interfere with their ability to translate their understanding of content. As Smith points out: ‘Composition and transcription can interfere with each other. The more attention you give to one, the more the other is likely to suffer’ (1982, p21). The result is a piece of work that may well fall short of tutor expectations in the latter as the student concentrates on composition. For example, Student 3 was asked to write an essay on an aspect of popular culture in her first year. This was the first assessment for a Media module named

*'Introduction to Writing'*. She was given quite detailed written formative feedback on a first draft of the essay:

I can see you've thought through this subject a great deal and this is promising but your main problem is that much of what you write is unsupported opinion. A little too subjective in approach. Try to get rid of some of the 'I's and 'My's. You also can't use interviews with friends and family in an academic essay unless you are going to do it in a scientific way and detail questions and answers and justify your sample.

Try to set out your issues clearly in the introduction and then you shouldn't need to say what the essay is going to do – it should be obvious.

You might be better concentrating on newspapers and then at least you could give concrete examples (include copies in your appendix) – You seem to ignore anything that doesn't support your ideas. Are there no positive role models in the media at all? Doesn't news, not just about youth, centre on the negative because that deviates from the norm?

Define your issues clearly; introduce your argument with evidence; back up any points you make with supportive references (you should be able to find relevant material in the Media section in the library) You may even be able to find statistics.

Your expression is not always clear. Try reading your work aloud now that you've not seen it for a while and this might help.

Even dictionaries need referencing – editor instead of author and which edition. Watch how you include quotes - look it up or ask. (Feedback on 3.1.2)

There are several points on academic writing covered here, but in terms of the use of Standard Written English, 'Your expression is not always clear' is the only reference. There were over thirty punctuation errors, seven of which were marked by the tutor and also seven spelling mistakes, three of which were noted. In the revised, summative version of this essay, some of the topics in the feedback were addressed in that she improved the introduction, removed the use of the first person and included some supporting references and a bibliography (although she did not follow the Harvard system as documented in her handbook). There were fifteen punctuation errors, nine of which were noted by the tutor; out of sixteen spelling errors, fifteen were marked. The written feedback was as follows:

#### PRESENTATION

- style, syntax, spelling etc.

This should be word processed but if not you need to double line space and leave good margins on both sides. The spelling is not up to standard and is something you will have to work at. Ask someone to proof-read for you and check any words you are unsure of.



- references and bibliography

Not enough detail. It might seem picky but the idea is that someone could find the exact source for themselves, so which edition of the dictionary could prove crucial as definitions change over time.

- planning & structure

Needs a better 'skeleton' leading to a conclusion based on the title.

#### KNOWLEDGE

- conceptual awareness

Some reasonable ideas but needs to be set in context of theory of media manipulation, narrative theory etc.

- factual information

Good examples but again needs academic underpinning

#### ANALYSIS & ARGUMENT

- handling of debate/critical awareness
- development of argument

As above, your ideas need more support and you don't really move towards a conclusion based on the title but finish rather abruptly on what should be a point in your argument

#### GENERAL COMMENTS

You have improved on the draft (although you didn't include it as required) and show the ability to act on feedback, which is important. However, you've not gone far enough in researching supportive academic evidence and your overall presentation shows that you need to develop attention to the detail of requirements. I think you are capable of learning quickly and will improve on this if you take the necessary care.

This student has obviously made an effort to act on feedback, and as the majority of the initial feedback focused on the content, she has done the same. Most of this student's early work was handwritten; feedback commented on her spelling: 'You've got SERIOUS problems with SPELLING' (3.1.3) and this improved when she started to word process and use a spell checker. There are second year pieces of work which contain several spelling errors, but third year work shows that she has this largely under control, with only one spelling error on each of five pieces and a few obvious typing errors such as 'e' for 'be' and 'Feud' for 'Freud'.

However, when looking at punctuation, there is little noticeable improvement throughout the three years; as discussed in the next chapter, the error rate drops from 13.7 per thousand

words to 11.7, with highs of over 20 in between (See Graph 3, Appendix 4). In the 19 pieces of work collected from this student over three years there is no mention of punctuation in the feedback although two pieces of feedback mention poor syntax (3.4.12 and 3.5.15). Commas are used to link several main clauses throughout most assignments and apostrophes and semi-colons are misused throughout. It is difficult to see how development in such fundamental writing skills as punctuation is to take place if it is not referred to or taught during the undergraduate period.

This example also illustrates that for students whose schema for writing diverges from Standard Written English, the reviewing process is much more crucial than it would be in the case of an accomplished writer. Not only must they check if the final piece conveys understanding of the content in a logical and coherent way but also that it follows all of the necessary conventions for this particular piece of academic writing. As we have already established, these conventions can vary not only within disciplines but also from task to task; they are often not made explicit and can differ from those that the student has previously experienced. Added to this, they have to negotiate differences from Standard Written English that they might not recognise and, even if they do, are not sure how to correct. Under these circumstances, the lack of compliance with conventions is often not owing to lack of time and effort but to confusion about exactly what is wanted and what is important, and, in some cases, a lack of the specific knowledge necessary to conform.

It is important to emphasise here that tutors may not appreciate that each individual piece of work presents a different set of requirements for the student to negotiate. Ganobcsik-Williams listed 64 separate writing tasks that students may be asked to perform (2004, p14). Students in the present sample were required to write between 20 and 25,000 words in their first year of

study. This included assignments classified under headings of annotated bibliography, bibliography of enquiry, journalistic piece, essay, report, close analysis, text analysis, documentary analysis, critique, test, summary, transcription, log, review, poetry, short story and commentary. It could be argued that the conventions of formal Standard Written English are required in all writing at this level but where students are struggling to assimilate sometimes quite subtle differences in requirements it is understandable that their concentration is not always focussed on these. As Kellogg explains:

The task environment shapes the allocation of attention. It includes the intended audience, the writing assignment that specifies the topic, the reason for writing, and the rewards and punishments associated with doing a good or poor job.(1999, p32)

With regard to the first point, it is interesting to note here that, almost without exception in the current data, spelling errors were more common in creative writing, whether it was word-processed or not. Typographical errors were also much more common in creative writing which suggests that students may differentiate this from more formal, academic work and may take more care with the latter. Gregory Light (2002) suggests that that these different forms of writing are not completely distinct but are on a 'personal-public continuum' (p274) and that creative writing is at the end of the continuum where students may feel less constrained:

Related to this idea of creative writing drawing more fully upon the personal, most students on all three courses also perceived creative writing as providing them with more freedom. (Light, 2002, p264)

Interestingly, however, grammar errors were generally fewer in creative writing (Ten instances of semesters where the error rate was significantly smaller, as opposed to four where there were more and three where it was about the same). This might suggest that where the student writer feels more obliged to consider the formal academic nature of the audience, they might be forced into experimenting with an unfamiliar writing style which results in

awkward syntax and inappropriate vocabulary. This stance can be linked with a long tradition of calls for the use of ‘free writing’ (see Elbow, 1973, 1998; Veit, 1981; Creme and Hunt, 2002) which allows students to write without inhibition in a way which encourages ‘thoughts and ideas, a springboard for developing key points and ideas’ (Li, 2007). What is important here is that such strategies, which are positive and useful in encouraging student writing (see Creme, 2003) should be shown to be at one end of Light’s continuum, and are not intended for assessment, but at the other end of the spectrum is writing for public consumption. The positive benefits of free writing strategies should not be undermined, but students need also to be taught the necessity to polish this writing in relation to purpose and audience. Rather than vague references to more proofreading, however, it is important that students are invited to analyse models of successful writing, in a variety of genres, and that they relate this to their own writing. In doing so, they also need to be motivated to learn how to use the fundamental features of writing constructively.

The comment regarding ‘rewards and punishments’, in Kellogg’s quote above, emphasises the point that motivation is an extremely significant factor in the learning process. This is not a simple case of whether or not a student who wants to do well will put in the necessary time and effort to achieve this. Motivation is linked to many issues, including aspirations, self-esteem, confidence and fear of failure (Child, 1981, pp33-57). If a student has previously attained satisfactory marks, within their own and other’s expectations, the motivation to do the necessary revision to improve, especially regarding something which is regarded as low level learning, may not be high:

- PH Do you know exactly what’s wrong with your punctuation?  
MT No, not really. I’m not sure about commas and my sentences run on a bit I think.  
PH Do you think about checking the punctuation specifically when you proof-read?  
MT No. I just check it for spelling and if things sound right.

- PH How do you think you could improve it?  
 MT I don't know really. We never really did much on punctuation and grammar at school. (Int. 14a)

This student knows that his punctuation is not standard and that he makes several slips in grammar but his marks are generally in the high 2.2 or low 2.1 band, which is where he expects to be, so motivation to commit the time and effort needed to improve is minimal. It is also important to note that whilst transcriptional features of his writing are reasonably consistent throughout, with some improvement in his second year being reversed in the third,<sup>11</sup> the feedback varies considerably. One first year essay received a mark of 59 with the simple comment 'Good' with reference to 'style, syntax and spelling' even though his work contained many instances of questionable punctuation, for instance: 'This is referring to the fact that the war in Spain was a civil war, it was in the majority Spaniards fighting Spaniards' (14. 2.8). Other first year pieces, with marks in the high 2.2 /low 2.1 range, had comments such as 'You could still improve on sentence construction' and 'You need to take a little more care with proof-reading' and 'Be careful with your punctuation – see your script'. Some pieces, however, only had reference to content. Out of four pieces collected from second year work, three had no reference to anything other than content whilst the other one simply commented on 'several small errors'. A paragraph from third year work with several noticeable errors was simply marked with a tick.<sup>12</sup> As Student 5 illustrates, this lack of consistency can cause confusion:

- PI Yes I try to, I want to do my best but not everyone says the same things so it's hard sometimes  
 P Can you give me an example?  
 PI Well you always say loads about the writing but R just ignores it.  
 P Yes but as long as one of us is telling you-  
 PI I suppose so but it's hard to know if it's important or-  
 P If I'm just picky?  
 PI Yes. (Int. 5a)

<sup>11</sup> See data and discussion in Chapter Five

<sup>12</sup> Discussed in more detail in Chapter Five

This is not presented as a criticism of the markers, who may have sound pedagogical reasons for concentrating on content and may well have been influenced by scholarship which suggests that this is where the focus should lie, but is presented as evidence of why students may have little motivation to change. As an English and Media student, Student 14 had opportunities to do work such as a case study, based on a work placement, and a practical project relating to media production, so the focus on formal writing may have been diminished even further. Whilst it may be the case that this student has talents other than writing, the fact remains that this student graduated with a degree in English and Media not having grasped the basic rules of punctuation and still making errors such as ‘there’ for ‘their’.

It is extremely difficult to be precise about motivation and attitude as it can change for any number of reasons. Student 13 is generally a conscientious and hard working student who wants to succeed. Problems in her writing, predominantly in punctuation, were evident in the first year:

After The Beatles had gone their separate ways in 1970 John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono moved to New York, Lennon had been hugely criticised for a comment he made whilst the Beatles were in America he said that the Beatles were “bigger than Jesus Christ”, he hadn’t meant it in the way it was taken, not that the Beatles were in anyway better than Jesus Christ but that there following seemed to be as huge it was a flippant comment not a serious remark. (13.1.3, my underlining)

The omniscient third person narrator is not their to guide the reader through this disrupted text the characters themselves do this. Third person narrator is the one who nudges the memories when the silence approaches, the slave’s voices are triggered by the third person. (13.1.4, my underlining)

When asked, at the beginning of the second semester, what she had done to try and improve her writing, she said:

I’ve tried. I’ve consciously read what I’ve done and tried to figure out and then - I’ve realised yes I could have put that a different way but I’ve written in the way I’ve always written. That’s what’s odd that suddenly that’s not right or not ‘not right’ but

could be made better; it's been a bit strange and a lot of my grammar I've had to really sit down and look at it 'cause it's something I've never been told to look at before, even at 'A' level. (Int. 13a)

When asked what she was actually changing she replied:

The sentence structure itself, more erm like semicolons and not just- I normally just shove loads of commas in and maybe- I don't know if it's out of laziness or just because that's how I've always done it but I've really had to look at it and think now what I really need to- or that paragraph goes in there or-. (Int.13a)

This is evidence that she is attempting to do a thorough review of her work. This is not a simple process. Kellogg supports Bereiter and Scardamalia's view that writing is 'an act of problem solving' (1999, p34) and that these can be grouped into two 'problem spaces':

content and rhetoric:

Interactions between these problem spaces comprise reflective thought in writing as the writer struggles in working memory with what to say and how to say it. (1999, p34)

This student feels confident about the content; tutor feedback and marks given suggest that she is a capable student in terms of understanding concepts, but she seems unable to grasp what could be considered quite basic rules of formal written English. Although some tutors ignore writing errors, there are enough instances of negative feedback to concern her. The following are written comments collected from feedback sheets for first year essays. They are from three different tutors:

You need to use semi-colons more or break sentences up...Be careful with sentence structure and punctuation. (13.1.1)

Good, although you do seem to have a tendency to write rather muddled sentences. Err on the side of caution by keeping sentences reasonably short and always check through your work for sense. (13.1. 2)

There are a multitude of basic errors of English in this. There are many non-sentences, poor use of apostrophe & vocabulary errors. Punctuation is erratic. (13.1. 3)

She can see that there is something wrong and has obviously given it some thought as on listening to a reading of an extract from her work during the first interview she says: 'Yeah it

sounds like I should be saying it rather than you should be reading it. It's - That's like an answer I'd have given if I'd been talking about it' (Int. 13a). There was evidence of some progress towards the end of the second semester when she produced such sentences as: 'The turn taking in the conversation is very interesting; the relationship between the participants is made clear (13.2.11). However, another piece of work, a creative writing piece written two months later, showed that she had not really grasped the rules of punctuation:

The door wouldn't move something was blocking it, I felt around the door to see if I could move the object, I grabbed something warm and pulled, it was what I knew it was going to be, Andy. (13.2.16)

This student's reflection on why the punctuation was so poor in this particular story is worth examination:

- SS Basically the reason the punctuation's bad in the story is because I didn't check it enough.
- PH So when you say you didn't check it enough, you don't automatically punctuate it properly; is that what you're saying?
- SS No I struggle; oh I do struggle with my grammar and punctuation definitely.
- PH Do you not find it any easier than you did?
- SS Yes. I do find it easier than I did because I read it out - due to you actually- I read it out loud to myself and it helps an awful lot. (Int.13b)

The student suggests that one of the strategies that she has been given is working but, as she has not assimilated the rules of punctuation, it has to be done as part of the review process and with this piece of work the motivation to put in that extra time and effort was not there. The student gave a very long account of why she was dissatisfied with the module and how this had affected the time and effort she was willing to put in; her motivation was related to how much she liked the topic and her assessment of the tutor. However, this still begs the question of why a reasonably able student had not been able to learn these rules so that they could be



used more efficiently as part of the translating process rather than as a time-consuming review:

I don't understand apostrophes at all. I've got so many books at home and I've read about apostrophes and I just get so confused. It might sound really simple but I do not understand apostrophes. I do not understand semi-colons and I do not understand apostrophes. (Int.13b)

This appears to have become something of a mental block for this student. Even though she professed to want to change her writing habits, the necessary learning conditions were obviously not there. During the interview, close attention was paid to instances of incorrect punctuation in her work and the student was given a handout that explained the rules and gave examples of correct usage. She suggested that this was useful and that she understood the examples. Pieces of work in Year 2 showed some improvement in this area. Although there were still some instances of questionable punctuation, these did not seem to detract from the clarity of the work as much as in previous writing as she had trimmed the average length of her sentences considerably:

The result is still a diegetic style, we are still told a story, any narrative is an amalgam of both mimesis and diegesis; words have to replace actions. (13 .3.18)

This piece of work had no markings related to punctuation, and the overall comment was: 'Excellent – well controlled writing'; the comment probably refers to the content, which was an exercise in text intervention, but it is easy to see how it might give mixed messages to the student in the context of her struggle to develop her writing. In another assignment there are several instances of the correct use of semi-colons and conjunctions, and her sentences are noticeably shorter and easier to follow, but there is also strong evidence that she had not yet internalised the rules:

Another interesting style change, came with the arrival of our kitten 'Archie' Emily began to talk to him in a way that I had seen her talk to Jacob at their house, she used a more high-pitched tone and her intonation patterns changed as a mothers and fathers tone changes to get the attention of very young children, Emily is aware that she needs to do this to get the attention of the kitten. (13.4.25, my underlining)

This was an assignment that the student thoroughly enjoyed so the previous reasons that she gave for poor punctuation obviously do not apply here.

In the first year, much of the feedback for this student included such assessments as ‘Good insightful analysis. Clear understanding of the terms but be careful of sentence structure and punctuation’ (13.1.1). However, the feedback in the second year, contrary to previously mentioned research which suggests that the focus is often on transcription, largely ignores the latter. The piece of work above (13.4.25) had detailed feedback on content but simply had the word ‘Good’ next to a heading of ‘Style, syntax, spelling etc.’ Again, the motivation to learn, despite the student’s professed good intentions, might be affected by the fact that there appears to be no extrinsic reward for change. Intrinsic motivation, based on early feedback and the need for self satisfaction, may have led her to buy the books, but the fact that she is attaining solid 2.1 marks despite her non-conformity to the rules of punctuation may influence her willingness to put in the concentrated effort needed to change. This is not promoting the view that penalizing her would have more effect but is simply acknowledging one of a range of motivational issues involved in student writing development that need to be addressed.

In this student’s final year work, the writing is much more readable than it was in the first year. She has progressed both in style and content and is capable of quite sophisticated analyses of texts. There are whole pages of assignments where the writing conforms to formal writing conventions. However, there are also enough instances of the misuse of commas and apostrophes to suggest that punctuation is still an area of confusion for this student and her case challenges the notion that students who cannot punctuate are lacking in drive or intellectual ability, in other words, that this problem can be attributed simply to idleness or lack of brain power.

Student 12 is a further example of a committed and intelligent student who found it extremely difficult to change his writing to accommodate the requirements of his course. Although his major problem was keeping within word limits (writing 5000 when 2000 was requested), he also had problems with punctuation and style. Early work was regarded as ‘too formal’ and ‘verbose’ and there are indications that he was not comfortable with punctuation conventions:

Gestalt theory, focuses on the way [...]; Behaviourists, suggest that [...]. These interpretations and the ability to read text; as behaviourists would have us believe, are based upon [...].’ (12.1.2, my underlining and ellipsis)

His attempts to use formal language often resulted in circumlocution and feedback reflected this:

Try shorter sentences. You are not communicating what awareness you have. (12.4.15)

Sometimes you seem to be trying too hard with your writing style. (12.4.17)

Watch your syntax and grammar which now and then obscures your meaning. (12.5.20)

This student attended an interview at the end of the second year of his degree and showed increasing frustration. He put so much time into his reading and grasping of concepts that he felt that he never had enough time for his writing. Word counts were always a problem, and he would often lose marks for exceeding them by vast amounts. He criticised our ‘surface approach’ and felt that the restrictions on his writing were unreasonable if he were to cover ideas adequately. His spelling actually deteriorated as he said that proofreading was ‘a bit of a luxury’ (Int.12c). In the first interview he admitted ‘I need to work on my punctuation’ (Int. 12a) but in a later interview he suggested that it was his confusion about what was wanted that affected his writing (see extract from Int. 12b below). He started to use semi-colons more appropriately, but there were still times when he used commas seemingly at random: ‘Defoe’s inspiration for these, were the weekly Bills of Mortality that, were published and issued’

(12.5.20). The reader also still had to wade through very long sentences, and missing apostrophes and letters seemed to confirm his ideas on proofreading quoted above (see following chapter for examples).

The motivation issues are extremely interesting here. Ecclestone (1999) suggested that student response to feedback showed that they were often more concerned with final results than with learning whereas Higgins *et al.*, (2000) found that their students were not ‘driven solely by the extrinsic motivation of the mark’ but wanted feedback that would ‘help them to engage with their subject in a deep way’ (p53). Certainly, this student’s desire to engage with the content overrode all other considerations, even when he lost marks because of his lack of adherence to writing conventions and restrictions. The following extract from Interview 12b illustrates something of the struggle that this student was having:

- P Right so-. If you take it back to what you’ve produced- . Does writing in the way we ask you to write- is it much harder than writing the way that you want to write. Is it much harder to produce? When you say you’re tired of writing-
- WR Yes.
- P So what is it that makes it difficult?
- WR The structure and the format. I think the way we have to write the essay- the style – I think that’s in contradiction to what we’re actually learning. I mean the content makes you critically conscious and very aware of the theory so that makes some students more critically aware of your own work.
- P Self conscious?
- WR Yes.
- P So you mean that being self conscious of yourself as a writer makes it more difficult to write?
- WR Yes. You see the paradoxes and the kind of contradictions in what you’re learning is kind of telling you to question things so when you apply that to your own writing to the actual academic system and the assessment process- well with me anyway it er manifests itself strangely in bad marks and bad writing and poor syntax and poor grammar. It seems to confuse my writing.
- P That seems to be what’s coming through in places, that you’re confused, but it’s not all that way is it? I mean some of the feedback that you’ve had suggests confusion, but, on the other hand, you’ve also got things like ‘Generally well written – well structured’ so it’s a combination isn’t it? In some pieces it seems better.
- WR If you think about things that I’ve learnt this year – things like erm the subjects deconstruction, structuralism - those kind of more philosophical areas - those seem to contradict the way I write because they kind of say things like death of

the author so the writer is the scripter and on the other side of the assessment there's the reader who's got all these preconceived ideas about their language and meaning is lost.

This, again, clearly debunks any simplistic notions of students whose failure to conform is rooted in apathy or lack of ability. The problems that students have in meeting requirements for writing in higher education are as varied as the number of students involved. Raising student awareness of the advantages of learning to produce writing within conventions is crucial but so is the need to raise awareness in tutors of the complexity involved in this process. As Ganobcsik-Williams points out (2004), this necessitates a 'whole institution' approach to writing which funds and encourages staff development in an increasingly vital area of pedagogy.

Hinkle (1997) maintains that whereas students in her study were far more interested in compositional issues (content, style, organisation), tutors concentrated on transcriptional features (spelling, punctuation, grammar). My research suggests that this generally only happened in the first year and, even then, there were exceptions. Certainly in the case of Student 8, who, as shown in the following chapter, had an average punctuation error rate of 27 per 1000 words in the first year, the overall feedback on her work was largely on content. Some errors were noted in the text, but where she did receive feedback on writing, there were no negative responses apart from two suggestions for 'a more thorough proof-read' (8.1.3) and 'proof-read carefully' (8.1.6). One short piece (500 words) had the feedback: 'Well organised, written and presented' (8.1.4). However, it contained several errors, of which the following are a sample:

When using the catalogue I entered in subject keywords; research, audience research and methodology.[...] Someone maybe using it in the library or it has just been taken out the computer cannot register this information immediately[...]

They were not necessarily helpful in that they did not give me information on the best way or even list of ways to select participants for an experiment, they were mainly

sites of research that has been carried out or ways in which one can get participants to be involved in an experiment. [...]

Using CD-ROM is similar to using the Internet. They are various periodicals to look at with relevant articles on audience research and participant selection. When the periodical is found again enter a relevant keyword. [...]

Presentations can be difficult to prepare for therefor a plan B is a good idea. We took note on the elements that make a good presentation [...]. In order for our presentation to be more successful I think that we could have taken more time to explain what the audience research was so the audience could see exactly what we were looking for and how we went. (8.1.4, my underlining)

The point here is not to ridicule the student, nor to criticise the tutor but to illustrate the student's evident problems with the rules of punctuation and consider how learning will take place in this situation. In this student's second interview, she was very clear about what was useful in improving her writing. In an *Introduction to Journalism* module, she had submitted articles and received immediate feedback with the opportunity for revision and had also had the opportunity to hear other people's work:

You can see your writing improve a lot more because you got your first piece of writing back; you've got your comments and you knew exactly where to improve it. You can read it again and again and then you'd see the mistakes and you'd see how it doesn't flow and you'd do it again so that the next time you wrote another article it was easier to write ...

You didn't just read it and think 'Oh I've made a mistake again. Oh dear' You thought 'Oh right, I've got a chance to improve it' so you do. You work harder on improving it because you know you've got a chance to do it again. Rather than 'Oh well that's it I made a mistake so-[...]' and then you'd read some again- somebody else's, 'cause he'd read some out and you'd hear it and then you'd think 'Oh yeah, I could have done that ... Exactly. You need models to go on so you know exactly what you're doing. (Int. 8b)

Theoretical issues concerned with feedback and its effectiveness are discussed in Chapter Six but it is important to point out here that, except in the most serious cases, the proportion of feedback devoted to transcriptional issues appears to diminish considerably throughout the three years. It is also useful to reflect on how the type, timeliness or lack of feedback, can impact on the students' perception of themselves and their writing, and on their ability to conform to the conventions of formal written English.

There often appears to be a tension between the tutor's wish to engage with the student on the subject level and the need to address writing style. However, there is also tension between wanting to correct work and not wanting to damage a student's self esteem and confidence. The 'feedback sandwich', where a negative comment comes sandwiched between two positive ones, is very much in evidence as a strategy for softening the effect of criticism. This is understandable; as was mentioned briefly earlier, comments on a student's writing can be detrimental to a student's self esteem and this can have a cumulative effect on their overall self confidence, which, in turn, could affect their general prospects:

Especially for the "non-traditional" student, doubts and lack of self-belief could be hampering achievement far more than any knowledge and skills deficit. And as far as employment was concerned, a lack of confidence could depress aspirations in the graduate and produce negative reactions in the recruiter (Brennan, 2004).

There is a clear example of lack of confidence in Student 2's first interview after reviewing her first semester's results: 'I want to teach - I want to ((laughs)) be an English lecturer; I want to do something with Literature but it doesn't look too good from all my results' (Int.2a). In the same interview when she was told that she could have worked as one of a pair for a particular piece of work she said 'Yeah well I know if I'd have done that I'd have messed it up for somebody.' The benefits of constructive feedback are discussed in Chapter Six but the point here is that confidence is another factor that may affect a student's motivation and ability to change.

What is interesting is that much of the scholarship on the self esteem of non-traditional students centres on prior negative educational experiences which have to be overcome in order to conform to the requirements of the academic discourse community (see Bamber & Tett, 2000; Lillis, 2000). Student 4, however, came to university as an outgoing and confident student with a good deal of self-belief, but during the interview I was aware that she seemed

very uncomfortable and defensive. As noted earlier, one of the first things that she said was that she was used to getting good marks for her college writing before she came to University. This student had strengths in her willingness to research and her organisational and technological competence, but her informal style and her non-standard spelling, punctuation and grammar were commented on quite heavily in early feedback: ‘style is a little too colloquial and personal’; ‘requires a more academic tone in places’; ‘Please take far more care with grammar and syntax’; pay a little more attention to formal vocabulary and style’. In her attempts to conform she says that she used a thesaurus to make it more formal and asked her ‘mum to check the punctuation and grammar’. She ended the interview with the comment:

I think my writing’s getting better because I work very hard at it but it’s obviously not good enough for some people. (Int. 4a)

So this student entered higher education with high self-esteem and a confident attitude but was demoralised by negative feedback on her writing. Student 13 had a similar experience: ‘Yes. It’s really difficult to realise that you’ve been doing things wrong for such a long time’ (Int. 13b). As discussed in the last chapter, if the academic discourse community is viewed as ‘stable, with experts who perform gatekeeping roles’ (Borg, 2003, p400), then it is inevitable that these students will see their own writing as a corruption of the norm and any attempts to change their writing style as curative. The ‘problems’ that students have in negotiating the writing requirements in higher education need to be redefined as problems that the academic discourse community has in bringing together diverse literacies in such a way that it is enriched and expanded. The unthinking acceptance of Standard Written English as an indisputable norm rather than as a symbol of cultural dominance encourages an unhealthy power relationship which supports the status quo and eliminates any discussion space in which students can negotiate change from a constructive and practical perspective as opposed to a remedial one.



In order to progress, this constructive stance also needs to acknowledge the complexity involved in changing adult writing habits. Higgins *et al.* (2000) suggest that ‘students may not view comments on “surface” aspects of their work as particularly useful’ (p20) but, as documented earlier, there could be any number of reasons why students do not appear to respond to feedback on these issues: students might not understand the feedback; they might understand but not know how to change or they might have other priorities at the time. There were examples of all these reactions in my data:

**lack of understanding:**

P ‘Loose writing’. What do you think that means?

FM I’m not too sure (Int. 9a)

SS A lot of people say my style is a bit odd. I don’t understand what they mean (Int.13a).

**lack of knowledge:**

PD Well I try to but I still got referencing wrong last time (Int. 4a).

NJ I try my best but I don’t seem to know what they want and they don’t all want the same thing (Int. 7a).

**lack of priority:**

JL Yes but I had lots of assignments to do at once so-(Int. 8a).

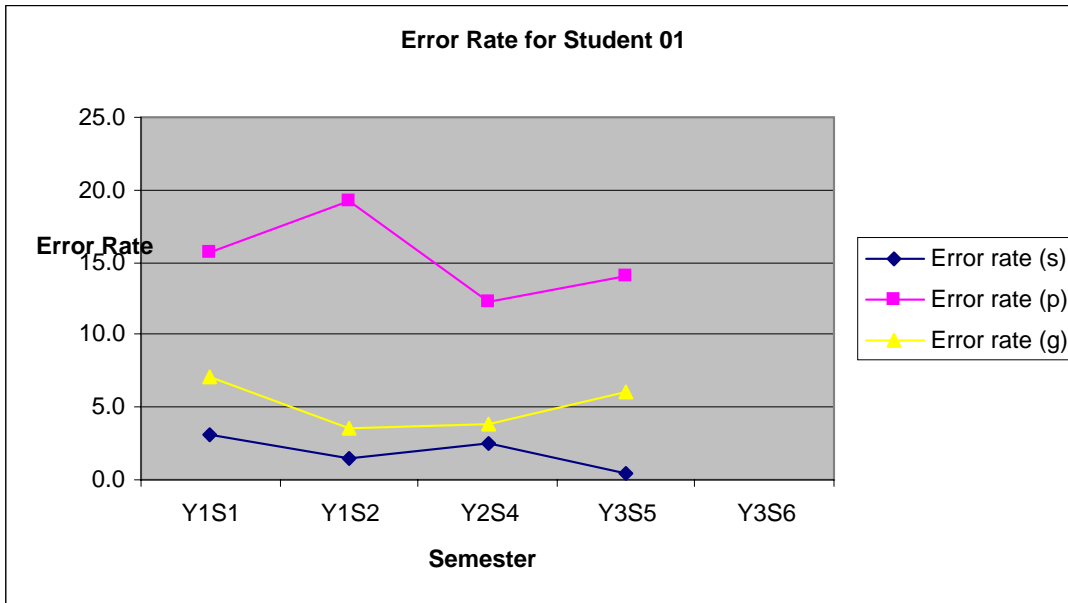
NJ I think I just do it and then obviously yeah when you’re typing it up you are a bit rushed (Int. 7b).

Alongside acknowledging and raising awareness of the impact of using conventions other than those of Standard Written English, then, it is important to recognise that multiple strategies might be needed to make any significant difference. The following chapter details the quantitative results based on the writing sample collected from students, whilst using the qualitative data to interpret those results in a way that further highlights the complex and diverse nature of writing development.

## **5. Results Section Two: Analysis of Student Writing**

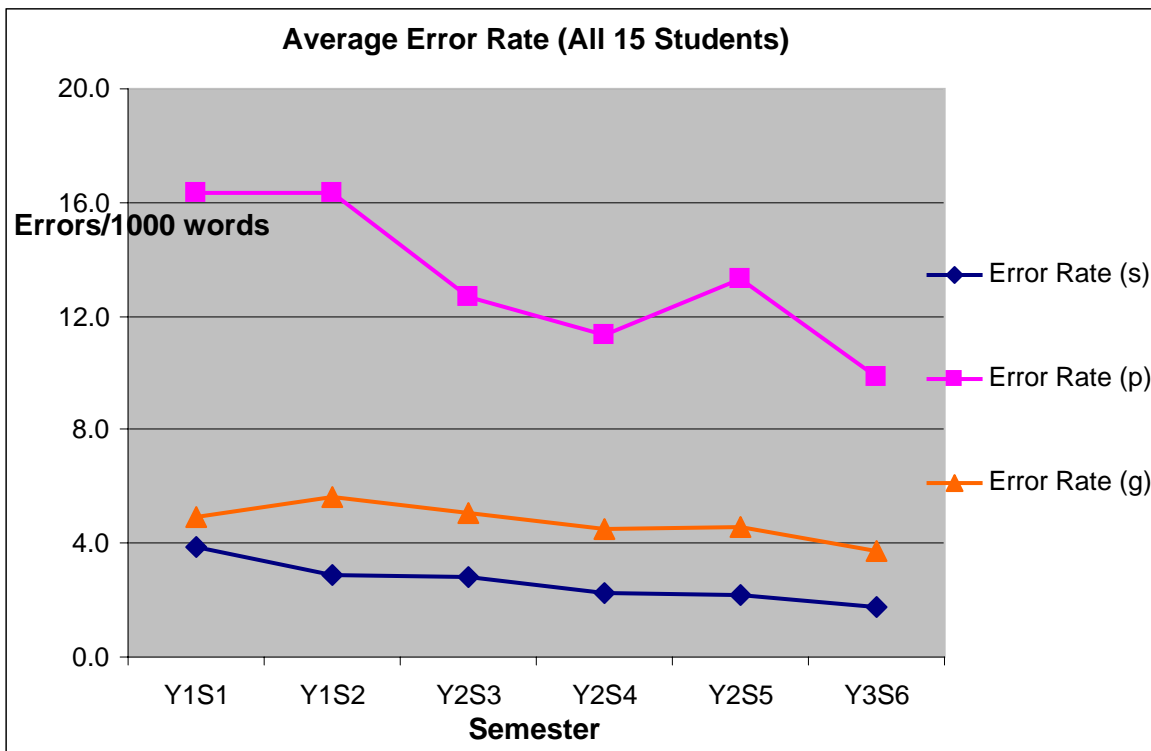
One of the main purposes of the data collected in this thesis is to illustrate the complexity associated with changing the writing habits of adults in the undergraduate context. That very complexity is why the quantitative data needs careful and detailed analysis and why it cannot be taken at face value. The assumption that students will be able to produce Standard Written English because they have been given notes in a handbook or a few words of written feedback on their work has been challenged in the previous chapter. This chapter focuses on what the data shows and, although patterns are explored, it underlines the need to recognise not only the individuality of writing practice but also the impact of context on the individual performance in different ways at different times. These writing practices reflect individual literacies that rely on schemata built up over many years, a variety of cognitive abilities, and different and changing motivations and attitudes for each student. The social context encompasses personal, discipline, course, institutional and societal demands, which generate differing priorities for the student throughout the undergraduate experience.

For each of the fifteen students in the cohort, a graph has been produced which shows the number of perceived errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar per 1000 words for each semester where work was collected; below (Figure 5.1) is an example for Student 1 (see Appendix 4 for graphs of all student data). This is not done from a judgemental perspective, but is used to track changes that can be discussed in relation to other factors. This illustrates more clearly the contention made earlier that taking a snapshot of one student essay to produce evidence of writing skills is not necessarily representative of that student's ability. Even the variation within the results from semester to semester fails to illustrate the differences between individual assignments, as will be demonstrated below.



(Figure 5.1)

By amalgamating the results of the 15 students for all the work collected, it is possible to show an overall decrease in the error rate per 1000 words for the features of spelling, punctuation and grammar (see Figure 5.2 below).



(Figure 5.2)

However, within these results, there are so many variations that it is necessary to take each of these features separately and evaluate the very different trends that are masked by this overall picture. Visually, the punctuation may appear to be the most dramatic fall, but calculating percentage drops reveals that spelling decreased by 71.8 per cent, punctuation errors by 39.3 per cent and grammar errors by 26 per cent.

It is not surprising that spelling has the most dramatic fall, as some students' early work was handwritten and some did not use an electronic spell check initially. With the exception of Student 15, who still had a rate of 6 per 1000 words in her final semester,<sup>1</sup> all students' error rates fell to around 2 or below. Student 1 only had one spelling error in his final piece of work ('mearly' for 'merely') which gave him the lowest final rate overall, but it is significant that this one spelling had been specifically pointed out in earlier work and that it appeared twice in this essay. Although this student's spelling had improved from an error rate of 3.1 to 0.5, and early use of 'there' for 'their' appears to have been eliminated in the second year, this improvement could be largely attributable to the spell check and the student's choice of vocabulary rather than any actual improvement in his ability to spell. Much of this final essay was written in an informal style:

Make no mistake these people do possess a huge amount of power and they don't seem afraid to use it to their advantage. [...] They are all in competition with one another, each trying to outdo the other. [...] They need to keep the readers interested but more importantly happy. If they don't like what they are reading then they wont (sic) buy the product. (1.5.16)

This meant that he used more familiar vocabulary than in early work where he attempted formality and produced 'decensortised' for 'desensitised' and three different spellings of 'necessarily'. So although the numerical data puts this student's spelling in a very positive light, one can see that there are other factors which affect results. The punctuation and

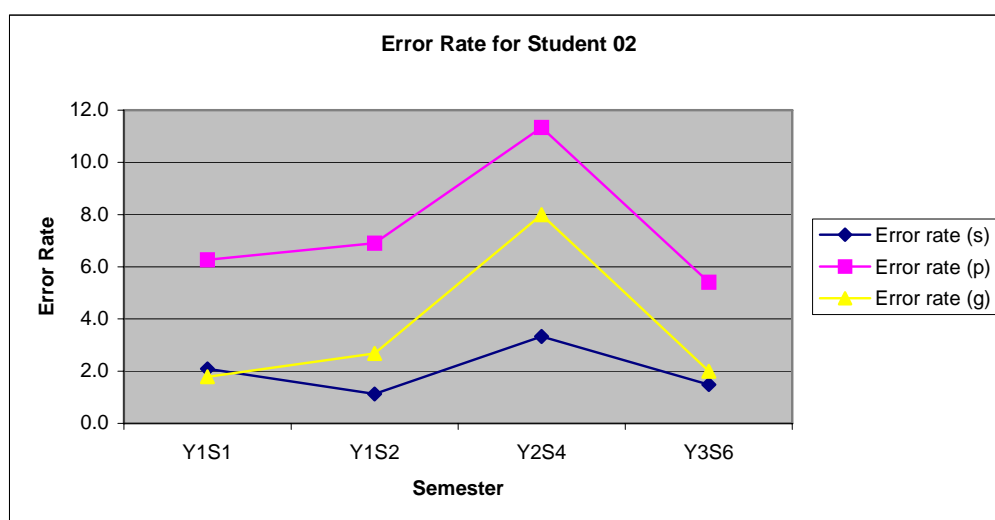
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<sup>1</sup> This student is discussed in more detail in the section relating to grammar.

grammar features for this student can be seen to improve only slightly and he actually left at the end of the second year without completing his degree.

Only one student's spelling appeared to deteriorate over the observation period. This was from an average of 1.2 per 1000 words to 2 per 1000 (Student 12). Again, further analysis reveals that some pieces of his third year writing had no spelling errors at all, whilst one piece had nine (12.5.23). Of the nine spelling errors in the essay, only two, 'equilibrion' and 'symbollic', would have been picked up by an electronic spell check. Many of the remaining errors were obvious typing errors which resulted in acceptable words, such as 'be' for 'by' and 'sing for 'sign' so these would only have been picked up with a close proofreading. It is significant that this student said that he spent so much time on researching and writing that he regarded proofreading as a 'luxury' and that by the end of a piece of work he was often so 'tired of looking at it' that he could not bear to go through it again (Int. 12c). As some of his work shows, this student is capable of producing writing following the spelling conventions of Standard Written English but a lack of proofreading has affected his performance. The reasons behind this lack of proofreading are not simply laziness or lack of care. This student put an enormous amount of work into his writing. As mentioned earlier, he often produced far in excess of the word count and tried to grapple with complex ideas, which meant that he left virtually no time for proofreading and editing.

The results for Student 12 can be compared with those of Student 2 who has a similar error rate in her last semester work. Although, again, several errors are obviously typographical, she also uses ‘bare’ for ‘bear’, ‘dependant’ for ‘dependent’, ‘family’s’ for ‘families’ and ‘had of’ for ‘had have’. I would suggest that these errors are more significant in terms of credibility than those of Student 12 and this is discussed in more detail below. The spelling error rate for Student 2 rose at the end of her second year and this corresponded with similar rises in error rates in her punctuation and grammar (see Figure 5.3 below).



(Figure 5.3)

This student had a problem with motivation at the end of her first year and admitted that she often did not put in the necessary time and effort: ‘Well, I started to lose interest. I thought I were gonna leave’ (Int. 2a). The type of spelling errors she made in her second year were all typographical and could have been picked up with a proof read; examples of these are ‘bee’ for ‘been’, ‘than’ for ‘that’ and ‘the’ for ‘they’. The word counts for the pieces scrutinised were considerably lower than they should have been and the general appearance of the work was rushed. Although the number of errors in her third year decreased proportionately, it is taken from a considerably larger body of work. One 2,000 word essay had only one typographical error, but her final year project was considerably below the required word count

and had 9 spelling, 10 grammar and over 40 punctuation errors. It is pertinent to point out that this student was included in the sample because her early work showed that she was capable of producing work that did follow conventions, but that she also produced rushed and poorly presented work at times. An example of two sentences from her final project illustrates an apparent lack of care that contrasted with other final year work:

In our culture; sex, and body parts and their functions can be huge taboos in social situations, but in other cultures these subjects may be spoken of in public. (2.6.20)

Using the phrases 'he' or 'she' or 'him' or 'her' are being used more often now. (2.6.20)

This student graduated with a lower second class degree with an average mark of 50 which she admitted, in an informal conversation after graduation, was largely down to her lack of commitment, as her capability was higher. As documented earlier, she came to university with the intention of teaching English, but as this began to seem improbable to her, her motivation waned. Interestingly, she has since done work as a freelance journalist doing music reviews over the Internet, and her work, although the writing is lively and entertaining, shows similar writing errors such as 'your hooked' and 'out of it's packaging'.<sup>2</sup> Although this may not be detrimental in this environment, where conventions are more fluid, I would still suggest that this type of error would limit her employment opportunities. The data results from these two students show that even spelling errors connected to a lack of proofreading can be attributed to very different reasons for individual students. It also important to reiterate here that poor spelling in itself says very little about the intellectual capabilities of the writer. As Burt and Shrubsole maintain : ' ... it is concluded that the skills that differentiate good and poor spellers are verbal rather than more general intellectual skills' (2000, p107).

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<sup>2</sup> A reference has not been included in order to preserve student anonymity.

It is useful here to look at Student 3, whose error rate in spelling has decreased from 7.7 per thousand words to 0.7 in her final year. This student initially submitted handwritten work and the use of a spell check has improved the spelling in her work quite significantly; in her first semester work, 46 of her spelling errors would have been picked up through an electronic spell check whilst 9 would not because they resulted in acceptable words. In spite of the use of a spell check, one 3,000 word English language project at the end of her second year had 13 spelling mistakes, and although many of these could be regarded as typographical: ‘quite’ for ‘quiet’, ‘reactoins’ for ‘reactions’, there are also several homophones<sup>3</sup> which could be regarded as more than simple carelessness: ‘there’ for ‘their’, ‘weather’ for ‘whether’ and ‘allot and alot’ for ‘a lot’. The spelling of ‘curtius’ for ‘courteous’, and the previously mentioned ‘reactoins’, shows that she has not used a spell check effectively. These results can be used as an illustration that the numerical tabulation of spelling errors does not necessarily correspond with improvement in a student’s capacity to spell correctly. Another example of this is Student 10 whose submitted work was much improved but whose handwritten cover sheets contained errors such as ‘femenist’ and ‘storys’. The problem is not simply one of improving spelling, as some very poor spellers can produce accurately spelt work through the use of spell checks and proofreading, but also of increasing motivation and efficiency so that they not only realise the effect that poor spelling can have on the reader but also allow the time and develop the expertise to improve it.

Numerical tabulation of spelling errors also fails to illustrate the social nuances associated with different spelling errors. Where these can be clearly associated with lack of editing such as ‘the’ for ‘they’ (2.2.9) and ‘sing’ for ‘sign’ (12.3.13), the inference is one of carelessness. Feedback such as ‘One or two slips which should have been picked up on proofreading’

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<sup>3</sup> Words with identical pronunciation but different meanings or spellings or both.



(2.2.9) and ‘Generally well written with occasional lapses’ (12.3.13) are typical of comments that illustrate this. As Shaughnessy stated in 1977, ‘the static around some errors is greater than that around others’ (p122), and this is still the case; when spelling errors such as ‘had of’ rather than ‘had have’ (2.2.12, 2.2.16) are made, there is a lack of grammatical knowledge exposed which is more likely to be taken as an illustration of poor education than a common error such as ‘effect’ for ‘affect’ (see discussion of this error below).

Literacies that include examples of phonetic spelling are more likely to give rise to comments relating to lack of reading. However, Burt and Shrubsole point out that ‘it is clear that frequent reading per se is insufficient to produce highly proficient spelling’ (2000, p107) and that ‘phonological coding skills’ may play a significant role. What should be noted is that for students who speak with a Received Pronunciation<sup>4</sup> accent many of the words in this category would not be homophones, but for those with some regional accents they become so, and this has implications connected to the cultural capital discussed earlier. A good example of this, which was mentioned in the previous chapter, is the use of ‘were’ for ‘where’ or vice versa. Students 5, 7, 9 and 15 have several instances of this in their writing. Student 5 wrote ‘where’ for ‘were’ several times in his first year work and, as illustrated by the discussion of the interview (Int. 5c) in the last chapter, he said that he was not conscious of this even though tutors had marked it as an error and we had discussed it in an earlier interview (Int. 5b). After the first interview where this was discussed there were no more instances of this error and yet he was not conscious of having looked out for it. It may be relevant for this student, and for students 7 and 9, that there was virtually no difference between his pronunciations of the two lexemes. As Student 15 did not attend for interview, it cannot be documented that this was the case for her also, but she was local to the same area as Student 9. Without further

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<sup>4</sup> According to Crystal (1987, p39), this is ‘the educated accent which signals no regional information at all (within Britain)’.

investigation, it is not possible to attribute this error to accent interference but it does seem to point to an interesting area for further investigation.

Confusion with homophones ‘there’ and ‘their’ was prevalent in the work of many of the students. Students 3, 4 and 7 only showed this in one of the pieces of work collected but Students 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14 and 15 had several instances throughout. Early feedback on first semester work for Student 6 was ‘LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEIR/THERE!!’ (6.1.1), but this appeared to have had little effect as there was evidence of ‘their’ for ‘there’ and vice-versa through to third year work. Student 6 said that he had noticed some instances of this and changed them, as he did know the difference, but must have missed some. He admitted that he often relied on his girlfriend to do much of the proofreading of his work and professed amazement that she had not picked this up as ‘she is very picky about these things’ (Int. 6a). Again the numerical data illustrates a significant improvement in the spelling (7.8 per 1000 to 1.7) but qualitative data shows that the reasons for the improvement can be attributed to diverse strategies such as using a proofreader rather than any improvement in the student’s own proficiency. This is not necessarily detrimental in some situations, but for an aspiring journalist, such as Student 6, expertise in writing would be expected, and a lack of ability in this area could have a negative impact.

The use of ‘effect’ for ‘affect’, although perhaps not strictly a homophone,<sup>5</sup> is prevalent in all of the students’ early work apart from Student 3 and Student 1, who made the error in one piece of work in semester 4 but showed evidence that he could spell both words correctly in Semester 5. For some students it is not possible to detail whether or not this is remedied in later work, as there are no instances of the use of these words in the work collected, but

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<sup>5</sup> The use of a schwa (half vowel) /ə / rather than /æ/or /e/ makes this possible.

Students 4, 9, 11, 12 and 14 were still using the incorrect spelling (usually ‘effect/ing’ for ‘affect/ing’) at the end of Year 2; Students 1, 5, 8 and 13 showed correct spelling in later work. Taking student 11 as an example, this particular error was corrected in two of the six pieces of work in which it occurred for this student. These were both very early pieces and were both marked by the same tutor. On the second year piece of work where it occurred, the only comment on writing was ‘Well written throughout’ (11.4.8). Bearing in mind the level of argument in the essay, this was arguably the case, despite the errors. The one other spelling error in the piece was ‘lead’ for past tense ‘led’, which is another common error (Students 3, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14 and 15 all showed examples of this). Shaughnessy suggests that ‘a common error here or there is not likely to keep an otherwise good writer down’ (1977, p122). Indeed, a feature of language change is that commonly used spellings that are labelled as incorrect can also become accepted, usually very gradually. An example of this is ‘alright’ which was noted in *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1972) as being ‘unaccepted’ but was listed in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* 2001 (10<sup>th</sup> edition) simply as a ‘variant spelling of all right’.

However, this thesis argues that any spelling errors, particularly in the writing of English and Media graduates, will be at best regarded as careless and at worst be regarded as markers of a substandard education.

There are good pedagogical reasons why every spelling error may not be marked on a student text, and research work done in the field of second language studies is inconclusive as to whether close correction has a beneficial effect on student writing development (Guénette, 2007). As mentioned in the chapter relating to feedback, researchers such as Glover and Brown suggest that feedback would be more effective if tutors ‘worried less about jots and tittles’ (2006, p14), and spelling could be said to come under this category when the focus is on content. However, researchers such as Winch and Wells also maintain that ‘poor spelling

can lead to unclarity (sic), inaccuracy and ambiguity' (1995, p78). The arguments about whether or not standard spelling is important will continue, but this thesis suggests that this is a measurable feature of competence in language use and, as such, undergraduates in English and Media should be encouraged and supported to gain that competence. The earlier arguments based on Bordieu's notions of habitus and cultural capital also suggest that this competence is not as simply acquired as is commonly assumed and that the consequences of this are more significant than are acknowledged.

Although error correction may not work in all cases, it also seems irrefutable that if errors are not pointed out at some stage then the writer is unlikely to pick up the correction by osmosis. As stated previously, the lament that students need to read more will not necessarily relate to an automatic improvement in spelling. Two of the students, 5 and 13, who did show evidence of change in this case both had specific tuition on this particular error, where memory aids were given in that the 'a' in 'affect' links with the 'a' in action (verb) and 'effect' (noun) has a determiner (all 'e's) before it. This was illustrated with several examples. It may be that this intervention had an effect but, as will be documented throughout this chapter, even conscientious students can often fail to absorb rules to the extent that they can use them automatically.

Student 13 was determined to improve her writing, and as her aim was to enter the profession of journalism she acknowledged that poor spelling might be an issue. In relation to other students in the sample, her spelling was better than average, going from 2.3 per 1000 words in the first semester to 1.0 per 1000 in the latest work. However, 'board' for 'bored' and 'there' for 'their' were still evident and she also still had a problem with the plural form of words

ending in 'y' where she used the plural for possessive: 'societies beliefs' (13.6.28).<sup>6</sup> As mentioned earlier, she seemed to have grasped the difference between 'effect' and 'affect' and had learned to check for the mistyping of 'from' as 'form' that was prevalent in early work. A further problem, which only appeared in her final year work, was with compound words; she wrote 'for ever', 'who ever', 'where as', 'tense-less', 'agent-less', 'in to' and 'other wise'. Perhaps this illustrates how reliant she had become on the computer spell check, as none of these errors would have been picked up in this way.

This type of error with compounds was very common in the sample, with only two students, 3 and 12, not showing any evidence of confusion. Student 4's spelling was reasonably accurate moving from a 1.9 average to 0.7 over two years but she went from writing 'dis-advantage' and 'dis-prove' in the first year, which was marked as incorrect, to writing 'dis advantage' in the second year; she also uses 'un-worthwhile' 're-inact', 'co-inside' 'eachother' and 'aswell'. Despite the contention made earlier that prolific reading does not automatically produce good spellers, it might be tempting to suggest that these errors lie in lack of knowledge about word formation that may result from lack of exposure to the printed word. However, frequently cited research by Holmes and Castles (2001) suggests that there is no simple equation between poor spellers and the amount they read and that 'passive learning encounters alone are not sufficient for the development of completely accurate orthographic representations' (p344). Student 4 was shown that 'dis-advantage' was incorrect and then went on to write 'dis advantage' three times in later work, although she did write 'disprove' correctly; it is unlikely that this student has never read the word 'disadvantage' or that she did not have the morphological knowledge required. It seems that in order to remedy some spelling errors 'word-specific orthographic information just has to be remembered, using conscious

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<sup>6</sup> This could be seen as problem with apostrophes rather than spelling which will be discussed in more detail under punctuation.

mnemonic and strategic operations' (Holmes and Castles, 2001, p345). It would appear that pointing out errors is not enough and that correct spellings plus strategies for remembering them would be more useful. This has shown results in one-to-one work with students, but the aim here is not to suggest that this is possible with every student, but to challenge the simplistic notion that poor spelling is directly linked to how well read or intellectually capable a student is. Certainly, detailed editing and proofreading are a significant factor in producing accurately spelt work but, as has been shown, the reasons for lack of proofreading and the inability to proofread effectively can also be complex and diverse.

Even the one-to-one strategy above may not succeed without the motivation to pay attention to such detail, and the variation in spelling in different pieces of work shows that this motivation needs to be constantly renewed as priorities shift. As the graphs in Appendix 4 show, only students 4, 7 and 9 had a clear chronological improvement in spelling. For students 7 and 9 this may be directly related to increased proofreading, as they both admit to rushing early work. For Student 7, this was because of difficulties with time management (Int. 7a and 7b) and even third year work shows that her proofreading is not entirely thorough, as she spells the word 'privileged' three different ways in the same essay (7.6.28). For Student 9 (Int. 9a) it was because he did not think that first year work counted towards his degree classification so that he did not make the extra effort. However, Student 4 was very thorough and as well as checking her work herself she also asked her mother to check it (Int. 4a). Along with using an electronic spell check, this strategy resulted in work with fewer spelling mistakes (although as will be seen in the next section, it did not always pick up errors in punctuation and grammar).

As mentioned earlier, accurate spelling is acknowledged as an employability feature, particularly for graduates whose use of English will be part of their job description. The University of Kent Careers web site quotes a Forum3 survey which says that ‘Candidates sending CVs and letters without spelling mistakes are 61 per cent more likely to receive a reply and 26 per cent more likely to be given an interview’ (Woodcock, no date). So simply pointing out spelling errors by circling or underlining, as was done in the majority of the feedback on this work, may not be enough without raising the awareness in students of the importance of accurate spelling, giving them a range of strategies for improvement and motivating them to use those strategies. Setting high expectations and having low toleration limits may seem counterproductive to encouraging writing, but this thesis rests on the premise that undergraduates need to engage positively with the mechanics of writing so that they graduate with the confidence that they will be accepted into an educated discourse community which maintains specific conventions.

The graphs show that punctuation errors decreased by almost 40 per cent, but this still left an average of almost 10 errors per 1000 words. As with the spelling, this overall figure masks several different situations and it is only by looking at the work of individual students that the complexity of the development can be gauged. As discussed in the methodology section, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate punctuation errors from grammar errors as both are related to sentence construction. Where the text could be punctuated differently to form well constructed sentences (comma splice, parenthesis, run-on) this has been counted as a punctuation error, but where the syntax results in a non-sentence, this has been counted as a grammatical error. An example of this taken from the work of Student 1 can be seen in this piece that was revised after it had been pointed out in a draft essay. The first effort was:

One of the most recent and controversial examples of media related violence is so close to home that it is frightening. The case of two schoolboy killers, Robert

Thompson and John Venables. Who viciously beat and murdered six year old James Bulger on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1993 (1.1.1).

The student was given the feedback ‘Check your sentence structure, spelling and punctuation.

Reading out loud or getting someone else to read it can help here.’ The second version read:

The case of two schoolboy killers, Robert Thompson and John Venables. These boys viciously beat [...](1.1.4)

The first version was marked both as a grammatical and a punctuation error as there appeared to be words missing in the first sentence but once this was dealt with, the removal of the full stop before ‘who’ would have resulted in a complete sentence: ‘[This was] the case of two schoolboy killers who viciously beat [...]’. The second version was marked as a grammatical error only. Punctuation errors were marked using the following terms: ‘Missing’ (e.g. question mark, apostrophe in possessive); ‘Extra’ (for example, a capital letter for a common noun, an unnecessary comma in front of which); ‘Wrong’ (for example, a semi-colon or a full stop to introduce a quotation). Where one mark was routinely substituted for another it was noted as ‘semi-colon for colon’. Comma splices, and run-ons, to use Shaughnessy’s terms (1977), were noted, although they could have simply been labelled wrong commas or missing full stops. As indicated in the methodology, the actual form of the labelling was less important than the consistency of use, as it was the change over time that was being monitored. It should also perhaps be reiterated here that the omission of isolating or bracketing commas has been noted as one error, and that where the sentence read well without isolating a weak interruption, it was not deemed an error. An example of this can be seen in the work of Student 6. The first sentence: ‘Simply put the information is meaningless unless it is used along side (sic) and in conjunction with other information sources’(6.1.4) has an isolating comma missing after ‘put’ and this momentarily can affect the reader’s initial interpretation and so has been counted, whereas in the second sentence: ‘In the past almost all



house holds (sic) were equal in a broadcasting sense'(6.1.5), the omission of an isolating comma after 'past' does not affect the clarity of the sentence and so has not been counted.

The punctuation error rates for most students have diminished, apart from Students 5 and 9 where rates have increased. Student 5 received early feedback that said 'You need to brush up on punctuation and consider the use of commas and apostrophes' (5.1.2). He had improved his use of apostrophes by the end of the second year, as there were fewer errors, but later work still includes 'it's point', 'peoples desires' and 'the career's of' (5.4.15). The interview illustrates that he was consciously working on getting this right, as there was a discussion on whether or not 'Levi's' should have an apostrophe:

- PI That one, I thought that was right because it was written in a book and because every time I wrote 'Levi's' without one it came up wrong on the spell check and when I put in an apostrophe it said it was right.
- P So it's their trade name?
- PI I think so. I'm not sure. (Int. 5c)

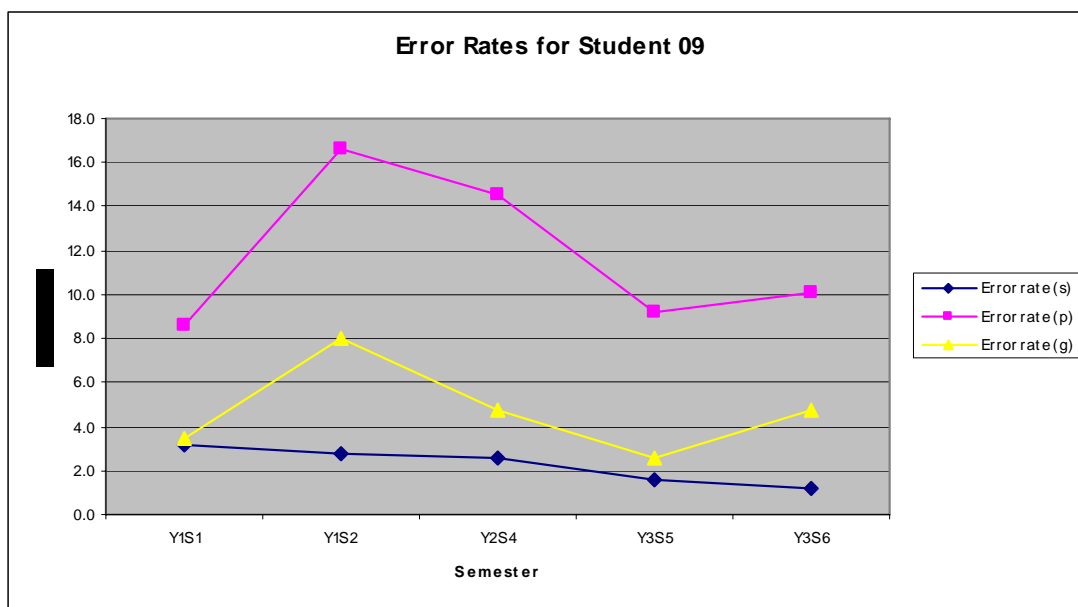
The same interview also showed that he felt that carelessness was the reason for the errors:

- P So when did you – Why do you think it went wrong in the first place? Where did you learn about apostrophes and what do you think confused you?
- PI I don't know because I do actually know but it's just a case of being careless and not checking properly.

He missed out isolating commas quite often in early work and, although there were fewer instances in later work, he still made errors which brought into question his knowledge of the underlying rules: 'The studios controlled everyone, who worked on a film, including actors, writers, directors, producers even cameramen' (5.4.16). As detailed earlier, Student 5 joined the sample cohort at his own request as he wanted to improve his writing, but whenever the subject of punctuation was mentioned, as above, he insisted that he did know the rules but had simply been careless, consequently no teaching or learning was taking place. As discussed in

the previous chapter, many students blamed their own carelessness for these errors but the question remains as to why these students consistently fail to follow the conventions, despite their contention that they know the rules and often despite specific guidance and feedback.

Student 9, the other student whose punctuation actually deteriorated in numerical terms, finished his interview at the end of the first year by saying that he was going to put more effort in as he wanted to get ‘a good degree’ (Int. 9a). He had earlier said that he intended to spend some time over the summer working with a friend of the family who was an English teacher. Punctuation and grammar errors did decrease in the second year, as shown in Fig.5.4 below but, interestingly, they started to rise again in the third year.



(Figure 5.4)

The types of error he made in punctuation were the same throughout. Possessive apostrophes were largely omitted, with 13 examples of correct usage out of a possible 64. There were also 11 examples of misused apostrophes in plurals. The pattern did not change from the first to the third year, with the correct usage being mainly attached to proper names. There were two other main traits which persisted: a) the use of a full stop before a conjunction rather than a comma, and b) the omission of commas. These can both be illustrated from the same essay:

- a) By this I mean that one paper, the Star, is deemed as a tabloid which is associated with the working class. And the other, the Mail, is described as a broadsheet usually associated with the middle class.<sup>7</sup>

[...] the father is owed justice but has been wronged. Whereas the Mail claims there is ‘a mockery of justice’.

The Star uses [...]. Whilst the Mail uses [...] . (9.6.22)

- b) This is tackling the issues not that the father is owed justice but that the courts and indeed the judge were at fault.

However regardless of the size of the piece I feel that it was evident that the two papers have completely different language uses and in fairness that could represent the reader .(9.6.22)

So, although numerically there appears to be a strong improvement from Semester 2 to Semester 5, it appears that the error decrease may be accounted for largely by the type of sentences used in the particular assignments rather than more correct usage of commas. The first example above shows that Student 9 does use isolating commas in some instances but they are very rare in his work, and what he appears to have done in later work is to use shorter sentences and fewer embedded clauses. When this is coupled with the fact that allowances were made for stylistic choices in the short story in Semester 4, this results in a numerical decrease, but with no evidence of increased knowledge of the rules of punctuation.

The comma splice, where a comma is used to join two sentences (Shaughnessy, 1977, p17) is another error that is common amongst the student sample, with all fifteen students having several instances of this throughout. Significantly, Students 5 and 9, discussed above, showed no evidence of this problem in the first year but did in the second year and it is possible that this was dictated by the need to simply get their thoughts on paper where the content was more difficult for them. As Shaughnessy indicates, there may be a resistance to ending a sentence, ‘because it imposes an end on a unit the writer usually had difficulty beginning or

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that in the short story for the creative writing module, this has not been counted as an error but as stylistic choice.

doesn't want to finish' (1977, p18). There certainly seemed to be an element of this where students said that they just wanted to get the words and ideas down on paper: 'I just concentrate on the topic' (Int. 8a) and 'I get carried away when I'm writing. I just put points in like I think' (Int.9a).

The comma splice could be seen simply as a general lack of knowledge about comma usage, as students omit and add extra commas with a similar frequency (see discussion on Student 8 below) but for some students there was a major problem in knowing when to finish a sentence. Students 12 and 13 were English Studies students<sup>8</sup> who were both regarded as good students, keen to do well and intellectually capable of understanding relevant concepts. The examples of writing and extracts from interviews given in the previous chapter have illustrated the problems that these two students have had in this area and their struggles to improve, but what is interesting about the quantitative data (see graphs 12 and 13, Appendix 2) is that it shows a steady improvement up to the end of Year Two but in Year Three work the error rate starts to increase again. As has been documented previously for Student 12, this could be related to his contention that 'proofreading' was 'a bit of a luxury' and that he spent 'so long on a piece of work that [he got] tired of looking at it (Int. 12c). For Student 13, my personal knowledge of the student might suggest that an element of stress was involved. However, whatever the reasons for this decline, the evidence points to the fact that the improvements in their writing were not permanent or static and that competing priorities and other factors, discussed throughout this chapter, had a significant impact. This, again, challenges the notion that writing development is a case of simple progression. It is important to point out that if this project had been centred on one piece of work or even completed after Year One or Year Two, as initially envisaged, the results would have been very different.

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<sup>8</sup> Studying English Literature and English Language.

One feature of punctuation which appears to attract strong views is the use of the apostrophe, and there appears to be a clear divide between those who regard Lynne Truss (2003), the writer of a best selling book on punctuation, as a champion of traditional values, and those who regard her as a ‘linguistic fundamentalist’ (Crystal, cited in *The Observer* September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006). Crystal makes a case for a more ‘flexible’ approach which acknowledges language change and variety:

Zero tolerance does not allow for flexibility. It is prescriptivism taken to extremes. It suggests that language is in a state where all the rules are established with 100 per cent certainty. The suggestion is false. We do not know what all the rules of punctuation are. And no rule of punctuation is followed by all of the people all of the time. (Crystal, cited in *The Observer* September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006)

There is no doubt that this is the case, and it is important to acknowledge this, but the ‘correct’ use of the apostrophe can be seen as a dividing line between the traditional and progressive or between the competent and the inept. Whilst one may choose not to regard the use of the apostrophe as a marker of intelligence, its use as a marker of possession or ellipsis has not yet been discarded in Standard Written English and the fact that Crystal and other expert writers use the apostrophe in particular ways would still allow the reader to discriminate between them and other writers.

All students had examples of error with apostrophes, although Student 11 only had missing possessive apostrophes in two pieces of first year work. Most students had no problem with apostrophes used in ellipsis, but as ellipsis is not generally used in academic work, there were not many examples of its use, except in creative writing. The possessive apostrophe seemed to be difficult for most students, with missing, wrongly placed or extra apostrophes noted throughout. Although there were improvements in the number of errors, all the students except Students 4, 11 and 12 had errors in the last piece of work collected. To use Student 7 as an example, these instances of non-standard use of apostrophes were all found in the final

essay collected at the end of the third year: ‘told by writer’s’, ‘husband’s and children’, ‘the character’s communities’, ‘their communities essential values’ ‘the father’s in *Beloved*’, ‘her companions dreams’ ‘black women’s’ lives’ ‘communities discrimination’ ‘to her white employer’s’, ‘gently comfort’s’ and ‘in it’s female’ (plus nine other instances of an apostrophe in possessive ‘its’); there was correct usage where the possession was used with a proper noun, for example, ‘Sethe’s actions’(7.6.29). As noted earlier, several students insisted that they did know how to use apostrophes but that errors were connected with poor proofreading. However, if students genuinely know the rules, it is difficult to understand why they put them in wrongly in the first place and some students did not seem to be able to correct them during proofreading.

Only Student 13 openly admitted that she did not know how to use apostrophes, and her early work contained several instances of missing or wrong apostrophes in possessives. Although the number of errors does decrease, it would seem that this was still the case in the third year. This is despite being specifically taught how to use apostrophes on a one-to-one basis and being given a handout with examples (Int. 13 b). In late second year work, she still writes ‘the families’ lawyer’ for one family (13.4.27) and in final year work she writes: ‘The advertisers have chosen to utilise cultures opinion of Voltswagen’s in this advertisement’ (13.6.28), ‘echoed internally in the stanza’s’(13.6.29), ‘readers desire’ and ‘purchasers thoughts’(13.6.30). It is interesting to note that these were all added by the marker, who appeared to be focusing on both content and writing in her marking of the text. However, the marker also added an apostrophe to ‘the creators attempt to make the reader feel as if they are very much in control’, when, in fact, ‘attempt’ is a verb so that this is a plural rather than a possessive and an apostrophe is not appropriate (13.6.30). This might add weight to the idea

of the difficulty of concentrating on both areas at once but it also highlights the different ways a reader can approach a text and this is discussed further in the conclusion of this chapter.

The use of the apostrophe in possessive 'its' was found in the majority of the students' work, with Students 9, 11 12 and 13 being the only students who did not illustrate incorrect usage, although Student 4 only had one example in the first semester. Student 8 also had no instances of this but she did miss the apostrophe out of the contraction for 'it is' so perhaps she dealt with the problem differently by leaving it out in both instances whereas most students did the opposite. This is one of the few errors that most tutors marked on work and several of them took the time to write on the work to explain the usage. Students 2, 3, 5, 7 and 10 had this demonstrated in their work but all made the error subsequently. Student 14 also had correct and incorrect uses within the same piece of work and, as with Student 15, he used apostrophes in such a way that it was difficult to see a pattern; they appeared in plurals: 'the line's', and verbs: 'make's it funny' (14.6.18), 'gender make's a difference (15.5.12) as well as being omitted in many instances. As stated earlier, most students appeared to be able to use the possessive apostrophe correctly when single, proper nouns were involved but most other usages confused them. This confusion over how and when to use the apostrophe has been aggravated by a divide between those who fight to keep the apostrophe alive and those who maintain that it is out of date, so there is a lack of consistency even within the educated discourse community. However, as stated earlier, knowing how to use an apostrophe and choosing not to is a different practice from avoiding them because of confusion. Cavella and Kernodle (2006), in their history of the apostrophe, refer to Allen's argument that those who know how to use the apostrophe but then choose not to teach it are responsible for it becoming a 'shibboleth for sorting classes of knowers according to their various levels of

initiation' (1997 p.84). This, of course, could be applied to the features of Standard Written English in general.

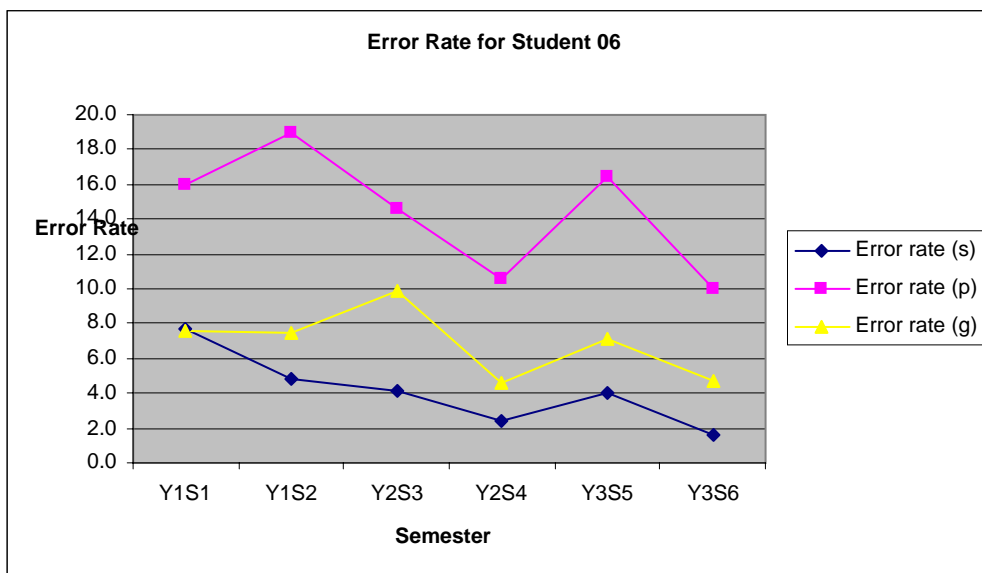
Student 6 used the wrong apostrophe in 'its' up to Semester 3 but there are no instances after this so it might be assumed that he had learned the correct format, but this can be investigated further. Student 6 had a large number of punctuation errors marked on several pieces of work and had feedback such as:

You would have had a much better mark, were it not for careless presentation and very poor punctuation/spelling. (6.1.1)

Your punctuation and sentence structure are unsatisfactory. (6.1.5)

Your punctuation and sentence structure both make for very difficult reading and spoil the impact of your material. This carelessness has lost you a lot of marks. (6.3.13)

The numerical data (see Figure 5.5 below) shows that the punctuation in his work did improve steadily throughout the second year; the error rate rose again at the beginning of the third year but improved in the last semester:



(Figure 5.5)

This student was one who admitted that he discounted the first year and did not put much effort in, as the marks did not contribute towards his degree classification and he was more



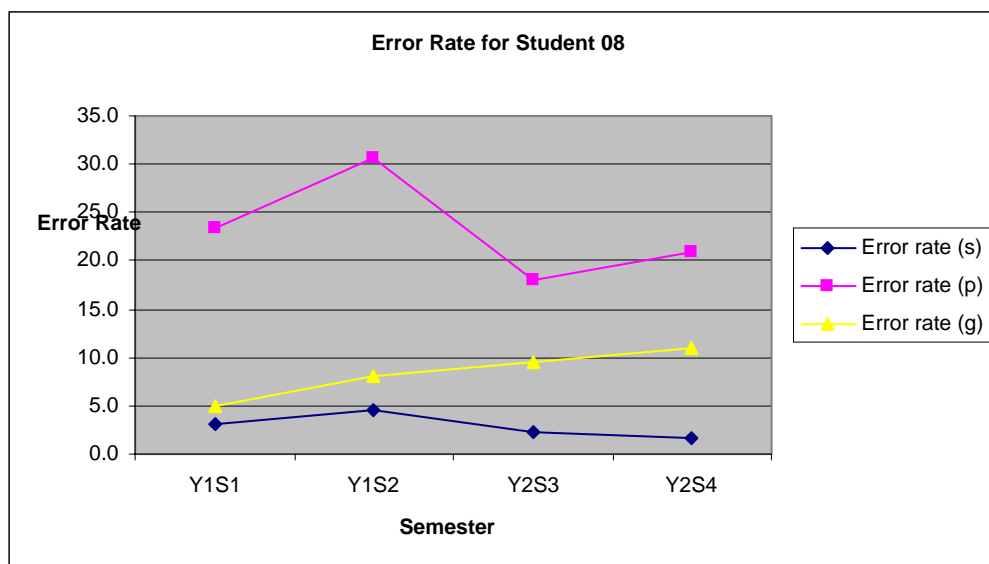
interested in his social life. As previously documented, he thought that as long as he had ‘the information in’ he could ‘get away with it’ (Int. 6a). However, when he received second year feedback that said that he had lost marks, he began to take notice. His solution was not to learn about punctuation, as he felt ‘[he knew] most of it’ but that he might ‘brush up on it over the summer.’ As mentioned earlier with regard to spelling, his immediate solution was to ask his girlfriend to proofread for him. The error rate at the end of the third year, although significantly improved on the first year, is still high, with 10 errors per 1000 words. On four pieces of work collected in the third year, two have no comments on writing practices, one says ‘Well written’ (6.5.21) and the other says ‘Your writing style has improved massively since you started three years ago. Well done’ (6.6.23). His marks were in the upper second range; the content was well researched and the arguments were clearly structured. It can be reiterated here that this is not recounted to criticise the markers, but rather to force a consideration of how this student has been helped to acquire a working knowledge of conventional punctuation. Again, this student had aspirations to be a journalist and had the intellectual capacity to achieve his goal, but it seems a pity that he may have to rely on the goodwill of others to produce writing within the accepted format and has not been taught or been able to learn the rules of punctuation during his undergraduate years.

The use of isolating commas could be seen as fairly insignificant in the overall discussion of student writing. Written communication, however, has to stand alone without the advantages of oral communication in which explanations and revisions can happen in real time, so this aspect of punctuation can be genuinely helpful in guiding the reader. Whilst it is unhelpful to be pedantic about exactly which rule should be applied, as in the differences between American and English use of commas, it is also unhelpful to ignore the fact that the rules are there to aid comprehension. Some examples from the work of Student 10 illustrate the

problem: ‘She cried, but the only reply, which came, was’ (10.2.9); ‘given enough information to, both, himself and the listeners’; ‘it would, be wholly, inaccurate’ (10.4.12). As has been discussed throughout this thesis, even where comprehension is not hindered, there may be social disadvantages to illustrating ignorance of or carelessness toward the rules. The work of Student 8 illustrates how missing or misplaced commas can affect the reader’s comprehension. This does not mean that the reader cannot understand what she is trying to say, but that the lack or use of punctuation hinders rather than helps this process:

The news that we read or see our families and of course the church influence our moral decisions and therefore the way we live our lives[...] As nothing, any longer holds it (sic) authenticity when we hear music or issues with an essence of political anarchy we have heard and seen it all before and therefore react in the same way. (8.4.14)

As can be seen from Figure 5.6 below, the punctuation errors for this student did decrease over the two year period but there are still a significant number of errors, and the trend in Semester 4 is regressive.



**(Figure 5.6)**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, written feedback on early work for this student was mainly concerned with content, apart from a couple of suggestions for more careful proofreading. In her interview (Int.8b), she praised the teaching practices in her journalism

module as they allowed her to revise her work after feedback and discussion, and to compare her work with that of others. However, she also suggested that she had an issue with time management that she was determined to address:

I feel there's room for improvement again because I'm travelling back and forth and sometimes I'll get home and I'll be tired- sometimes I just won't proof read and I'll just think so long as I'm getting it done that's fine but now I realise that it's not enough. Sometimes I'll need to read it again or just to make sure that it does actually make sense. I'm not missing out little words that'll change the sense of it. (Int 8b)

Although her punctuation appeared to improve at the beginning of the second year, Figure 5.6 above shows that she was starting to lose that control. The feedback on writing on the last two pieces collected mentions: 'Poor expression throughout' (8.4.14) and 'Room for improvement' (8.4.15). The previously shown examples from this work show that she struggles to use punctuation effectively. Nowhere in her two interviews was the word 'punctuation' mentioned, and although she did talk about 'stupid little mistakes' and improving 'the flow', there is no evidence to suggest that she felt that she had a particular problem with punctuation, or that she had to learn anything more. Her comments centred largely on content and any writing errors were connected to 'rushing' and lack of 'checking' or 'proofreading'. A similar attitude has already been illustrated in other students, and in tutors, in earlier chapters.

The remedial perspective towards punctuation is implicit in this attitude in that both students and tutors presume that students should already know how to use punctuation from their schooling and that any changes are to do with correcting mistakes caused by carelessness. This is where a perceptual shift needs to occur. Developing writers need to learn how to use the tools of punctuation positively to their advantage. In discussing the writing of students of English and Media, this should be an integral part of their development. This is not simply a case of regurgitating rules, but of critical analysis of the different effects that punctuation can

achieve. Whether this is done through poetry, news articles, academic journals or any other medium, the connection also needs to be made to their own writing so that they can develop their communication skills in a more positive way than simply by correcting errors when they have time. The work done by The Anglia Polytechnic University on their Speak-Write project, which is discussed in Chapter Six, is based on a similar premise, and although it is particularly aimed at English Literature students, the parallels can be made in other disciplines wherever any type of textual analysis takes place.

It is perhaps timely here to mention a feature which was not counted, but could also be seen as an important feature of punctuation which students need to learn in order to communicate successfully: paragraphing. Many of the students had no real idea of how to organise their work into helpful paragraphs. Those who had journalism as part of their course often resorted to one sentence or very short paragraphs, whereas the Literature students sometimes had paragraphs over a page long. Student 7 initially appeared to have no problem with paragraphing her work but towards the end of the first year she started to include the occasional one sentence paragraph (7.2.11). By the end of the year, this had become more prevalent and her last essay attracted the feedback ‘Again disjointed use of sentences as paragraphs - need to keep statements together as part of a paragraph which focuses on specific points or issues’ (7.2.18). An interesting point here is that in a textual analysis, which was produced in between these two essays, she asserts ‘If the form was different (i.e. lengthy paragraphs, academic) the page wouldn’t be interesting and it would not be an appropriate piece of content in a tabloid’ (7.2.15).<sup>9</sup> This student continued with a type of hybrid structure where she would have large ‘chunks’ of writing of about half to three quarters of a page separated by double line spaces; within those chunks she would have mini paragraphs which

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<sup>9</sup> See discussion of non-transference of knowledge about writing later in this chapter.

were sometimes only one sentence and sometimes three or four sentences; these were demarcated by a new line. In subsequent work, double line spacing was eliminated altogether, (despite the often reiterated requirement that all work should be double line spaced throughout), and her work was a mixture of very short (one sentence) to medium paragraphs which gave no clear idea of her organisation.

Markers largely ignored this aspect of her writing and concentrated on content, apart from on the very last essay where the tutor mentioned that it was 'disjointed'. The student attracted a mixture of marks but several were in the upper second band so, as mentioned earlier, the motivation to change would be minimal. Student 11 received a mark of 62 for a second year essay and the comment 'well written throughout', but there were several one-sentence paragraphs, alongside a paragraph of thirty lines, which meant that the overall structure was not easily discerned. Again, it may be that paragraphing would not be seen as an important or essential skill in the wider context of the overall development of student writing, but the use of paragraphs as an aid to communicating a logical structure and a coherent set of ideas to the reader is something which could be embedded into the critical analysis of any writing and should not only be within the capabilities of English and Media graduates, but should also be a part of what they learn explicitly about competent writing.

As noted in the methodology, one of the difficulties in noting grammatical errors lies in the fact that a problem sentence can be changed in several different ways in order to make it conform to the rules of Standard Written English. Also included under this heading is the incorrect use of a word in the context. Many errors are missing or extra words, often prepositions, which change the structure of the sentence; these could be seen as typographical errors not picked up through proof-reading rather than a lack of grammatical knowledge but

they were included here as they still result in non-standard sentences. This, again, emphasises the need to analyse the information in more detail than the numerical data allows. According to the numerical data, the grammatical error rate for the majority of students improved but three students showed an increase in the error rate. In unpicking these statistics, although the overall picture is positive, it becomes evident that there are some persistent errors that could affect the credibility of these graduates as competent writers.

In dealing firstly with the positive implications of the results, there are some students for whom the decrease in the error rate was quite marked. Student 7 went from a rate of 10.3 to 4.4 per 1000 words and Student 11 went from 4.6 to 0.8. The latter has to be seen in light of the small amount of data collected in the second year but the data shows that there was at least one instance of non-agreement of subject and verb in every piece of first semester work, but none in the Semester 2 and Semester 4 essays. Other errors were related to missing or wrongly used words, and the final essay (11.4.8) has no instances of this and was deemed 'Well written throughout' by the marker. It has already been mentioned that this was despite some spelling and punctuation errors, and it is suggested here that grammatical errors are more potent in affecting the perception of the reader as to the credibility of the writer. His early work was handwritten and obviously rushed so the improvement may simply illustrate a more careful approach.

Student 7's writing appeared to improve as she became more confident in her subject matter, but it should be noted that, despite the improvement, she still came in the upper half of the error rate with 4.4 per 1000 words. One of this student's enduring problems was the wrong choice of word. In early work, this resulted in the meaningless sentences already detailed in the last chapter. Although this improved over the three years, in the final piece of work

collected she still uses ‘reciprocates’ where she means ‘advocates’, ‘replicates’ for ‘illustrates’ (also used incorrectly in earlier work) and ‘in it’s female restrain’.<sup>10</sup> The use of ‘appropriate’ academic vocabulary is a contentious area, but I am not discussing the use of informal language or ‘slang’ as opposed to formal, language here. The need for formality appears to have forced this student into using unfamiliar language and, as a result, she loses meaning. As mentioned already, many researchers argue for concentration on meaning rather than form in assessing texts but it is difficult to divorce form from content when the meaning is altered by the word choice. The breadth of research in this student’s essay was solid and the marker notes that she shows ‘a sound appreciation’ of the concepts involved, so this would suggest that lack of reading is not a problem here. This student has attached meanings to words that she thinks she is using in the right context. An interesting example is the word ‘cease/s’ which was often used in ways that not only made no sense in the context but could almost be seen to give the opposite meaning. For instance, in one essay where she explains the differences between a tabloid and a broadsheet newspaper, she goes on to say: ‘This is what ceases to distinguish newspaper content’ (7.2.10). Other examples are:

During this time [1939], it was extremely difficult to separate poetry and politics, as the war ceased to be the centre of people’s lives. (7.2.11)

[...] this particular documentary ceases to reveal such tendencies adopted by certain salesman. (7.2.14)

They did promote the idea that they did not cease to revolutionise against the past. (7.4.22)

Repeat handling of stories in a certain way can cease to define a newspaper. (7.4.24)  
Like God, society imposes an author to attribute control over a novel, to curtail meaning, thus cease deferral. (7.6.28)

In the context of these phrases it is difficult to substitute one meaning for the word ‘cease’ but the nearest I could produce would be the word ‘continue’. This student often resorted to a thesaurus (Int. 7a) and the word ‘cease’ is linked to ‘continue’ as an antonym. It appears that she may have looked up a word for this and confused the two. No matter how many times she

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<sup>10</sup> Context: ‘This community is the most significant because Morrison establishes it both positively and negatively, in it’s female restrain’.

proofread these essays, she would not have picked up the error, and feedback was too vague (a question mark, underlining or ‘unclear’) to be of any help. It might be difficult for an English tutor in higher education to empathise with a student who does not understand the meaning of the word ‘cease’, and they might assume that the writer is unintelligent or does not read a great deal. Neither of these assumptions applies in the case of this student and this exemplifies the difficulties that some students face in developing their writing at undergraduate level.

Apart from incorrect vocabulary choices, the other grammatical problems that student 7 had in early work were the use of prepositions with ‘which’, (already discussed in the last chapter and largely under control by the third year), subject/verb agreement, confusion between ‘whom’ and ‘who’, missing or wrong suffixes, missing or extra words, sentence fragments and occasional lapses in word order. Although the number of errors had diminished by her third year, there is still evidence of most of these error types in final year work. The following sentences were all taken from one 3,000 word,<sup>11</sup> final year project (7.5.27). Ironically, perhaps, the subject is a teaching observation on ‘developing competence in writing skills’ and centres on the argument for teaching ‘a standard set of rules’ for written communication:

Consequently, when they arrive at school, there is National Curriculum guidelines and literacy strategies to follow in order to become fully literate.

Evidently, it is the teacher’s role in developing written language.

The school’s age ranges from 4/5 to 7/8 [...]

From asking for the toilet, to the consequences of their misbehaviour.

The main problem the groups caused was that the children were not sat with who they wanted to be sat with.

Often the timetables regulated to the point were it seemed the children had only just began to work and it was time to move on to something else.

The management of the timetable however, was broke up quite successfully [...]

It is the role of education to provide children with experiences of written language that encourages them to write their own.

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<sup>11</sup> Only 2,500 words submitted, for which she lost marks.



As the numerical data shows, this student's writing has improved measurably over her three years as an undergraduate. At the end of her first year, when asked if she thought her writing was improving, she replied:

To be honest it's not something I really think about. I think it's improving; I hope it's improving but it's not something that I stop and I don't, you know, think about. (Int. 7b)

With a part-time job and a lengthy commute from home, this lack of concentration on her writing could be attributed, at least partly, to time management, as she admitted that her writing strategy depended on how much time she had (Int. 7a). Time management continued to be a problem for her, and some pieces of advanced work only attracted a mark of 40 per cent because she missed the deadlines. In the work collected, she did not appear to cut down on the required reading, as her bibliographies and content knowledge were satisfactory, but her writing always contained errors which could have been picked up with a thorough proof-read, such as missing or extra words and, as mentioned previously, different spellings of the same word in one piece of work. However, even if she took the time to proofread more thoroughly, it is difficult to see how she could eradicate all the grammatical problems without some specific learning taking place. Bearing in mind the problems of time management already mentioned, the only practical place for this learning to take place would be within the curriculum.

It is important to note here that many of these errors are not picked up by electronic grammar checkers and even where they are, the result is not always a correction. Students 5, 7 and 13 indicate that they rely on the computer to point up errors (Int. 5a 7a, 13a). Many grammar checks come in the form of questions or comparisons that the student does not have the necessary knowledge to deal with so a reliance on the computer to highlight and correct errors is futile; it also gives students a false sense of confidence so that they are less likely to

question their own writing practices. One example is that many students put unnecessary commas before ‘which’ because they do not understand the advice given: ‘If the marked group of words is essential to the meaning of your sentence, use “that” to introduce the group of words. Do not use a comma. If these words are essential to the meaning of your sentence, use “which” and separate the words with a comma’ (Microsoft Word). The advice given by grammar checkers is often misleading and only writers who are secure in their knowledge can use the advice appropriately. An example can be shown using the last line of Chapter Two of this thesis:

Current strategies are discussed in Chapter Six but this is preceded by an exploration into the problems students face in understanding the necessary conventions and actively developing their writing to meet them.

The grammar check in Microsoft Word underlines the word ‘their’ and suggests ‘they’re’. It asks the reader to check whether the words are used correctly and gives examples of commonly confused words, but if the writer is genuinely confused by these homophones, suggesting an incorrect substitution seems less than helpful. In another example, the phrase ‘what students produce’ is underlined with the suggestion that this is a possessive and needs either ‘student’s produce’ or ‘students’ produce’. A writer who was unsure of their own expertise might well take advice that makes their writing less correct. In their study guide to writing, Birmingham City University (no date) advises its students not to use a grammar checker, as ‘they are very unreliable’. They are unreliable because they cannot judge the intended meaning from the words used. Students of English and Media should be given the confidence and the knowledge to use this guidance appropriately because language use is central to their discipline.

For most of the other students who improved, the difference in error rates for grammar is small, a fall of less than 2 per 1000 words. According to the numerical data, Student 10’s

error rate of 5.3 drops to 2.1 per 1000 words. In part, this can be accounted for in terms of style, as in early work he tended to use note form in essays that resulted in sentence fragments. He also had several missing words and attributed this to lack of proofreading:

Yeah as far as grammar's concerned if I had time to do all that, get myself time I'd be fine but at the time I'd leave it till the last night all the time; other times I've got on to it a day before. (Int. 10a)

Throughout his advanced level work, there is still evidence of extra and missing words and awkward syntax that hinder comprehension:

There was little else power related amongst this conversation so in conclusion of this channel I would say that it is very even terms of control and power. (10.4.12)

A necessary combination of involved, dictation, small group work and team discussion definitely [...] (10.5.12)

The fact that these people have come to university alone, in most cases, proves that they have a desire to learn. (10.5.13)

Instead of to, in the silent way of mice, tiptoe forward, this almost tramped [...] (10.6.15)

A mismatch in style between some passages of his later work revealed evidence of plagiarism (see later discussion) and it transpired that several sections of one essay collected were taken directly from other texts (10.5.13). Taken together, this means that, despite a numerical improvement, this student's use of grammar has probably not altered a great deal during his undergraduate years but he has assimilated the convention of using formal prose in essay writing and resorted to plagiarism.

One student's error rate for grammar stayed virtually the same throughout, and this was one of the highest rates at 11 per 1000. Student 15 decided not to attend for interview so there is little qualitative data to aid the analysis, but she did write a small amount in a writing log (see Appendix 2, Transcript 15a) at the beginning of her first year. This was handwritten in the form of a personal reflection and was not assessed. In it she said:

I feel I am not a very confident writer when it comes down to essays etc, but when working with creative types of writing I do this with ease. To back that up I have had a number of articles published in magazines which I have had a free run at. I know I have a problem with grammar but I now (sic) this could be fixed with a bit of help, also my spelling leaves a lot to be desired.

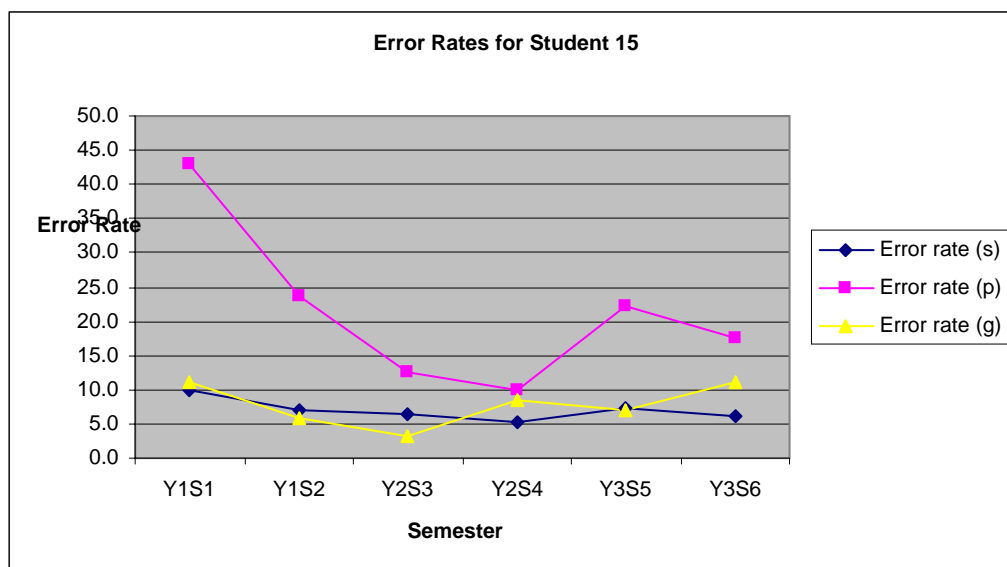
After her first essay had been handed back, she wrote:

I new as soon as I had finished it that I needed help. I have trouble taking the words from my head and putting them on paper, so what I am trying to say does not come across as clearly as I would like. Also I left it to late to get the information from the library so I struggled with quotes.

The data shows that she was given early feedback on her writing, suggesting that she should be more careful in her work:

You are obviously bright but you will not get the marks you are capable of unless you open your mind to developing your writing style in a serious way. (15.1.1)

She did show improvement in spelling, punctuation and grammar throughout the first year and up to the end of Semester 3 (See Figure 5.7 below), but although spelling and punctuation continued to improve to lows of 5.2 and 9.8 (a fall in error rates of approximately 50 per cent and 75 per cent respectively), the number of grammar errors started to gradually escalate again, and in the third year all three features had higher error rates than the second year.



(Figure 5.7)

Many of the errors would seem to be those related to a lack of checking rather than a lack of grammatical knowledge but there are also those that illustrate a lack of understanding of the underlying rules of what constitutes a sentence:

I feel that Rachel is an intelligent child, and although is oretty(sic) confident with her speech could improve. (15.4.6)

She kept asking questioned throughout, and sometime answering them. (15.4.6)

Also the different kinds of humour within conversation, with regards to the social environment we live. (15.4.7)

We can see this as all situations in Celies life appearances or manifestations of this. (15.5.11)

Some of the sentences show even more clearly that the work has not been checked through carefully:

Oedipus unwittingly kills his own after [father] and marries his own mother. (15.5.12)

This realise, coming as it does uncontrollable and often unfathomable depths, can cause unpredictable, sometimes unimaginable reactions. (15.5.12)

The two pieces of work collected from Semester 3 have no comments on writing and the first one in Semester 4 says 'Clear enough, some slips' but the feedback in the third year (Semesters 5 and 6) reflects the rising error rate; five of the six pieces collected had comments about the number of small errors and one said that the work appeared 'rushed and careless' (15.5.10). The types of grammatical error noted on her work are consistent throughout: subject verb disagreement, sentence fragments, extra, missing or wrong words, missing or wrong inflections. Although she had said in the first year that she had problems with grammar and spelling, the improvement in error rates could indicate that she had some control over this but, again, there are complicating factors. One interesting element is the type of assignment scrutinised. Most of the work in Semesters 2, 3 and 4 came under the first heading of Analysis/Report or the third of Creative writing; there was only one assignment coming under heading two, Theory/Essay. However, in the third year all the work came under the

Theory/Essay heading. The error rates appear to be lowest on the more practical assignments where she is asked to analyse empirical evidence.

Student 14 also showed evidence of difference error rates for different types of work but it is not a straightforward link. There are more errors in his creative writing pieces, even allowing for a more informal style, than in the more formal academic pieces, which would suggest that he approached them in a different way and was conscious of the need for more careful writing in the latter. There are also slightly fewer errors in the more practical analysis pieces than there are on the more theoretical essays. This student spent much of his time in the editing suite working on video production and his marks reflected his interests, as although he graduated with a lower second degree with an average of 58, his marks included several in the high sixties that were related to this area. This, again, perhaps, highlights the importance of motivation in learning.

Interestingly, as with Student 10, the more theoretical work for Student 15 also involved passages which were clearly plagiarised, so the difference in error count would probably have been higher had the student not incorporated quite lengthy passages from Internet sources in some third year work. It would be simplistic to assume that because passages are plagiarised and the work has clearly not been proofread thoroughly that this student has put no effort into her work. The lack of confidence in her writing ability, detailed earlier, may well have been a contributing factor. As Hall (2005) suggests, plagiarism is seldom a straightforward case of dishonesty or laziness. There is often an element of 'being called upon to complete a task that is outside of one's background training and present capabilities'. The responsibility for this rests not only on the student's shoulders. The institution should ask what has been done to furnish this student with the necessary skills to complete the task. The powerful impetus

behind the academic literacies approach can only be positively applied if guidance and teaching are tailored to student need and, as argued elsewhere, this needs to be done mainly within the curricular framework.

The data in the last two chapters has illustrated the reluctance of students to admit that they do not know the rules of spelling, punctuation and grammar. This can be linked with the resistance to engage in learning something that they think they should know already and which could be potentially time consuming when they have other priorities. Together these factors point to the need for this to be made more of a priority for them and that strategies should be available within the curriculum and this will be explored in the next chapter . An important and related point that this chapter has emphasised, and one that will be a central part of the conclusion, is that spelling, punctuation and grammar are fundamental aspects of writing and that labelling them as ‘basic’ or ‘surface’ means that students are reluctant to spend time developing their skills. Writers of any level can develop, and it is important that any course, but particularly those in the disciplines of English and Media, promotes critical thought and reflection on writing practices.

This notion of reflection is crucial as there are several examples within this data that illustrate that it is not enough to cover aspects of language and simply expect students to learn and then synthesise this knowledge and apply it to their own writing. As detailed earlier, Student 7 discusses appropriate length of paragraphs in formal work whilst consistently producing inappropriate length paragraphs in her own work. Student 10 discusses subject verb agreement in relation to child language acquisition and then misses a subject verb disagreement in the same sentence when he writes:

He says “Could you show me where the swing pull is...are?” Alistair realises that “is” will not be appropriate as there are more than one “swing pull” and quickly changes to “are”.(10.4.11, my underlining)

Student 12 discusses the use of homophones in advertising by using the example of “kids on board not bored” and then proceeds to write ‘ the problem of children becoming board on trips in the car and the phrase which we are all culturally aware of “Are we there yet?”’ This student also wrote, as part of a text analysis exercise:

It does not instil confidence in the reader that the party know what they are doing on huge matters of state when they cannot thoroughly proofread a campaign leaflet.  
(12.4.26)

Her analysis had several errors that could have been picked up with careful proofreading including ‘form’ for ‘from’, ‘hear’ for ‘here’, missing capital letters and full stops. In another part of this analysis she specifically discusses the use of appropriately formal language and then illustrates the point with: ‘ Throughout the text [...] the Conservative party attempt to put down the Labour Party’ (12.4.26, my underlining). Student 5 scored 83 per cent on an exercise in which he analysed the grammatical structure of a chosen text but in a short passage in which he discusses his analysis he writes:

As the piece is describing the character’s emotions, there is also a number of subject and object complements. For example “I’d be a natural for talk shows” and “I felt like Moses on Mount Sinai”. There are a large number of adjectives which accompany many of the noun phrases. Two examples being “a solemn ceremony” and “a major omen”. [...] An example of a co-ordinated sentence being “My last job was in November”. Both the phrase “My last job” and “in November” can stand on their own without each other’ [...] There happens to be no examples of emphatic affirmation. Gramatically this extract is quite simple’. (5.2.8)

There were no comments on his writing apart from a correction to the content in that “My last job was in November” is not a co-ordinated sentence. Again, I should reiterate that I am not advocating that all written work should be entirely error free or that it should be littered with corrections but where a student is writing about sentence structure in non-sentences this might indicate that the assignment is not fulfilling its purpose. In any discussion on ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ learning there is an important element of synthesis in the former and I would argue



that students of English and Media should be required to *show* their understanding of important aspects of writing as well as *tell* it.

One other important area of discussion that this chapter has brought to the fore is that of consistency, both in student writing and in assessment. The error rates for the majority of students indicate a fluctuation in performance that can be related to insecure knowledge but also to the type of assignment set, the level of priority the student can afford to give these aspects of their writing and their motivation to do so. But just as the students' writing varies with the level of attention given to different aspects of their work, so does the assessment. The data shows that some markers habitually pay more attention to writing and some to content, but the same marker can also react differently to different pieces of work. Williams, in his article 'The Phenomenology of Error', maintains that:

When we read for typos, letters constitute the field of attention, content becomes virtually inaccessible. When we read for content, semantic structures constitute the field of attention; letters - - for the most part - - recede from our consciousness. (1981:2)

Although only one instance has been detailed here, the current data shows that when markers try to pay attention to both, they sometimes make errors themselves. Indeed, Williams shows clear examples of professional writers who outline an error and then commit that error themselves in other places. One of the points Williams makes is that these errors must have gone unnoticed in subsequent editing, even though they are the topic being discussed. He argues that there are varying levels of error and that some errors are unlikely to catch the reader's attention whereas others are more likely to do so. He also argues that we are more likely to find errors when we are looking for them. He supports his points by including several 'errors', documented in grammar books, in his article and challenging the reader to acknowledge that they have not noticed them before he points this out. This suggests that

reading a scholarly article is essentially a different reading of the text from one in which we are marking, in that the marker may actually be looking for errors rather than evaluating content.

Some of the errors that are counted in this data would probably go unnoticed in some circumstances; some of the errors would be noticed by most educated readers. It is at this latter end of the spectrum that student writers are likely to alienate the reader so that the writing rather than the content becomes the focal point. As discussed earlier, there are sound pedagogical reasons why markers might concentrate on content and ignore or even not notice errors, but it might also be the case that writers who stray outside the expected range of competence draw attention to their writing and make it so 'visible' that the marker finds it difficult to concentrate on the meaning. Whatever the cause, the result of this inconsistency is confusion for the student. I would argue that students of English and Media should have confidence that their use of written English is an asset rather than a liability. As discussed elsewhere, in the present system, even when markers do pay attention to writing processes, the type of feedback they give is often not constructive and does little to develop the student's competence. Most, if not all, tutors of English and Media are successful writers; their expertise needs to be passed on in a positive, nurturing and developmental environment. However, it is clear that unless the necessary learning is done within the curriculum rather than as part of an uneven and patchy feedback process, there is little hope of success.

## **6. Strategies for developing student writing.**

In studying the complexities surrounding the acquisition of Standard Written English in higher education, it has been necessary to explore what is required of student writers and what problems they face in meeting those requirements. This chapter aims to put this in the context of a community which has recognised a problem and has attempted to solve it. Without reflection it is impossible to progress; the aim here is to reflect on the effectiveness of past and present strategies in order to synthesise ideas on a way forward whilst attempting to highlight those attitudes which may hinder genuine progress. It explores attitudes that have led to past and present models of provision and the theoretical underpinning that drives them forward. It also charts the ways in which lessons learned through the US tradition of freshman writing are applied to the present situation in the UK. This leads to an exploration of specific ways in which academics attempt to close the gap between their requirements and the written work that students produce, including the introduction of writing centres, embedding skills teaching within the curriculum, peer tutoring and the use of paper and electronic learning aids. One other important strategy is tutor feedback and the debates surrounding this are investigated. Illustrations from the student data have been used in Chapter Four to exemplify the challenges faced in making meaningful interventions in student writing but if conclusions are to be reached on how these are to be met then the theoretical and institutional positions adopted need to be examined. Feedback is inextricably linked to assessment procedures and the role that the use of Standard Written English plays in forming assessments is also explored.

As discussed previously, there are those who continue in the ‘complaint tradition’ bemoaning the lack of writing skills that current UK students bring with them to University. The basis of their complaint is grounded in the exclusive nature of higher education. Their approach to

writing development is that it should not be necessary, as students should already have the necessary skills or they should simply imbibe them. This notion that students in higher education can learn how to tailor their writing to the needs of the institution simply through ‘osmosis’ is outlined and challenged by Lillis (2001, pp54-6) who questions the practicality of a model of ‘implicit induction’ which, whilst successful in the past with a small elite, is not sustainable in the current context of larger numbers and limited resources. This is illustrated by the fact that despite students being immersed in examples, with the majority of their reading matter within the academic framework following formal writing conventions, they routinely fail to absorb the relevant detail which would enable them to conform.<sup>1</sup>

As students have proven resistant to ‘implicit induction’ the logical assumption would be that they need to be taught. However, the idea that the teaching of basic writing skills is not compatible with higher level education is well entrenched. Those who do seek to teach such skills are often marginalised. Joan Turner, chair of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP) and senior lecturer at Goldsmiths, comments that the

separation of language and content leads on the one hand to accusations of teaching language skills in a vacuum (Gee, 1990) and on the other to the marginalisation of language teaching, i.e. remedial or support teaching in higher education. (Turner, 1996)

Although Turner is largely concerned with second language speakers, she makes the point that it is time that those working in academic literacies and study skills should pool their resources: ‘Academic literacy needs to establish both its institutional place and its discursive space’ (Turner, 2000, p149). The shift from making the condition of undergraduate writing *a problem for the student to solve* to a problem that *everyone in higher education needs to solve*

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<sup>1</sup> See student data in previous chapter.

is a major challenge when attitudes are rooted in the selective and elitist system from which many current practitioners have evolved.

The assumption that everyone who enters higher education should already be able to produce Standard Written English stems largely from an era where those who entered it were part of an elite who possessed the 'cultural capital' necessary to conform. Gee (1996) highlights the tension between 'primary Discourse', that with which one is culturally raised, and a 'dominant secondary Discourse'(p146). There is a clear analogy here with the American journey after 'open enrolment' where, in the 1970s, colleges changed their admission policies and admitted large numbers of students who were 'less prepared' for higher education (Shaughnessy 1977). Indeed, Gee cites Shaughnessy's findings on the difficulty of acquiring the "superficialities of form and correctness" in later life when he acknowledges that 'many non-mainstream students...often gain just enough mastery to ensure that they continually mark themselves as outsiders' (Gee, 1996, p146).

With the onset of widening participation in the UK, it can be seen that the number of students who may be categorised as 'non-mainstream' has grown considerably but also that which constitutes 'the mainstream' may have also shifted. As detailed earlier, widening participation in the UK has not expanded the number of markedly non-traditional students as much as it has expanded the number of middle or lower middle class entrants, albeit with lower entry qualifications. Even in this context, it has to be acknowledged that formal Standard English, as discussed earlier, is not a '*national*' language but in fact a '*class dialect*' (Fairclough, 1989, p57). The written form of this dialect, Standard Written English, has become a marker of educated discourse, but, for many reasons, many current students will not identify with this dialect or use it automatically (Wray 1994; Turner1999). Strategies need to

evolve which will enable them to have a genuine choice in which dialect or discourse practice they use.

It is difficult for many lecturers, especially in the Humanities, to acknowledge this need, as they regard being able to write ‘well’ as one of the criteria for entry into the academic community, and the requirement to produce publications is an integral part of most academic positions in UK universities. Lecturers are often in position because they excel at writing in a formal academic style which, as well as following the specific conventions relating to their discipline, also incorporates the features of Standard Written English. As discussed with regard to writing requirements, it can be a challenge for those academics to acknowledge that people can think at a higher level without necessarily being able to express those thoughts in formal writing. As Turner suggests:

when language becomes ‘visible’, it is an object of censure, marking a deficiency in the individual using it. Additionally, the association of language use in academic discourse with rationality and logic can have the effect of marking out such a student with a deficiency in logic and rationality also. (Turner, 2000, p150)

This linking of writing with cognitive ability results in an attitude that places the ‘problem’ firmly with the student.

In some cases, tutors will reluctantly decide to teach some aspects of formal writing to the students. If students cannot absorb the information through ‘implicit induction’ then the perception is that they should be able to absorb it if the necessary information is given to them directly. In my position as Academic Skills Tutor, lecturers have often indicated to me that they cannot understand why a fifteen minute presentation, or a two paragraph explanation in a handbook on how to use the apostrophe correctly, does not eliminate the problem of misuse of apostrophes in that whole group. As discussed earlier, the reasons for non-standard usage are complex and therefore the choice of possible remedies is also complex. Some students can

hear a lucid explanation of when to use an apostrophe and it immediately becomes clear; they learn it and it is subsequently not a problem. In my experience, however, this is rare (see previous chapter for empirical evidence). As discussed earlier, motivation and attention are important factors in learning (Gagne *et al.*, 1992). Some students are not motivated to attend, as they think it is unimportant or something else is more important at that particular time; some students listen but do not understand the explanation because it uses vocabulary or concepts which are not thoroughly understood such as ‘possessive’ or ‘ellipsis’; some students might understand at the time of the demonstration but are incapable of extrapolation on being faced with different examples, or lack of reinforcement means that so much time has elapsed between the demonstration and usage that they have forgotten the rules.

Even if the rule is understood and remembered, by the time a student is at university many of the strategies of writing have become ‘automatized’ (Kellogg, 1999, p64), and these habits are not easily altered. As discussed earlier, in order for habits to be changed there has to be an alteration from an unconscious, automatic state to a conscious, deliberate one. Changes in habit require concentration as well as understanding, and other priorities, such as difficult concepts and deadlines, can impact on this concentration. It has been established earlier that writers cannot give equal attention to all facets of their writing at the same time (Hayes and Flower, 1980; Smith, 1982; Kellogg, 1999) so that there will inevitably be a question of priorities. The correct use of the apostrophe, therefore, can seem, and probably is, relatively unimportant when a student is wrestling with an unfamiliar concept or an impending deadline and the fact that a tutor may have explained the rule two weeks earlier will not impact on their performance. The need to foster efficient editing and proofreading skills as an integral part of the writing process is underlined by this acknowledgement of competing priorities.

In recent years there has been a growing and influential body of research that rejects the ‘student deficit’ perspective and acknowledges the complex issues involved in the development of student writing. Lea and Street (2000, p44) suggest that there needs to be a move away from identifying writing ‘problems’ simply from the view that students lack competence and need to be socialized into the academic community, towards also acknowledging the power relationships inherent in ‘the student-tutor interaction and the institution’. In *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education* (2006) Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams brings together a number of researchers who respond to this challenge. In outlining some of their ideas, along with other perspectives, this chapter sets out to identify some of the current approaches to developing student writing. Whilst endorsing these strategies as overwhelmingly positive in challenging elitist attitudes, particularly the moves away from ‘student deficit’ and towards making writing development central to the curriculum, it also explores the specific challenges inherent in developing adult writing and the prevailing attitudes that make these strategies only part of the answer.

In a move away from separate study skills provision towards that which provides a more positive, holistic student experience the ‘academic literacies’ approach, proposed by Lea and Street (1998b), has been welcomed by the academic community because it recognises a ‘student deficit’ attitude as negative and counter-productive. It firstly criticises the ‘study skills’ approach as one that centres on student deficit and regards writing as simply a set of learnable skills. Lea and Street document the progression from that position as the ‘academic socialisation’ approach which, although more sensitive to the need for students to be inducted into higher education processes, still depicts writing as a ‘transparent medium of representation’ and suggests that ‘the codes and conventions of academia can be taken as given’ (Lea & Street, 2000, p33).



The 'academic literacies' approach maintains that writing needs to be examined within an institutional framework and requires academics to question their own ability to make their requirements clear to students who do not necessarily have the same understanding of terms and definitions that the academic community takes for granted. Lea and Street suggest that students should be introduced to:

literacies as social practices; at level of epistemology and identities; institutions as sites of/constituted in discourses and power; variety of communicative repertoire, e.g. genres, fields, disciplines, switching with respect to linguistic practices, social meaning and identities. (Lea & Street, 2000, p34)

They suggest that this approach moves to a new 'level of engagement with student writing', as opposed to the 'more straightforward' study skills and academic socialization approaches' (2000, p35). It is important to point out here, however, that there is a great deal of necessary simplification in this model which can lead to the idea that the teaching of 'skills' in itself is a negative phenomenon. Lillis (2006, p32) suggests that 'the skills model assumes **transparency** in relation to language and **transmission** in relation to pedagogy', but not all those who endeavour to improve students' writing skills outside the discipline do so from a position that writing is 'a transparent medium of representation' (Lea and Street, 2000, p35), and that 'knowledge is transferred rather than mediated' (p45). In developing new theories which 'address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning' (p35), there is a danger that the work done to address some of these issues in the past is minimised and discounted and that work done outside the curriculum is seen as necessarily ineffectual.

The groundbreaking work of Mina Shaughnessy (1977), where she painstakingly catalogues the different types of writing errors, the reasons for them and the different strategies needed to change them, illustrates the complexity involved in understanding and changing the writing

habits of adults. Shaughnessy's insistence on collaboration rather than instruction as a means of improving writing shows that the simple 'transfer' of knowledge has not necessarily been an accepted feature of a skills approach. Orr *et al.* (2006), in a comparison of US and UK approaches to peer tutoring<sup>2</sup> also challenge the assumption that study support necessarily uses 'transmission-based approaches'. Their contention, that the assumption that some aspects of pedagogy are the sole preserve of lecturers whilst others are the sole preserve of peers is a false dichotomy, parallels my concern that separate study skills provision must necessarily be seen as more 'crude' and 'more straightforward' than any other provision. Although I support researchers such as Wingate (2006) and Haggis (2006) who argue for a more integrated and critical approach, it is important to remember that a well crafted, student-centred session on an aspect of writing development can be a very positive learning experience which takes into account the complexities involved in the learning process, and a high level of expertise and a sound theoretical basis are needed to provide such an experience.

To develop this point further, as mentioned earlier, Lea and Street have labelled the gradual move towards a more negotiated stance by skills tutors as 'academic socialization'. They depict a hierarchical model with 'crude' study skills at the bottom, socialization in the middle and the academic literacies approach at the top. In fairness, the three models are not depicted as discrete but as 'encapsulating' each other so that Ganobcsik-Williams (2004), in her report on the development of academic writing, endorses Lea and Street's approach by suggesting that an effective strategy for improving student writing would need to take account of all three models. She goes on to advocate a 'whole institution' policy and emphasises the need to make all university teaching staff responsible for improving student writing so that a combination of strategies provides an integrated approach.

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<sup>2</sup> Discussed in more detail below.

It is difficult to argue against this, but educational progress in the UK is often hampered by the tendency to adopt one strategy in opposition to another rather than to harness the strengths of different strategies. The chronological changes in methods for the teaching of reading are a clear example. As Mike Baker, BBC education correspondent, points out ‘the teaching of reading has always been controversial and methods such as phonics...have been in and out of fashion’ (Baker, 2005). Bethan Marshall sums up the problem succinctly by saying that ‘It is as if we are constrained always to fight out an endless dialectic with no synthesis’ (1997, p116). With regard to writing development in higher education, Ganobcsik-Williams now suggests that:

Not only must the teaching of writing be embedded and made part of an institution’s culture, but strongly-led and well-supported teacher and staff development must be a high priority. (2004, p39)

This ‘whole institution’ approach seems to acknowledge at last that we do not always have to replace one practice or theory with another. Instead, it is important to synthesise the successful elements of existing practices with developments based on new insights and that these should be as consistent as possible throughout the student experience. The shift of emphasis from the learner’s responsibility to ‘fit in’, towards a tutor’s responsibility to engage in a critical and productive dialogue is at the core of recent scholarship, but this can be done in a variety of situations. The need for the student to develop specific skills and practices and the complexity involved in doing so means that there is still room for a variety of approaches which includes multiple strategies which are not all confined to the discipline tutor, and may well encompass workshops and one-to-one tutorials with writing tutors.

As Ganobcsik-Williams points out, what should be taught and by whom are contentious issues and cannot be taken for granted. It is important not to simply label the study skills approach as ‘crude’ and to encourage the embedding of writing development into the

curriculum as a cure-all. This could mask the tensions that continue to exist concerning which aspects of writing are considered relevant for the higher education curriculum and which are not; it can also minimise the level of expertise and commitment necessary to understand and develop adult writing habits in the bid to promote a ‘writing within the disciplines’ approach. The staff training proposed by Ganobcsik-Williams is crucial but the hierarchical model used in the academic literacies approach might work against an objective overview of what constitutes a positive strategy.

In exploring models for the development of student writing in the UK, it has been necessary to put it in context of ‘study skills’ provision. As Ursula Wingate (2006, p457) explains, the initial progression from the ‘implicit induction’ approach has been a move towards such provision. Much of this has been the ‘bolt-on’ variety that Wingate and others argue has ‘several drawbacks’ (p458)<sup>3</sup>. A 2008 survey<sup>4</sup>, completed by 42 members of the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDin HE) documents the type of study skills provision on offer in UK universities. Although this encompasses all study skills, the overwhelming focus is on the development of writing skills. Information from this survey and a recent discussion thread on the ALDinHE Jiscmail (19.2.07) would suggest that the models in place for supporting writing are extremely varied. They range from one part-time tutor, who runs student workshops and offers advice to academic staff across the whole campus, to a Learning Advice Centre with 30 full time staff and 30 hourly paid staff that includes an Academic Writing Centre and a ‘Thinking Writing’ initiative working across twelve departments to embed skills into course modules. This variation in ethos and practical provision is symptomatic of the organic rather than strategic evolution of different models and practices.

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<sup>3</sup> Wingate’s arguments are detailed later in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Available online <http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/>

Blythman *et al.* (2003) identified ‘five key areas’ in providing support to academic development. They list these areas as (1) Geographical and structural location, (2) Staffing, (3) Co-operation and liaison, (4) Resourcing, and (5) Strategic factors (p203). These key areas are likely to have an impact on student and tutor perception of the support offered and subsequently its effectiveness. Their table on the ‘Model of the ideal study support’ (p207) largely assumes separate provision based in a writing centre<sup>5</sup> but they suggest that it ‘can be effectively adapted to other contexts’ and indeed the broad sweep of their suggestions have been incorporated in models such as the one in the University of Huddersfield where Academic Skills Tutors are based in each School.<sup>6</sup> Whether based in Writing Centres or not, the current scholarship endorses a change in the perception of study support. I would suggest that the main contrasts in this perception can be defined as:

<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Current</b>
remedial	developmental
peripheral	integral to the curriculum
separate	embedded
remote	accessible
institution driven	student centred.

(Table 6.1) **Contrasting perceptions of study support**

The reasons for any particular model being implemented are often logistic and financial but it is the pedagogical impetus that is relevant here. This involves a discussion of current approaches to writing development which take a positive stance on developing writing skills within a discipline framework and which encourage a move away from more traditional,

<sup>5</sup> See further discussion of the role the Writing Centre later in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> See Catterall, Hill and Tinker (submitted)

elitist attitudes towards an inclusive, diverse model taking account of the challenges of widening participation in higher education.

The type of initiative that is being introduced to solve a perceived problem with student writing by relating it more clearly to content and process is largely curriculum based. As Tamsin Haggis suggests:

The question in relation to learning then changes from being ‘what is wrong with this student’ to ‘what are the features of the curriculum, or of processes of interaction around the curriculum, which are preventing some students from being able to access this subject?’ (Haggis, 2006, p526)

Although Haggis puts forward a strong argument, the difficulty in the context of this thesis is that although it is a positive move to make some features of academic writing more explicit by relating them to a specific discipline, thus moving away from student deficit towards the overt introduction of conventions, the features of Standard Written English are not discipline specific. As they are a requirement of the National Curriculum from the beginning of a student’s education in the UK, the attitude prevails that they should have already been acquired. Consequently, any variations from a perceived standard are still regarded as needing separate remedial attention and lecturers comment<sup>7</sup> that dealing with this is not part of their remit and should not be part of a higher education course. This is especially true in the Humanities where writing is a major feature of the discipline (Alsop, 2003; Ganobscik-Williams, 2004). As discussed earlier, the fact that students enter higher education without acquiring a facility for formal Standard Written English is either blamed on a poor education system or regarded as student deficit. I would argue that both of these possible reasons are irrelevant. When a student enters higher education, they are entitled to the opportunity to learn what they need to know in order to profit from their experience. The discipline content is a

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Four for examples.

major part of this but, as already established, when employment is a key goal for the majority of students, the conventions which might exclude them are also important; within the disciplines of English and Media these conventions are part of the discipline content and therefore need to be taught explicitly where necessary.

If, as discussed in Chapter Two, Standard Written English is accepted as the norm for an academic discourse community, then the attitude that any attention to spelling, punctuation and grammar at the level of higher education can be regarded as remedial is perhaps understandable. Despite the contention that this attitude may need to change, it will inevitably be a slow process. In the meantime, it is important to encourage the perception that any changes to writing style are positive steps towards achieving goals rather than punishment for the inability to conform. Initiatives by the Royal Literacy Fund, where RLF Fellows are placed on fixed term contracts in UK Universities to help students develop their writing skills, suggest that a developmental approach to writing, often focusing on individual students, is extremely successful; the perception that spelling, punctuation and grammar are the fundamental tools of the writing trade at all levels, and that editing is an integral part of the writing process, can shift the emphasis from error to enhancement:

RLF Fellows have helped students discover that writing is a pleasure rather than a chore. In other words, these students have found their voice, and finding that voice, in the metaphorical and literal senses of the phrase, is surely part of the purpose of HE. (Ahmad and McMahon, 2006, p3)

Although, as documented earlier, many researchers decry separating out features of non-Standard Written English as a negative approach, the RLF illustrates that it can, if presented constructively, lead to a feeling of accomplishment and achievement. The additional suggestion made by this thesis is that it should also be dealt with honestly as a socially constructed convention rather than presented as the invisible norm. As one-to-one tuition for

every student is not feasible, it also means that every tutor has to take responsibility by acknowledging and reinforcing the importance of the confident use of Standard Written English in an academic environment and offering opportunities for students to develop that competence.

Although there are many different purposes for writing, and researchers such as Peter Elbow (2000) and Phyllis Creme (2003) make strong arguments for writing of any kind being beneficial to thinking development, my area of investigation is centred solely on the use of those conventions that produce writing which falls within the boundaries of formal Standard Written English. One difficulty facing the development of strategies to address this is that any focus on this area is often seen as a regression to the concept of ‘student deficit’. This is inevitable to some extent as the very notion of ‘standard’ means that there are those who fall short of it and are deemed inadequate. Although, as already acknowledged, there are debates on whether the word ‘standard’ means a ‘prestige’ variety or a ‘uniform’ one (Bex, 1999, p27), in order for it to be shared, it still has to be attained.

Students who understand concepts and can argue them logically should, in theory, be treated equally, but as discussed earlier, those who have the advantage of Standard English as their social dialect benefit from a shared symbol of educational achievement in Standard Written English; those who ‘deviate’ from this conventional sign of a good education are deemed inadequate.<sup>8</sup> It is important that any strategies that seek to develop other aspects of student writing are not disingenuous in ignoring or minimising this important aspect of writing. It is progressive that the approach to student writing is altered to take account of different literacies but in doing so it is also crucial to remember that so called ‘surface features’ are the outward signs which the reader uses to judge the writer, and this is done before the reader can

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<sup>8</sup> See previous chapters for examples of feedback and comment that support this.



engage with what the writer has to say. Strategies that move away from a ‘student deficit’ model are necessary but they also need to be more explicit about writing requirements. In acknowledging that difficulties in conforming to the rules of formal Standard Written English are not directly connected to intellectual capacity they also need to acknowledge that differences do have the power to diminish the writer’s credibility in an academic or business context. Therefore, addressing this difference needs to be a priority if the writer wants to be accepted within that context.

It would seem that a first step, then, in developing strategies to improve this aspect of writing, is to re-acknowledge its importance. It is crucial that this is not done under the negative connotations of a ‘back to basics’ banner that diminishes the student, but in a way that acknowledges the exclusive nature of the academic and business elite and the inherent power relationships involved. Raising awareness among students that their writing does not conform to standards is often seen as detrimental to student confidence but experience would suggest that students are already aware of difference and see it as an embarrassment;<sup>9</sup> removing this embarrassment from the equation and offering writing enhancement as an integral part of the higher education experience must be a positive step towards a solution.

As mentioned earlier, this integration of writing development is shown in a move towards Writing in the Disciplines (WiD).<sup>10</sup> In line with our US counterparts, many UK writing practitioners have come to the conclusion that bolt-on study skills alone cannot deliver the necessary enhancement (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004; Haggis, 2006; Wingate, 2006). In support of a strong argument for embedding skills development within the discipline

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter Four for empirical evidence.

<sup>10</sup> An International WAC/WID Mapping Project is being undertaken at present. As at April 2008 there have been 250 individual responses to the Preliminary Survey from a total of 47 countries and 205 institutions. Details are available online from <http://mappingproject.ucdavis.edu/>

framework, Wingate's contention that we should '[do] away with study skills' is based on the premise that the term 'study skills' implies :

1. That techniques and surface problems are concerned, which can be fixed relatively easily.
2. That acquiring these skills serves the short-term purpose of succeeding at university
3. That they are unrelated to skills needed for 'work and life in general' (QCA,2000). (Wingate, 2006, p465)

Although I have taken issue earlier with assumptions that 'study skills' is necessarily 'crude', there is logic in changing labels if those labels have become associated with negative connotations. Wingate argues persuasively for promoting the embodiment of skills within the academic framework by 'encouraging academic staff to integrate the development of learning into their teaching' (2006, p467). Whilst agreeing that this is a positive step, it is also important to acknowledge that there may also be advantages to keeping some separate provision. The complex power relationships involved in student-tutor interaction and institutional demands mean that it is sometimes an advantage for a student to be able to step outside that relationship:

In the safe, neutral and mark-free learning skills environment, students are perhaps more likely to 'see', 'feel' and reflect on the wider and longer-term application of their developing skills. (Hampton, Personal communication LDHEN jisc.mail 14.2.2007)

An important stance, reiterated throughout this thesis, is that what is needed is not to simply develop new strategies to replace old ones but to develop a range of strategies which preserves positive aspects and transforms the negative aspects of what already exists. A positive learning experience can take place wherever the 'conditions of learning' (Gagne, 1985) are in place and the availability of multiple strategies makes this more likely to occur.

The embedding of writing development makes absolute sense in terms of academic writing, as students are much more likely to relate to content specific tuition which is seen as relevant to

the discipline area to which they are committed (Bruce, 2003). It is difficult to see, in this context, how tutors in English and Media can ignore the relevance of spelling, punctuation and grammar to their discipline. However, despite the continuing resistance to the teaching of 'basic' writing skills in higher education, it should be relatively straightforward, with targeted staff training, to convince lecturers that features of academic writing such as referencing, signposting an argument, and the use of formal and technical vocabulary are not self evident to today's student. Indeed, there has gradually been an acknowledgement that the expansion of higher education means that the explicit teaching of academic writing conventions is a necessary part of the induction into it and that all students cannot be expected to have acquired these conventions before entering. Many departments have already incorporated essay writing skills into first year modules. Two good examples of these in UK universities include:

The Speak-Write Programme at Anglia Polytechnic University (1997) which resulted in a compulsory module, based on a set of text books, which incorporates all aspects of writing within a framework of introducing English Literature students to the demands of studying Literature at a higher level.

The 'Write through the Semester' project at Keele University, which also developed a module that incorporates the introduction of academic writing into the subject of English.

The former project was based in a traditional classroom setting but the authors have since focused on adapting the material towards more independent study (Avery and Brown, 2001, p179). They recognise that the problem here might be motivating the less able students to

engage in activities that are not compulsory. The latter project was deemed a success, but the evaluation emphasises that ‘student writing improves if and almost only if the writing assignments that they are given are related intrinsically – emanate from—the work that they are doing for their main subject interests’ (Bruce, 2003, p18). Although these are both based in English departments, the suggestion is that both these HEFCE funded initiatives can be adaptable for use in other disciplines.<sup>11</sup>

Realistically, it is difficult to envisage all academics from other disciplines giving such commitment to writing development, but projects that aim to put writing at the forefront of academic work across disciplines have been in evidence for some time. The University of Leicester Teaching and Learning Unit initiated ‘The Focus on Writing’ programme in 1997. The underlying ethos was that ‘the development of writing skills was best facilitated at the chalk face’ (Clark and Lorezini, 1999, p98). Along with staff development through writing forums and workshops, one of the key strategies was to produce paper materials that would give clear guidance on ‘core aspects of language use’ (p102). These materials were promoted to staff as either a ‘basis for discussion’ or for attaching to returned work. Although the staff evaluation of these resources was largely positive, some of the problems it highlighted were that in modular systems students might receive the same materials several times, which could be demoralising and irritating, and tutors are often unable to gauge any development because they only see a particular student for one module.

An international perspective on the same topic can be gained by reviewing the Australian based initiative TULIP (Tertiary Undergraduate Literacy Integration Program) (Cartwright

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<sup>11</sup> The Anglia project in particular, however, is very literary in its approach and may need adaptation for other disciplines, as jargon such as ‘identifying phrase classes’ could be viewed as intimidating and unappealing to non-English specialists.

and Noone, 1999). An ‘action research’ project, this involved collaboration between Education lecturers and academics in other disciplines to incorporate literacy development within the curriculum. The main strengths of the project centred on student reflection on writing but one of the more positive outcomes appeared to be the reflection on writing which was engendered in the subject specialists.<sup>12</sup> One of the main insights that emerged from some of the problems that had to be negotiated during the TULIP project was the need ‘to be mindful of the signs of conflict and confusion that are given out through curriculum and pedagogical practices’ (Cartwright and Noone, 1999, p14). Any strategy that minimises or ignores such confusion simply serves to maintain the status quo. As Cartwright and Noone suggest, in order for learning to be successful there needs to be a ‘process of working one’s way through the contradictions, conflicts, and confusions of learning in a multi-layered, complex context’ (p14). Raising student awareness of the real life implications for writing is not possible unless tutors understand and acknowledge the tensions involving their own place in relation to the student, the academic community and the institution.

Ganobcsik-Williams (2004) calls for an ‘Institutional Approach’ that would involve a compendium of writing development strategies, and, within this, the establishment of writing centres is a key recommendation. Such writing centres are common in the US;<sup>13</sup> from these Centres, writing tutors can work on a one-to-one basis with students but also give training to staff and be involved in team-teaching so that writing can be embedded in the curriculum as much as possible whilst alleviating some of the problems associated with lack of expertise or increased workloads. This model is in place at Coventry University where Lisa Ganobcsik-

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<sup>12</sup> It might be useful to point out here that genuine reflection on the part of subject specialists in English and Media would involve questioning whether, as competent writing practitioners, they were aiming to enable students to become a part of their community or whether, unconsciously or not, they were protecting their own status by using any differences in practice as a discriminatory tool.

<sup>13</sup> For a further international perspective, see also Leibowitz et al (1997) for a perceptive evaluation of the introduction of a writing centre in the University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Williams is heading a Centre for Academic Writing. It is useful here, however, to take further note of Nancy Maloney Grimm's perspective from twenty years experience in writing centres in America. In applying a 'postmodern' approach, she argues that:

As long as writing centre workers view themselves as having the expertise the student needs in order to manage academically, their ability to see beyond a needy individual to a less-than-perfect social structure is blocked (1999, pxvii).

Whether work is done in writing centres or embedded within discipline structures, then, the inherent elitism in the system still needs to be recognised and challenged. Based on Brian Street's (1984) ideas, Grimm's 'ideological model of literacy [...allows us to] imagine alternative practices by shifting focus from the individual who is lacking skills to the system that structures what we do' (1999, p31). It is important to recognise that the introduction of a writing centre is constructive only when its ethos is based on sound, pedagogical, student-centred values. Such a centre should acknowledge difference positively and not be perceived as a space for 'fixing' the less able, and which is there simply to help maintain the status quo.

The 'Thinking Writing' programme, at Queen Mary, University of London, is another very positive example of an institution wide approach that was influenced by the US model. Collaboration with Cornell University resulted in this WiD initiative that aims to put writing at the heart of the curriculum. The programme is supported by a web site launched in 2003 <http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/index.htm> which is accessible to all academics and gives clear advice and encouragement on making writing issues part of a holistic learning experience for the student. Such a commitment to improving 'academic writing' is obviously a major step in writing development, but the focus of this particular thesis is the place of Standard Written English and how this is taught. In the 'Frequently Asked Questions' on the above website there is a question relating to students with 'extremely poor' English. They are directed towards the English Language and Study Skills section of the Learning Development

Unit. Although they go on to explain that the unit does not ‘solely play a “remedial” role’ and is available to students of all ‘levels and abilities’ the negative connotations of separation are still an issue.

As already documented, in the current drive to develop a theoretical base for academic writing development, the use of standard spelling, punctuation and grammar can be relegated to the status of a side issue in that concentration on ‘surface features’ is said to detract from the real business of communicating ideas within the academic discipline. Whilst accepting some validity in this position, this can lead to the perception that ‘surface’ equates with ‘superficial’ or ‘easily remedied’ but, as shown earlier, one of the major problems with these surface features is that they are not easily remedied and the motivation, concentration, time and space to acquire the necessary knowledge for change are extremely difficult to negotiate. If the only space available to concentrate on these features is outside the module, even in English and Media modules, this perpetuates the remedial ethos. As clearly illustrated throughout this thesis, the solution to closing the gap between student writing and the requirement for Standard Written English within the educated discourse community is not straightforward and even seemingly positive strategies can support dominant ideologies and practices.

As mentioned, the solution to developing student writing is not one strategy but a system of strategies that needs to acknowledge the diversity of writing styles inherent in an expanded higher education system. Ganobcsik-Williams concludes her report on the teaching of academic writing with several recommendations (2004, p 40-41), the majority of which are centred on the provision of funding for staff development. It is obvious that no strategy can work without the understanding and support of the staff involved and there is a growing body of literature which suggests that staff in higher education can no longer afford to ignore the

changes that widening participation has engendered. There is little point in continuing to 'guard the academic tower' (Shughnessy, 1976, p34), as the drawbridge has already been lowered. In the US, as far back as the seventies, Shughnessy's solution was 'Diving In' (1976), in which she advocates a more collaborative role for teachers whereby they work with students to negotiate change. As already discussed, this would require a much more open acknowledgement of the power relationships inherent in our use of language and of the gatekeeping function of Standard Written English, rather than simply referring students to an outside body for 'fixing'.

A major concern in any strategy then is that in appearing to be empowering students by acknowledging individual academic literacies and the complex nature of writing in making meaning, the current trend underestimates the complexity of learning involved in changing a lifetime's habit and obscures rather than deals with this gatekeeping function of Standard Written English. This gatekeeping ethos is clearly illustrated in the recommendations of the recent report produced by The Royal Literary Fund which include the words: 'students should display a minimum standard of correct and effective written English as a condition of acceptance for undergraduate study' (Thornton and Coppard, 2006, p45). All of the other positive recommendations by the RLF are overshadowed by this one. It shows quite clearly that good writers see themselves as an elite and that an intelligent person can be relegated to secondary status if they do not have a talent for producing writing that follows the dominant conventions.

Apart from Writing Centres, another strategy detailed by Ganobcsik-Williams is the use of interactive IT or 'computerised support' (2004, p34) which is thought to be particularly useful in giving hands-on practice in a non-threatening and personalised environment. It is



suggested that this gives the students the opportunity to test their understanding and provide the reinforcement required, but motivation and time management are still important factors. There are a growing number of universities who are using some IT based teaching and learning methods to develop student writing.<sup>14</sup> As McKnight (2005) points out, it is important that teachers keep pace with technological advances to avoid a major gap between the 'Net Generation students' and lecturers who are resistant to any change from the traditional lecture/seminar format. Researchers such as Bourner and Flowers (1999) have called for a more far-reaching revolution that would combine 'high tech' solutions with the necessary 'high touch'. Citing the ideas of Sir Douglas Hague, they suggest that there needs to be a balance between distance learning and social interaction. Their solution would move away from seminar/lecture towards online learning supported by 'Large workshops and Action Learning sets'.<sup>15</sup> The reality is that most innovation in higher education is done on a more piecemeal and less radical basis and the computer based strategies discussed here in relation to writing development are largely viewed as additional resources rather than replacing traditional teaching strategies.

The Higher Education Academy website lists Hull and Liverpool as UK Universities with extensive skills provision available through web resources. It also lists American sites that have links to enormous reservoirs of advice and information. From those UK universities that have invested in their own resources Sue Drew, of Sheffield Hallam University, as Ganobcsik-Williams (2004) points out, has been at the forefront in developing an interactive computerised system for developing student writing. Partly because of acknowledged

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<sup>14</sup> For details of three UK examples, see 'Teaching and Assessing Writing Skills' A project led by Dr A Jenkins at the University of Glasgow; The Production of University English led by Prof. K. Jones at Keele University ; Teaching language Skills using Computer Assisted Assessment led by Dr S. Rushton at University of Wales, Bangor, Available from <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/>

<sup>15</sup> The larger implications of e-learning are outside the scope of this thesis but see O'Neill, Singh and O'Donahue (2004) for a review of the topic.

problems with student motivation to use the original optional system, she has developed a three-pronged approach which uses 'optional', 'directed' and 'integrated' systems (Drew, 2004). This means that students can work entirely on their own and at their own pace; they can be introduced to the program in class and then complete work on their own, or they can be made to use the material as a constituent part of an assessed module.

This latter approach acknowledges that however efficient or user-friendly a computerised system appears to be, it is motivation that is the crucial factor in its success. Drew maintains that unless students see the need to improve their writing skills as a vital component of the course they are reluctant to devote time to it (2004). One of the roles of a lecturer must be to increase this motivation by openly and directly relating writing to academic success, but without judgement on past failures. What is emphasised here is that genuine commitment to start from where the student is, rather than where the lecturer thinks the student ought to be, is fundamental to the success of any writing development programme, or in fact any learning programme.

In recent times, and with restraints on resources, many Universities are not developing their own IT resources in student writing but are making use of such tools as social book-marking sites in order to give students access to resources. Rebecca Carrant, at Bradford University, has constructed the 'Develop Me!' website to give access to a wide variety of study skills and writing development material. She has made use of the 'del.icio.us' book-marking site to collect a range of resources from members of ALDinHE, including international contributors such as Victoria University in Melbourne, which are made freely available to students and colleagues. The Academic Skills Tutors at my own institution share resources with each other

and with students through the same technology.<sup>16</sup> This strategy appears a relatively pain free solution to providing good quality resources when and where the student needs them.

Unfortunately, the same problem recurs in terms of encouraging students to recognise the need for and the value of using the site. Christine Cattermole at the University Campus, Oldham, is currently (March 2008) conducting a small evaluation project using questionnaires and a focus group in order to explore how the resource is being received amongst students, but unless academic members of staff intensively encourage its use, it is difficult to envisage this being a major factor in developing student writing overall. The problem is not a lack of quality resources but a lack of motivation when writing skills come low on the list of student priorities.

A further US influenced strategy in writing development in the UK<sup>17</sup> is peer assisted learning.<sup>18</sup> In 1995, Keith Topping did an extensive review of the literature on this topic that was later published as part of the *Deliberations* forum (online) by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA). He gives a ten point typology of peer tutoring which illustrates the diverse formats that this can take. One of the key developments he points out is that this is not a case of ‘transmission from the more able and experienced ...to the less able’ (Topping, 1996) but that in the act of enabling a fellow student, the peer tutor is also developing learning. His conclusions pointed to ‘very substantial and persuasive evidence from the USA of impact on course grades, graduation, outcomes and drop-out rates’. The evidence based on UK research was far less substantial but still positive. In relation to peer involvement specifically in writing development, Topping reviews nine studies that show

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://del.icio.us/pathill>

<sup>17</sup> See report on HEA funded initiative conducted at St Mary’s College Belfast by Jonathan Worley and Dr Matthew Martin (2005). Available from <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/literacy/lit3.php>

<sup>18</sup> See National Conference on Peer Tutoring website for evidence of its extensive use throughout the US: <http://www.wc.iup.edu/ncptw/>

overall positive results in ‘writing competence’. There were also said to be improvements in ‘raised deadline attainment rates, reduced failure rates, and self report of improved writing in the tutors’ (Topping, 1996).

In contrast to this very positive endorsement, a note of caution about what is now an established practice in the US, peer response groups, is expressed in an article in the American *WAC Journal* (Fernsten, 2006). After documenting several instances of students who were intimidated and discouraged in their writing by engaging in peer response groups, she concludes with some very pertinent questions:

How often do we unwittingly silence difference as we move to maintain an established practice? Is there a contradictory tension between valuing difference and working towards the norms of academic writing? Are we simply setting students up to refine their prose to the academy’s satisfaction, or do we have a part to play in assisting the students’ understanding and appreciation of the value and power of their voices? If writing is a way to develop the confidence and habit of mind needed to participate more fully in the world, how can we safely and comfortably make response groups a part of that process? (p40)

These questions again underline the necessity to acknowledge the complex issues surrounding any strategy involved in developing writing. In answer to the first two questions I would say ‘Often’ and ‘Yes’. The opposition in the third question regarding ‘simply setting up students to refine their prose to the academy’s satisfaction or ... assisting the students’ understanding and appreciation of the value and power of the student voice’ is, in my view, a false dichotomy as the need is for both. In giving students an understanding of the value of their own voice we also need to set this in a realistic context where they understand the power that the socially dominant practice of Standard Written English has to demean that voice, and to provide options which give choice in engaging with that practice.

Devet *et al.*, in their chapter within *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education* (Ganobcsik Williams, 2006), clearly outline the peer assisted model from a US perspective which corroborates the positive findings expressed by Topping; this is followed by the view of three UK practitioners: Bishop, Blythman and Orr who have conducted research in one institution (University of the Arts, London). The American perspective, given by Writing Lab Director, Bonnie Devet, emphasises several advantages in using 'peer consultants'. These advantages centre on the absence of student/academic power relationships that are felt to hamper the emergent writers. Examples are given which show that peers can encourage writers to 'write, re-write and evaluate' whilst 'using terms the client would readily absorb'.

Devet maintains that:

Peer consultants, trained to create a non-threatening, neutral environment, welcome clients to use open, casual communication (Harris, 1998) so that clients feel free to place ideas on the table, to discuss them, to revise them, to reshape them. Nothing has to be polished or perfect. Less intimidation leads to more freedom to grow as a writer and thinker. (2006, p201)

The UK response, as mentioned briefly earlier, points out that writing support given by Study Support Lecturers provides a similar supportive environment that engenders 'meaningful collaborative relationships' (p210). They cite Nancy Grimm's work that, as mentioned earlier, radically challenges those involved in writing centres to be 'responsible for changing the cultural practices, the institutional conditions, the unconscious habits that contribute to cultural oppression' (Grimm, 1999, p108). They go on to discuss the danger in assuming that all peers have equal amounts of 'social capital'. Although they emphasise that it is overtly true that students and tutors do not share equal amounts of social capital, they point out that this does not necessarily mean that student peers do so. This again underlines the point that it is important not to define learning experiences by labels that engender assumptions of homogeneity. The myriad influences on each specific learning experience work against simple solutions and Blythman *et al.* rightly call for the need to develop 'appropriate

pedagogical approaches for writing development rather than focus on a particular model of staffing' (Devet *et al.*, 2006, p211). So although Topping's review, detailed earlier, gives a very positive view of peer assisted study, it may well be that any discussion, particularly one-to-one, which encourages a student to question, evaluate and rewrite their work in a non-threatening and supportive environment would give similar positive results, irrespective of who is assisting. One of the questions this also raises is why the teaching within the curriculum space might still be viewed as threatening or unsupportive where the published ethos of most higher education establishments is student-centred.

Another major strategy through which tutors aim to develop student writing is written feedback. In order to explore this, it is first necessary to place it in the context of general assessment strategies. David James (2000, pp151-164) gives a telling account of the student perspectives of assessment in higher education, showing how potently it can affect their approach and their self-belief. He then productively uses an approach based on the writings of Bourdieu to suggest that:

Staff and student practices maintain a situation in which a very specific set of differences between students are expressed in academic currency and are misrecognized as naturalized personal knowledge. (James, 2000, p164)

This is relevant to the use of Standard Written English as its 'surface' nature makes it even more prone to being misrecognised as a norm against which other practices are judged to be deviant. A detailed exploration of the intricate power relationships involved in assessment procedures are outside the scope of this thesis but it is important to acknowledge the tensions between the call for widening participation linked to a 'learning society' and assessment procedures which are still steeped in traditional, hierarchical, gatekeeping attitudes. Knight (2005) suggests that 'Assessment is a moral activity...What we choose to assess and how

shows what we value ' (p13) so it is important here to investigate what assessment strategies tell us about the value we place on Standard Written English.

Assessment is generally divided into two main strands: formative, which is aimed at improving performance, and summative, which contributes to the final award. As Knight and Yorke point out: 'There is an ever-present tension between the formative and the summative components' (2003, p211). Where summative assessment is given, it is usually related to criteria that justify a grade and this practice is in itself contentious. Assessment in higher education has nominally moved away from norm referencing which measures one student's performance against others, towards criterion referencing. The reason for the move has been to leave behind 'rather antiquated notions of "academic rigour" and "maintaining standards"' towards a system that gives 'a fairer and more accountable assessment scheme' (Dunn *et al.*, 2002, p1). Arguments in support of criterion referencing rest largely on improved transparency; this transparency is said to produce a system where students can see what they are being judged against, rather than being judged against each other.

Whilst supporting the positive elements of criterion-referenced assessment, Dunn *et al.* (2002, p8) give a clear account of the problems associated with the 'intensive level of negotiation required to formulate criteria and standards'. They suggest that 'academics find it hard to clarify and articulate assessment standards' and that they cling to a need for 'normal distribution' which results in 'a small percentage achieving low grades and a small percentage achieving high grades'(p8). This is reiterated by Atherton (2002, p2), who suggests that it is virtually impossible to find the right formula for criteria. Indeed, he maintains that what actually happens in many situations where criterion referenced assessment is used is 'norm-referencing by the back door', as institutions strive to show improved progression and

achievement and inevitably lower standards in order to do so. Whilst one of the main points of his argument, that a degree from a university at the bottom of the league table cannot be equivalent to one from the top, is unassailable, it is important to reiterate that the main purpose of mass higher education is not, as he appears to maintain, to find ‘the top10% in their year’ for the benefit of employers and recruiters, but to educate a greater percentage of the country’s young people to a higher level generally. In accepting that criterion referencing is demanding and needs to be rigorously controlled within its ‘disciplinary context’ (Dunn *et al.*, 2002, p1), it is still an improvement on the old elitist system which essentially served to provide the most able students with proof of their ability in order to help make use of their already considerable cultural capital.

In order to establish explicit criteria that can be used to assess student capabilities, there is a clear necessity to agree within each discipline the ‘kinds of values they expect to see embedded in their assessment tasks’ (Dunn *et al.*, 2002, p7). In many sets of criteria for writing at higher education level there will be some equivalent to the RLF’s call for students to ‘display a minimum standard of correct and effective written English’ (Thornton and Coppard, 2006, p45) but the question is how students can ascertain whether or not they have displayed that standard and if not how to proceed towards that goal. Peter Knight suggests that not only should students be given these criteria ‘from the first’ but they should ‘regularly use them, and practise applying them, especially through dummy assignments in which they grade anonymous samples of work from previous year groups (2000, p246). In many cases, however, students are simply given these criteria in writing and where they are made explicit to students they are often linked to learning outcomes. Extracts from one example of such learning outcomes are given here:

Upon successful completion of the module students should be able to demonstrate...  
Key and transferable skills



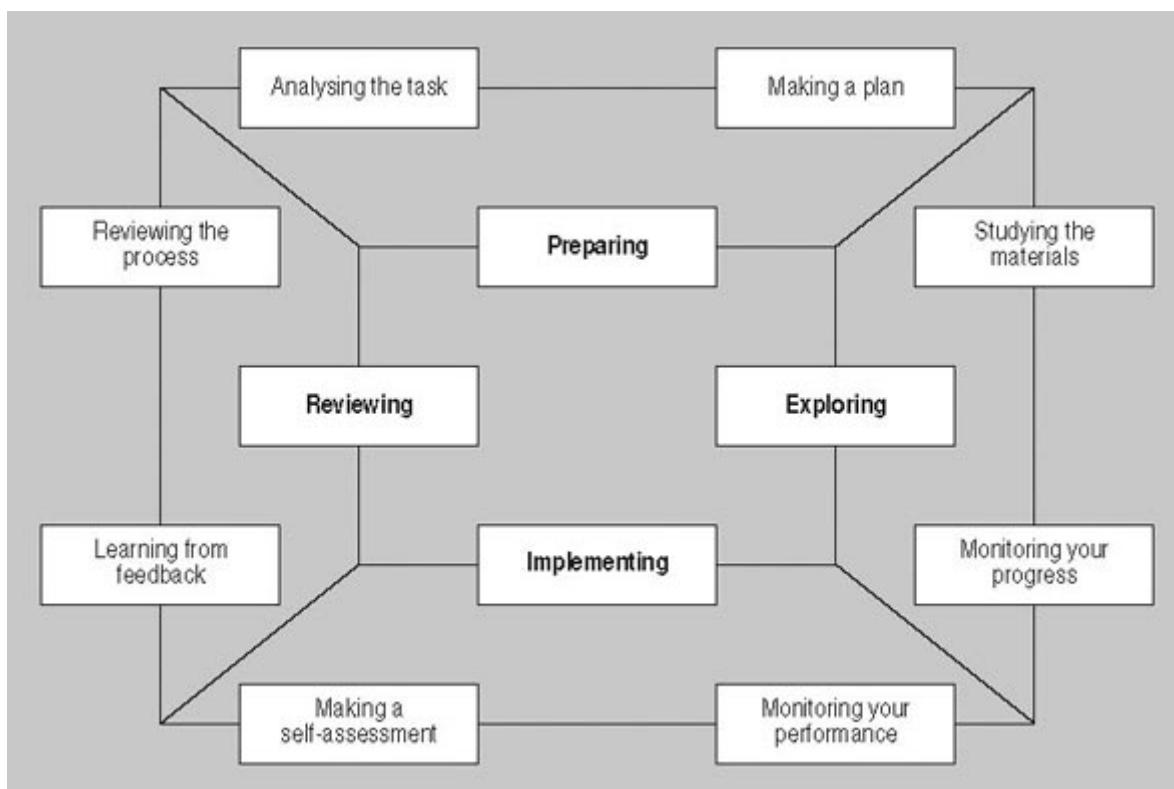
Advanced literacy and communication skills, including the ability to write in clear and accurate English, ...

Professional Practical Skills

The ability to discern how cultural norms and assumptions influence judgement...  
(University of Huddersfield, School of Music Humanities and Media, English Subject Area, Module Handbook: *City Narratives* 2006/7)

The interesting point here is whether or not these skills are specifically taught or whether they are simply meant to be imbibed through interaction and feedback. The efficacy of feedback has been debated earlier and a theoretical discussion follows, but the question asked here is whether criteria and learning outcomes relevant to features of Standard Written English are justified if the time, space and knowledge required to develop them are not provided. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is an ambivalence about the value we put on the need for Standard Written English as it is, perhaps automatically, included in the criteria but is often not specifically addressed and, even where it is, there appears to be an assumption that it is not only peripheral to the content, even in English and Media modules, but is also easily remedied and entirely the student's problem/fault.

If the features of Standard Written English are not specifically taught in higher education, despite forming part of the criteria, then the most obvious place to give students assistance in developing their writing is through feedback. As shown in the diagram below (Figure 6.1), feedback is seen as a vital component in the learning cycle where it helps to complete that cycle as part of the reviewing process. As such, it generates much debate and generally takes up a great deal of time and effort within the educational framework.



(Figure 6.1) The eight activities of learning how to learn (<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/> 2007)

The main issues relating to feedback are: when and how it is given; what its purpose is; how students use it and whether or not it is effective. The tensions between feedback as a learning tool and feedback which forms part of an institutional assessment procedure give rise to a great deal of discussion. In an investigation of student perception of assessment in higher education, a student quoted by David James, stated that feedback should come early enough “so that you can either get confident, or get help how to do it better” (2000, p152). This illustrates that positive feedback for competent students is important as well as that which helps students to develop where there are weaknesses. Higgins *et al.*, (2000) give the label of ‘conscientious consumer’ to the student and say that ‘Most students in [their] study link feedback to attaining better grades’ (p59) with 92% coming to university to gain qualifications. They counter this by saying that their student sample, whilst expecting feedback as their right also have intrinsic motivation and a large percentage (71%) maintain that they are at university because they enjoy learning (P, 59). This is important, as it would

seem obvious that this enjoyment is almost exclusively linked to degree content whereas feedback on writing style is often seen as a ‘necessary evil’. After exploring the general points relating to summative and formative feedback in higher education, this discussion will focus on the attitudes and perceptions which relegate feedback on writing to this position and which may work against any genuine progress.

David Nicol and Debra Macfarlane-Dick (2006, p2), in their insightful and progressive call for students to have ‘a proactive rather than a reactive role in generating and using feedback’, maintain that good feedback practice:

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006,p7).

Guidance on feedback from Sheffield Hallam University provided as part of their ‘Assessment for Learning Initiative’ suggests that feedback should constitute ‘“suggestions for change” i.e. feed forward, rather than merely critical comment’ (2006). Higgins *et al.* say that ‘at the very least, feedback does not realise its full potential to become an integral part of the learning process’ (2001, p270). The general consensus then is that feedback should be genuinely useful to the student no matter what other purpose it might serve in the assessment infrastructure. This leads to discussions on when student feedback should be given.

Arguments about the timing of feedback are often linked to its purpose and it has become common in UK higher education to label feedback as formative or summative. As mentioned earlier, summative feedback is given as part of a final assessment that contributes towards the

grade or mark. As it comes at the end of a piece of work, it does not give the student the opportunity to develop that particular piece of work but it may give insights into how subsequent work might be approached differently. One of the problems associated with modular degrees, however, is the students' perception that 'the topics studied had moved on' so 'that they did not use written feedback to improve their future work' (Glover and Brown, 2006, p2). Glover and Brown's research, using material from Sheffield Hallam and the Open University, suggests that students generally do not make good use of summative feedback, as once a piece of work is finished the motivation to go through feedback in detail and to act upon it is low.

Within my own data, as shown in Chapters Four and Five, there was a mixture of responses to written summative feedback, with some students admitting that they failed to act on it and other students adamant that they always act on it. Glover and Brown make the point that students did not always act on feedback even though they read it because they felt that the majority of the feedback they received was not perceived as relevant to future work: 'There was *feedback*, but no *feedforward*' (2006, p2,). However, this should not be the case with regard to the features of Standard Written English; the feedback should be relevant throughout the student experience as whether it is formative or summative it is still relevant to future student work and beyond.

As indicated earlier, the main problem in using summative feedback to develop writing appears to rest in Standard Written English not being seen as a priority. However, in Glover & Brown's research, they suggest that 'much feedback comment focuses on incorrect use of English and grammar. They point out that 'An excessive quantity, approximately 20%, of

feedback to SHU students was concerned with such minutiae of grammar and spelling' (2006, p7). This leads them to the recommendation that feedback should:

- Focus on main weaknesses, and explain these in depth: and
- Worry less about jots and tittles. (2006:14)

The phrase 'jots and tittles' could well be equated to the 'surface features' discussed earlier. One of the most significant points here is that Glover and Brown are dealing with Science students. They regard spelling, punctuation and grammar as 'jots and tittles' because these are not discipline specific. My contention is that these features *are* discipline specific for English and Media students, but, as shown in Chapters Four and Five of the current research, many students dismiss transcriptional features of writing as insignificant, and quite often there is little reference to writing style in summative feedback after the first year (see Chapter Five), which compounds this view. That feedback needs to be developmental and relevant to the discipline is a common theme in current research, but the problem in this case is an agreement on what is relevant and important. I would argue that even a scientist would have a greater chance of success with a good command of Standard Written English, but a journalist or teacher will certainly struggle for credibility without it. That this kind of correction might not work is a different issue from whether or not the differences in convention are important.

The motivation needed to make summative feedback have an effect on student writing may well be linked to assessment. As Brown and Knight maintain 'assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time, and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates' (1994). This relates back to the point that assessment is linked to what we value. It has been shown that the academic and employment communities do value Standard Written English but although this is often reflected in the marking criteria, it is not explicitly reflected in assessment or teaching in a way which acknowledges its

significance. This can allow students to regard it as unimportant and unworthy of time and attention. This does not call for a simplistic solution such as attaching marks to these elements of writing, as research shows that giving marks can also have negative affects on learning (see discussion in Glover and Brown, 2006, p12), but it does call for a rethink about strategies for developing competent writers.

Formative feedback is not related to grading and is meant to give ‘opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance’ (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p13).

Higgins *et al.* suggest that in order to do this, feedback must be ‘timely [... and] comments should be returned to students as soon as possible after the assignment is submitted’ (2000, p62). Knight (2000, pp237-251) makes an excellent case for a ‘programme-wide approach to assessment’ that emphasises the value of ‘low stakes’ assessment that does not form part of the final mark but contributes to learning through meaningful feedback. Peer and self-assessment are also seen as important components of this type of assessment, as long as clear criteria are made available to students (Knight, 2000, p246). The plea for more and better formative assessment has grown in recent years and students who do ‘AS’ levels are now used to being able to build towards their final grade through formative feedback.

Many higher education institutions have recognised this need for formative assessment. For example, following a review of assessment procedures at the University of Huddersfield in 2001, it was decided that: ‘Modules of 20 credit points or greater will normally include an element of formative assessment. This is a requirement at Foundation level’. The decision on what formative assessment might entail, however, is left to individual module leaders to decide. Formative work can take the form of annotated bibliographies or oral presentations so that there is still little feedback on actual writing. The links are strong here between Knight’s

call for programme wide assessment which is ‘embedded in the learning activities’ (2000, p246) and Ganobcsik-Williams’ call for a ‘whole institution approach’ where the ‘teaching of writing [must] be embedded and made part of an institution’s culture’ (2004, p39). Leaving the decision on what should be included in formative assessment to individuals allows for a continuation of the treatment of writing as a peripheral issue rather than one that is at the core of our educational system.

As mentioned earlier, Black and Wiliam (2001) illustrate how formative feedback improves student work, but they also emphasise the need for major curriculum changes and targeted staff development in schools in order for it to be wholly successful. In higher education, the obstacles are magnified, as the mantra of the independent or autonomous learner can be used as justification for not providing the specific help necessary for the student to progress. In this environment, an assumption that any student entering higher education should already have the necessary writing skills has made it more difficult to acknowledge that writing skills need to be taught to many students, but particularly to students where writing is expected to be a major part of their future employment. In line with Black and Wiliam (2001), I would suggest that students can only really become autonomous learners when they have:

- a) a clear idea of what they are meant to achieve,
- b) know where they are at present
- c) are shown how they can proceed to close the gap.

Criteria that call for Standard Written English are meant to deal with the first part of this, although it has been shown in Chapter Four that these requirements are not always clear to students. Feedback should cater for the second part and go someway towards the third but the problems associated with this have been illustrated in Chapters Four and Five and are further explored here.

In terms of higher education feedback on writing style, it has been shown in Chapter Five that there is inconsistency. There is a widespread perception that student feedback often concentrates on ‘surface features’ and that this is detrimental to the development of academic writing in the disciplines. Glover and Brown’s previously mentioned reference to ‘jots and tittles’ is symptomatic of this (2006, p14). Much of the scholarship cited earlier (Hinkle, 1997; King, 2000; Higgins *et al.*, 2000) has contended that lecturers already put too much emphasis on writing or ‘surface features’ and that they should concentrate more on content:

It should be noted that written responses to writing which focus on compositional features generally lead to improvements on transcriptional features...it is evident that emphasis on transcriptional issues over compositional issues may be a hindrance in supporting the production of good writing. (Hinkle, 1997, p165)

Unfortunately the evidence does not always bear out the former contention and the latter begs the question of what constitutes good writing. As was shown in Chapter Five, Students 4 and 13 came to University with the belief that their writing was of a good standard because it had met the required standards at their sixth form colleges. Student 4 wrote in her early writing log (4b, Appendix 2) that she did not ‘have any problems with grammar and spelling’ although the data shows that she had at least an average of five grammar errors per thousand words and a punctuation error rate of twice that. As documented earlier, Student 13 was confident that her writing style was fine and was not worried about it because she knew that the content was good. The implication is that the focus had been on content in their former educational experience but this appears to have done very little to develop their understanding of what constitutes a sentence. As also discussed earlier, contrary to the belief that feedback often concentrates on features of Standard Written English, some students were given very little feedback on writing style, and even where they were made well aware that their writing was not of the required standard, there was little for the student to grasp in terms of development (see Chapter Five for examples). With regard to Standard Written English the



motivation needed for the student to learn the necessary information is often not provided as the perception that this is a peripheral issue compared to content is shared by students and tutors alike.

In summing up their ideas on feedback, Higgins *et al.*(2000) suggest that ‘it is not usually sufficient to simply tell a student where they have gone wrong – misconceptions need to be *explained* and improvements for further work suggested’ (p62). However, they go on to discount features of Standard Written English from this advice by continuing ‘Nor should comments focus solely on spelling and grammar. Fostering “higher order” critical skills may have more long-term educational value’ (p62). I would suggest that alerting students to the importance of conventional spelling and grammar in a literate society is one way of developing their critical skills in a way that will be practically as well as academically beneficial.

Even when separate modules are, in theory, devoted to writing development, the feedback will often still focus on the content of what is written with only vague comments such as ‘Your writing needs to be tightened up but this is something which comes with practice’ (11.1.1); ‘A little too subjective in approach’ and ‘Your expression is not always clear’ (3.1.1) for the student to work with. This type of feedback points out that there is a gap but does little to show them how they can proceed to close it. The contention that simply practising writing will enable this change to occur has been illustrated to be false in the present data where students still make the same errors after three years of higher education.

Another important point in the attitudes towards giving feedback on writing is that, as illustrated earlier, students take criticism of their writing personally. This stems largely from

the pejorative and prescriptive attitudes towards language variation already discussed. There is a clear necessity then to remove the remedial tag from any discussion on writing development by acknowledging explicitly that different literacies do exist but that as Standard Written English is one of the chief markers of academic and educated literacy, it is an important part of what English and Media graduates need to acquire. Without a raised awareness on the part of student and tutor about the complexity involved in developing writing style and its significance as cultural capital it is difficult to see how the necessary motivation for change will occur.

Formative feedback appears to be one place where this awareness can be encouraged but only if there is space for genuine development rather than simply criticism. The relationship between feedback and assessment is crucial in allowing this space to develop. There is still tension between priorities of content and form to contend with, and attitudes towards the importance of following convention need to be changed. The overriding perception that features of Standard Written English can be ignored or can be easily acquired works towards maintaining discrimination. The strong motivational factor in learning means that if students are allowed to ignore problems with features of Standard Written English and to succeed despite such problems, then they might find it difficult to focus their energy in that direction.

The fact that lecturers comment on problems with 'surface features' illustrates how distracting they can be but does little to encourage the concentration necessary to bring about change.

Elbow (1998) suggests quite clearly in his advice to developing writers that:

The only way to make grammar disappear - to keep the surface of your writing from distracting readers away from your message - is to make it right (p167).

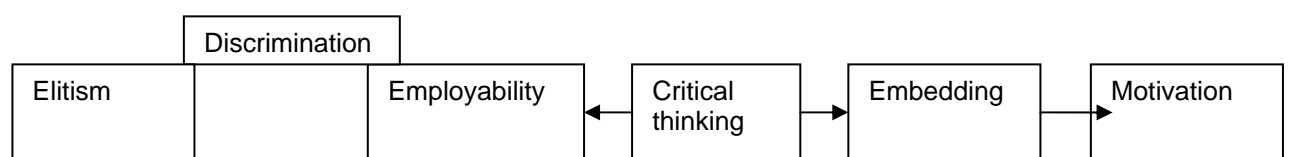
It is this message that needs to be emphasised in formative feedback but it needs to be done in tandem with a genuine commitment for change so that there is a dialogue that acknowledges the consequences of non-conformity and offers time and strategies for learning both in and out of the curriculum space. Research encouraging formative assessment acknowledges the complexity and diversity of student reactions to feedback (Yorke, 2003, p488) and this brings to the fore the major obstacles in establishing strategies for the development of student writing in relation to Standard Written English: each individual student is subject to myriad variables in developing a schema for writing; it is extremely difficult to change an established schema; competing priorities mean that motivation is often absent and this makes it hard to ascertain when, where or how learning may occur. Add to this the resistance, conscious or unconscious, on the part of lecturers in higher education to teach these 'basic' skills and it is possible to see how students can graduate without attaining the level of proficiency that might be expected in members of an educated discourse community whose competent use of language is crucial to their credibility.

All of the strategies discussed above have positive elements that aim to develop student writing. The emphasis for many researchers has clearly moved towards acknowledging the student voice and recognising the negativity of a 'student deficit' approach that assumes that writing is a set of easily transferable skills. In expounding the need for academics to accept responsibility for inducting students into the conventions of higher education and doing so explicitly in a way which is relevant to each particular discipline, these researchers have introduced a necessary breach in the gates that surround the academic elite. However, it is also imperative to be realistic about one of the goals which many students set with regard to higher education: it is a means to an end, and that end is employment. As already established, one of the key expectations of employers, in particular for English and Media graduates, is

good written communication skills and this includes being able to produce writing that illustrates the features of Standard Written English. Whatever strategies are employed to develop student writing, whether they are embedded or bolt on, group or one-to-one, peer or tutor assisted, paper or IT based, it has already been established that it is crucial that those strategies include the space to acknowledge and make explicit the power relationships involved in the social functions of writing. Whilst making clear that the conventions of Standard Written English are simply that, and are not markers of intelligence, they must also acknowledge the importance of being able to acquire those fundamental tools of formal written English for the production of writing which is not only acceptable for its purpose but is also an asset to the writer. In raising this awareness they also need to acknowledge the complex and difficult nature of changing adult writing habits and remove any remedial stigma attached to this transition towards dominant writing practices.

## 7. Conclusions

This thesis centres on one particular aspect of writing: the need to be able to conform to the conventions of Standard Written English in an educated discourse community. As with any aspect of language, this cannot be viewed in isolation but needs to take account of the ideological system in which it exists. Nancy Grimm, in her work on writing centres, makes use of Stuart Hall's conceptual metaphor of 'an articulated lorry, a truck linked to other vehicles' which gives 'not only the clear, well defined expression of a position, but also the productive linkage of that position with other concerns' (Grimm, 1999, p93). Rather than using this concept to link areas of personal knowledge, as Grimm does (1999, p94), I would like to use it to draw together the different aspects of writing in higher education and society discussed throughout this thesis. My vehicle has five containers: elitism, employability, critical thinking, embedding and motivation. Making these links explicit should illustrate the need for a major rethink of the curriculum in any higher education course for which good written communication skills are a central goal:



**(Figure 7.1: Aspects of Standard Written English acquisition in higher education)**

The first two containers are linked through discrimination; higher education, despite widening participation, still works on an elitist, gatekeeping basis. As well as institutional hierarchy and a meaningless division between academic and vocational, another significant tool employed to maintain this elitism is discrimination against

those who arrive at adulthood without one of the major indications of a ‘good’ education: the competent use of Standard Written English. It has also been argued that this element of cultural capital is misrecognised as the norm rather than as a construct of society, and so allows for discrimination not only in higher education but also in society generally; a graduate’s employment prospects can be severely hampered when they are ‘culled’ in the first round because their written applications show ‘errors’ against the prevalent conventions. Many academics would suggest that widening participation has resulted in students who are intellectually less able than previously being admitted into higher education (Avery and Brown 2001, p172) and this is not disputed here. The difference is that I would see this as a positive move aimed at realising the potential of more young people, whereas those who serve to maintain the elitist nature of higher education would see this as a ‘dumbing down’ of the traditional academic community. The notion that a higher education system that caters for developing the employability of undergraduates must necessarily lose its role in fostering critical thinking is strongly contested.

One of the significant ways in which academics and employers perpetuate elitism is by regarding any difference from their notion of Standard Written English as deviance. Any difference is perceived as ‘error’ and the writer’s inability to conform is taken as evidence of, at best, carelessness, and at worst, intellectual inferiority. As Cameron’s confession<sup>1</sup> illustrates, it is virtually impossible to ignore these differences and the perception of error and subsequent judgement are made instantaneously, despite the reader’s best intentions. It is important to reiterate here that rather than eliminating elitist practices, widening participation has actually increased the need to

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<sup>1</sup> 1995:14 Quoted earlier in Chapter 2

use this type of discrimination. Where a tutor is faced with a large set of assignments in which the content knowledge is roughly on a par, the use of non-standard features of English serves as a useful measure of differentiation, and this is the case whether the assessment system relies on norm or criterion referencing. Where an employer is faced with a raft of candidates who appear equally qualified, the quality of the written application can be crucial in the decision to interview. The perceptions of carelessness and intellectual inferiority, mentioned above, are rooted in the reader's own writing practices; the power they hold to make any judgement as academics or as employers often comes, at least in part, from their own ability and competence in writing. This normalisation of individual experience makes it difficult to recognise difference as anything other than an indication of inferiority.

I would further suggest that a reliance on the ability to produce formal Standard Written English as a criterion by which intellectual ability is judged is at best lazy, and at worst dishonest. Such a criterion not only continues to privilege white, middle class students, it also privileges those who have an innate facility in written communication. 'Common sense' might argue that this is as it should be, and that only those who have this talent should be admitted to this particular branch of the academic elite. In that case, the question of the purpose of higher education qualifications in English and Media is raised again. Is the purpose to teach already able students discipline content about English Literature, English Language, Creative Writing and Media which they can learn and regurgitate in a conventional manner, or is it to develop knowledge about the use of written language in all students which will enable them to develop their own writing through critical self-reflection so that they will be best placed to determine what they need to succeed in their future goals? If the

former, then students who enter higher education with a solid command of Standard Written English will inevitably do better than a student without it who has equal intellectual ability. If the latter, then this critical reflection needs to be at the centre of the curriculum so that writing is recognised as the medium through which their discipline expertise is judged and the importance of competence in the fundamental tools of writing is emphasised. That this should be done through positive, proactive teaching using models of successful writing rather than through a remedial perspective is one of the central points of this thesis.

It may be comforting for egalitarians to assume that those students who graduate from English and Media Courses without following the conventions of Standard Written English might be at the forefront of a revolution, or as Wray puts it ‘the spearhead of an escape from the conservatism of the overeducated few’ (1994, p105). I would argue that in order to successfully challenge elements of conservatism and the power that resides within it, the rebel would need to do so from a position of awareness, knowledge and competence that allows genuine choices to be made. Critical thinking is the central container on which this thesis pivots. It links the present situation of an elite that have the power to discriminate in education and employment, to strategies that can empower and motivate writers to change not only their own writing practices but the system itself. As John Biggs (1996) puts it ‘There is no point in blaming the student for cynically cutting corners: his approach is an adaptive one for the system in which it evolved’ (p13). I have argued that the dichotomy between higher education that serves to develop critical thinkers and higher education that serves to produce employable graduates is a false one. Higher education without critical thinking in any discipline is not worth its name. There are strong pedagogical arguments made for



minimising the importance of the ‘surface features’ of spelling, punctuation and grammar and concentrating on discipline content or the ‘higher-order matters of reasoning, argumentation, and evidence’ (Grimm, 1999, p105). However, I would suggest that these surface features are just as important, as they are inevitably used as a judgement of capability in relation to other elements of writing. The attitude towards these surface features and the strategies that are used to approach them are failing a whole generation of undergraduates who graduate in a discipline in which they can be judged and found wanting instantly on the first written contact.

Recent scholarship has acknowledged that a remedial position towards different writing practices is counterproductive, and strategies have been developed which centre on acknowledging different literacies and making those differences explicit. Much of this scholarship focuses on the higher-order writing skills mentioned above; the necessary call for a shift in perspective towards valuing student contributions and not making assumptions about knowledge, but engaging in collaborative and negotiated teaching and learning has been a positive step towards a more inclusive approach. However, as argued earlier, if surface features are sidelined or ignored, discrimination is perpetuated. Space needs to be made within the curriculum for dealing positively with all aspects of the writing process. Peer mentoring, computer based learning and other strategies outlined in this thesis will work for some students in some instances but as Ganobcsik-Williams (2004) points out, a multi-faceted and whole institute approach is vital in developing writing. In developing this approach, the question raised is whether academics are only interested in ‘developing’ a percentage of student writers to an acceptable level for themselves and employers in order to preserve the status quo and uphold the boundaries of their ‘educated

discourse community', or whether the aim is to produce informed and competent writers who might challenge and change the system which perpetuates the dominant power relationships and which preserves elitism and discrimination.

If there were any platform for changing this status quo, it would seem to be in curriculum areas where writing is the main focus. The student data used here shows that undergraduates can discuss elements of written language without that level of critical thinking that engages them in self-reflection and without experiencing genuine learning by which their own writing practices are changed. Students whose writing does not meet the required 'standard' are often pointed towards remedial help or given feedback which tells them something is wrong but which gives little guidance on how to put it right. Where some guidance is attempted, the motivation to prioritise this learning is often lacking in the student. Lecturers in English and Media Studies have expertise in writing. The majority, if not all, of these writers will be competent users of Standard Written English, but they do not appear to be able to pass on this expertise. The use of formal Standard Written English is seen to be important and is set in the criteria of higher education and so forms part of the assessment. In order for genuine learning to take place 'It is fundamental for teachers and students to grow in a community of practice where nothing in the assessment process is hidden and all hurdles are understood clearly and explicitly' (Elwood and Knenowski, 2002, p5). The hurdle of Standard Written English is often treated as a minor stumbling block when it could be a major obstacle to gaining relevant employment. The question needs to be asked again: if English and Media students do not enter higher education with this competence, where and how should they gain it? If it is by osmosis, or by independent study, the onus is firmly on the student. However, it has been shown that

lack of knowledge, lack of awareness, lack of consistency in institutional practices, alongside other competing priorities of students and tutors make this an extremely difficult task. This acknowledgement leads us to the two remaining containers in our lorry: embedding and motivation. It is by attaching these two containers that the pivotal role of critical thinking will be explained.

The creation of writing centres has been suggested as one answer to the ‘problem’ of student writing, firstly in America and latterly in the UK. Nancy Grimm’s powerful arguments, detailed earlier, on the need for these centres to lose their ‘innocence’ and acknowledge that they are often instrumental in ‘condon[ing] discrimination’ (1999, p105) are important in that they bring to the fore the need to acknowledge, and to ‘understand, to articulate, and to interpret’ differences, rather than simply to eliminate them (p 88). David Russell (1999) argues that long American experience suggests that writing should not be separated out but that writing issues should be raised within the curriculum. The role of the writing centre in providing in-depth training across the university to enable all tutors of any discipline to encourage writing development has been eloquently argued by Ganobcsik-Williams, but it is important to note that this thesis centres on expert writers teaching in English or Media. The production of writing within acceptable boundaries is argued to be a part of the discipline content, yet any perceived ‘errors’ in the ‘fundamentals of literacy’ (Wall, 2006, pxi), spelling, punctuation and grammar, are relegated to the level of ‘surface features’ and are seen as a problem that a student has to face alone. Only a radical shift in responsibility from the student to the tutor and institution will address this.

Strategies such as the Speak-Write Project, introduced by Anglia University, move towards raising student awareness of the power of writing, and the materials they have produced use a combination of literature analysis and writing practice to develop ‘the acquisition of advanced written and oral communication skills amongst undergraduates studying English’ (Bryan, 2002). This is a positive move in making the appreciation of writing skills a core issue, but it is important that this acquisition is not concentrated solely in one module, which students might easily see as self-contained and not transferable. The idea of learning how to control and manipulate the written word so that it not only conveys particular content through making meaning is essential, but it also needs to be acknowledged that writing needs to convey the necessary authority associated with the cultural capital that is Standard Written English. In any course with writing as a core component these issues need to be an integral part of the curriculum. This would necessitate training that would encourage tutors not simply to recognise and point out differences between some student writing and their own but also to question and to stimulate debate as to why particular practices deserve the prestige that they enjoy. It is acknowledged that the change in attitude would not be an easy one, as for many tutors it would mean an acknowledgement that the system that they came through and that they are working in is not a fair, equitable and unchanging one. They may need to acknowledge a system that privileges them not because they are intrinsically more intelligent or more capable but because they have been fortunate enough to acquire those elements of cultural capital that have enabled them to succeed in a discourse community which relies on a gatekeeping philosophy.

This does not mean that all students should simply be given an historical account of how Standard English emerged as the dominant dialect, although that could be useful, but that within their undergraduate experience students engage with models of writing that illuminate the results of adherence to and the breaking of rules of convention within a forum of open discussion and not of censure. There needs to be space to debate these models of language within a supportive and non-judgemental context where students can acknowledge difference not as a focus for remediation but as an intellectual puzzle: What does punctuation do in this piece of writing? How does it work? What are the rules? Why does this American writer use it this way and the English writer another way? Why does this poet ignore the rules? Why and how do journalists use punctuation differently from academics? What difference does it make? What is expected of me here? Why do I write like this? What are the possible consequences? Do I want to change it? What would I need to do in order to change it?

By making this a part of the curriculum and by engaging students of all levels in open debate on difference, there is a possibility that the motivation for change would be increased. The debate would not need to be engaged with specifically in every module but it is important to recognise that lack of consistency in the undergraduate experience is one of the major causes of confusion (Graal, 2001) and it is vital that students are given a coherent message. This does not mean that all tutors have to agree but that any differences in attitude are open and acknowledged rather than hidden and ignored. Critical thinking can only be encouraged in students if tutors are also thinking critically, not only on their specialist area but also on the whole process in which they are engaged with students. This strategy may well necessitate the removal of some traditional discipline content but the contention here is that any

resulting changes would constitute engagement with real writing in the real world that has real prejudices.

Writing should be one of the main areas of expertise for any graduate in English or Media, and it is impossible to produce acceptable formal writing without a command of the fundamental features of spelling, punctuation and grammar. The complex nature of developing adult writing should be acknowledged and dealt with in the curriculum rather than being ignored, blamed on the student or relegated to add-on status. The RLF stance that students should only be allowed into higher education should they have a minimum standard of formal written English would exclude a large number of students who are capable of critical thought and who would benefit from continued learning. Indeed, it is the intellectually able student who finds it difficult to conform who could be that ‘spearhead’ that is needed to challenge the dominant position. Grimm suggests that:

Relentless reflection on how we know what we know and why we assume what we assume creates conditions for social transformation because it weakens the confidence derived from naturalizing the ways of the dominant group. (1999, p109)

This thesis contends that at present making writing ‘invisible’ is the only viable way to get heard and accepted, but if the academic community were willing to open up honest debate and reflection on the present system then it might be possible to visualise a more equal society in which potential is not lost because the reader has discounted the writer based on paradoxically named ‘surface features’ which go deep into the heart of a ‘carefully graded society’.

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Making writing invisible: A Study into the  
Complexities of Standard Written English  
Acquisition in Higher Education

Patricia Ann Hill

A thesis submitted to the University of  
Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the  
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Volume II of II

## Appendix 1: Research into Student Writing – Pilot Study Data

### Student Profiles 1-25 Media Studies

<b>Assignment 1</b>	<b>6 x 250 word logs</b>
<b>Assignment 2</b>	<b>1500 word essay</b>
<b>Assignment 3</b>	<b>500 word review of television documentary</b>

#### Student 1

Spelling	0	0	0
Punctuation	2	2	1
Grammar	1	0	0
Organisation	0	1	0
Style	2	2	4
Content	0	0	3
Typo	1	0	0
Total	5	5	8

Comments: Very competent writer and thinker; excellent essay but ends abruptly; word repetition/misunderstood style requirements in documentary.

#### Student 2

Spelling	5	2	0
Punctuation	8	8	5
Grammar	4	4	1
Organisation	1	2	0
Style	4	7	4
Content	0	2	2
Typo	1	1	1
Total	23	26	13

Comments: Takes trouble with presentation; typed work much better, uses spell check; content simplistic; colloquial language; some repetition.

#### Student 3

Spelling	1	1	0
Punctuation	6	8	3
Grammar	1	1	0
Organisation	0	1	0
Style	1	1	4
Content	1	1	0
Typo	2	0	1
Total	11	12	10

Comments: Good thinker but careless; solid, thoughtful writing; tends towards a rather pompous style in an effort to be academic.

#### Student 4

Spelling	5	3	4
Punctuation	9	13	7
Grammar	3	1	0
Organisation	1	2	1

Style	1	3	8
Content	0	1	3
Typo	0	0	2
Total	17	23	25

Comments: Tries hard but struggles; non-standard features; lacks objectivity; simplistic content; rather stilted style.

#### **Student 5**

Spelling	2	0	1
Punctuation	11	6	4
Grammar	2	0	1
Organisation	0	4	0
Style	3	4	5
Content	1	2	2
Typo	1	0	1
Total	20	14	14

Comments: Tries for a more sophisticated style than able but solid content; too wordy; too many quotes/long paragraphs; wrong style for review but interesting.

#### **Student 6**

Spelling	1	3	0
Punctuation	2	1	3
Grammar	3	1	0
Organisation	0	2	1
Style	5	4	3
Content	1	2	4
Typo	1	0	0
Total	13	11	11

Comments: Tries hard but has non-standard features; handwritten and chatty; too personal; superficial content

#### **Student 7**

Spelling	0	0	0
Punctuation	0	0	3
Grammar	2	0	0
Organisation	0	1	0
Style	2	2	2
Content	1	1	4
Typo	2	0	0
Total	6	4	9

Comments: mature style; errors do not detract from content; well written but heavy on quotes; lively and interesting but slightly repetitive.

#### **Student 8**

Spelling	14	4	1
Punctuation	2	3	2
Grammar	3	3	2
Organisation	4	1	1
Style	1	2	7
Content	2	3	4

Typo	2	2	2
Total	28	18	19

Comments: struggles with expression; improved with spell check; some irrelevant material; tries too hard; uses inappropriate vocabulary.

**Student 9**

Spelling	n	0	0
Punctuation	n	1	4
Grammar	n	0	0
Organisation	n	1	0
Style	n	2	2
Content	n	1	1
Typo	n	0	1
Total	n	5	8

Comments: well written and succinct; entertaining and lively writing.

**Student 10**

Spelling	4	2	2
Punctuation	22	19	13
Grammar	12	7	6
Organisation	5	4	0
Style	6	10	4
Content	1	3	0
Typo	7	5	4
Total	57	50	29

Comments: Thinking good but writing a problem; now uses spell check. Misuses capital letters; awkward sentence structure; interesting ideas but hard to read; prepositions.

**Student 11**

Spelling	1	n	0
Punctuation	7	n	7
Grammar	3	n	0
Organisation	3	n	0
Style	4	n	2
Content	2	n	0
Typo	4	n	2
Total	24	n	11

Comment: repetitious; poor expression in places; apostrophes.

**Student 12**

Spelling	6	1	n
Punctuation	20	9	n
Grammar	12	5	n
Organisation	4	3	n
Style	6	2	n
Content	9	2	n
Typo	9	12	n
Total	66	34	n



Comments: not sure capable of this level; writing and thinking poor; words added or missing; proof reading poor.

### Student 13

Spelling	5	2	3
Punctuation	5	8	1
Grammar	2	1	0
Organisation	1	4	1
Style	4	2	4
Content	6	4	3
Typo	3	2	1
Total	26	23	13

Comments: muddled thinking; unacademic in tone; careless.

### Student 14

Spelling	1	n	n
Punctuation	6	n	n
Grammar	2	n	n
Organisation	2	n	n
Style	6	n	n
Content	6	n	n
Typo	6	n	n
Total	29	n	n

Comments: rushed and careless; colloquial style; non-submission.

### Student 15

Spelling	4	2	0
Punctuation	10	8	5
Grammar	1	7	4
Organisation	2	0	0
Style	10	1	1
Content	2	0	1
Typo	4	3	0
Total	33	21	11

Comments: verbose but thoughtful; good content but has trouble with prepositions; sub/verb agreement

### Student 16

Spelling	2	0	n
Punctuation	9	4	n
Grammar	2	0	n
Organisation	0	0	n
Style	6	5	n
Content	2	0	n
Typo	1	0	n
Total	22	9	n

Comment: verbose, too personal; thoughtful but colloquial language.

**Student 17**

Spelling	n	0	3
Punctuation	n	8	7
Grammar	n	2	1
Organisation	n	2	0
Style	n	4	2
Content	n	2	4
Typo	n	2	2
Total	n	20	19

Comments: colloquial style but thoughtful; lively writing; apostrophes.

**Student 18**

Spelling	2	1	1
Punctuation	3	3	2
Grammar	3	0	0
Organisation	1	1	0
Style	1	1	2
Content	3	1	7
Typo	2	0	1
Total	15	7	13

Comments: capable but variable; time management; well written but slightly repetitive; naïve, lacks understanding.

**Student 19**

Spelling	n	3	2
Punctuation	n	9	3
Grammar	n	5	3
Organisation	n	4	1
Style	n	4	6
Content	n	2	3
Typo	n	1	0
Total	n	26	18

Comments: prepositions –of/have; struggles with understanding and language use.

**Student 20**

Spelling	2	0	1
Punctuation	3	9	7
Grammar	1	0	1
Organisation	0	2	1
Style	0	3	3
Content	2	1	1
Typo	0	2	2
Total	8	17	16

Comments: some good writing but careless; apostrophes/commas.

**Student 21**

Spelling	n	3	3
Punctuation	n	6	6
Grammar	n	7	1
Organisation	n	3	0

Style	n	8	7
Content	n	2	4
Typo	n	2	1
Total	n	31	22

Comments: tries hard; colloquial; lacks understanding; struggles with expression.

### Student 22

Spelling	3	2	0
Punctuation	26	4	9
Grammar	8	4	3
Organisation	1	2	1
Style	10	3	3
Content	4	1	2
Typo	5	1	1
Total	57	17	19

Comments: non-academic in style; sentence structure; page missing count probably higher; tries hard; apostrophes/capitals

### Student 23

Spelling	n	0	1
Punctuation	n	5	3
Grammar	n	1	0
Organisation	n	1	1
Style	n	3	6
Content	n	5	2
Typo	n	1	0
Total	n	16	13

Comments: some irrelevant material; subjective and disjointed.

### Student 24

Spelling	3	0	n
Punctuation	10	5	n
Grammar	4	3	n
Organisation	0	1	0
Style	5	2	0
Content	1	0	n
Typo	4	0	n
Total	27	11	n

### Student 25

Spelling	n	0	0
Punctuation	n	6	1
Grammar	n	0	1
Organisation	n	0	1
Style	n	4	1
Content	n	3	1
Typo	n	4	0
Total	n	17	5

Comments: Capable but seems careless; well written but abrupt ending.

## Student Profiles 26-40 English/Media

Assignment 1 150 words-short handwritten analysis in class

Assignment 2 1500 word essay

Assignment 3 1500 word autobiographical extract

### Student 26

Spelling	1	7	2
Punctuation	2	5	8
Grammar	0	1	1
Organisation	1	0	1
Style	1	2	9
Content	1	2	4
Typo	0	0	1
Total	6	17	26

Comments: thoughtful but unwieldy sentences; handwritten; no refs/plagiarism; entertaining but clichéd.

### Student 27

Spelling	1	7	1
Punctuation	3	19	16
Grammar	3	5	3
Organisation	2	3	1
Style	2	7	4
Content	0	4	0
Typo	0	0	1
Total	11	45	26

Comments: sensible but rambling; immature; confused sentences; some powerful content; erratic punctuation.

### Student 28

Spelling	0	2	2
Punctuation	1	8	5
Grammar	0	2	0
Organisation	1	1	0
Style	2	4	6
Content	1	4	6
Typo	0	4	0
Total	6	21	20

Comments: sophisticated argument; competent but careless; potential but lacks objectivity.

### Student 29

Spelling	0	1	1
Punctuation	2	8	5
Grammar	0	2	0
Organisation	1	1	0
Style	2	9	6
Content	1	4	2
Typo	0	1	2

Total 6 26 16

Comments: repetitive but good points; colloquial and naïve in places; clichéd.

**Student 30**

Spelling	2	1	3
Punctuation	1	6	2
Grammar	1	2	2
Organisation	1	1	0
Style	1	4	4
Content	2	4	3
Typo	0	0	3
Total	8	17	17

Comments: A little confused; unacademic tone; over-written.

**Student 31**

Spelling	0	3	1
Punctuation	0	18	4
Grammar	1	3	1
Organisation	2	2	0
Style	1	2	1
Content	2	2	0
Typo	0	3	1
Total	6	33	8

Comments: good points but lacks organisation; apostrophes; some strong writing.

**Student 32**

Spelling	1	1	1
Punctuation	3	2	3
Grammar	1	4	3
Organisation	0	2	0
Style	2	4	5
Content	1	1	1
Typo	0	2	0
Total	8	16	13

Comments: solid points but repetition; promising but careless; some odd vocabulary.

**Student 33**

Spelling	1	0	2
Punctuation	1	1	1
Grammar	1	0	0
Organisation	1	0	1
Style	2	3	4
Content	2	1	2
Typo	0	0	2
Total	8	5	12

Comments: Struggles with clear expression; questionable vocabulary choices; dull.

**Student 34**

Spelling	0	2	0
Punctuation	0	15	12

Grammar	0	2	0
Organisation	1	3	0
Style	2	7	3
Content	1	5	1
Typo	0	4	0
Total	4	38	16

Comments: clumsy intro but improves; simplistic content; erratic punctuation.

### Student 35

Spelling	1	2	6
Punctuation	2	10	9
Grammar	1	2	2
Organisation	1	2	0
Style	2	7	6
Content	2	0	0
Typo	0	4	7
Total	9	27	30

Comments: naïve and immature style but some good ideas; careless.

### Student 36

Spelling	3	7	4
Punctuation	1	4	6
Grammar	1	0	1
Organisation	1	1	0
Style	1	6	5
Content	0	1	0
Typo	0	0	3
Total	7	9	19

Comments: solid ideas; odd expression; hand written; some good content but as/has, were/where; apostrophes; some lively writing

### Student 37

Spelling	1	0	0
Punctuation	2	8	2
Grammar	0	0	0
Organisation	0	2	0
Style	1	2	2
Content	0	1	1
Typo	0	1	0
Total	4	14	5

Comments: mature; mainly well expressed; fluent but a little dull.

### Student 38

Spelling	n	1	0
Punctuation	n	4	2
Grammar	n	4	4
Organisation	n	2	1
Style	n	11	4
Content	n	4	2
Typo	n	1	2

Total n 27 15

Comments: handwritten; colloquial and careless.

**Student 39**

Spelling	1	0	n
Punctuation	3	6	n
Grammar	1	2	n
Organisation	0	1	n
Style	1	3	n
Content	0	4	n
Typo	0	1	n
Total	6	17	n

Comments: astute and well written; some waffle.

**Student 40**

Spelling	0	0	n
Punctuation	0	3	n
Grammar	1	0	n
Organisation	2	5	n
Style	3	3	n
Content	0	2	n
Typo	0	0	n
Total	6	13	n

Comments: quite sophisticated argument; potential but needs organisation.

**Student Profiles 41-50 Theatre/Media**

**Assignment 1 150 words-short handwritten analysis in class**

**Assignment 2 1500 word essay**

**Assignment 3 1500 word autobiographical extract**

**Student 41**

Spelling	n	n	4
Punctuation	n	n	10
Grammar	n	n	3
Organisation	n	n	2
Style	n	n	7
Content	n	n	3
Typo	n	n	1
Total	n	n	30

Comments: struggles with expression; non-submission

**Student 42**

Spelling	n	n	2
Punctuation	n	n	7
Grammar	n	n	2
Organisation	n	n	0
Style	n	n	9
Content	n	n	5
Typo	n	n	11

Total            n        n        37  
 Comments: seems careless and thoughtless; non-submission

**Student 43**

Spelling	1	4	2
Punctuation	3	20	17
Grammar	0	2	1
Organisation	1	2	3
Style	1	9	6
Content	1	3	4
Typo	0	7	2
Total	6	47	35

Comments: Fluent and thoughtful but many errors; some strong writing but rambles.

**Student 44**

Spelling	1	0	2
Punctuation	1	8	6
Grammar	0	1	0
Organisation	0	0	0
Style	1	6	3
Content	0	1	0
Typo	0	2	1
Total	3	18	12

Comments: sharp and to the point; apostrophes; lively but colloquial.

**Student 45**

Spelling	n	2	2
Punctuation	n	7	3
Grammar	n	3	1
Organisation	n	2	2
Style	n	8	6
Content	n	4	3
Typo	n	0	3
Total	n	26	20

Comments: unsophisticated but genuinely thoughtful; repetitive and banal in places.

**Student 46**

Spelling	n	1	1
Punctuation	n	7	8
Grammar	n	4	0
Organisation	n	2	2
Style	n	8	1
Content	n	7	1
Typo	n	4	2
Total	n	33	15

Comments: struggles with expression but creative ideas.

**Student 47**

Spelling	n	1	0
Punctuation	n	1	5



Grammar	n	0	0
Organisation	n	0	0
Style	n	4	6
Content	n	1	3
Typo	n	0	1
Total	n	7	15

Comments: lively but colloquial; rhetorical questions.

#### **Student 48**

Spelling	3	0	24
Punctuation	2	17	12
Grammar	0	0	4
Organisation	1	3	1
Style	1	13	6
Content	0	6	2
Typo	0	0	0
Total	7	39	49

Comments: some good points but waffle; too much in parenthesis; writes as speech; no editing.

#### **Student 49**

Spelling	n	2	5
Punctuation	n	6	29
Grammar	n	0	2
Organisation	n	1	1
Style	n	8	4
Content	n	2	1
Typo	n	3	2
Total	n	22	44

Comments: good research; uses 'and' a lot; capitals and speech marks.

#### **Student 50**

Spelling	2	20	n
Punctuation	3	32	n
Grammar	0	7	n
Organisation	0	4	n
Style	3	14	n
Content	3	3	n
Typo	0	0	n
Total	11	80	n

Comments: thoughtful but lacks writing skills; colloquial; apostrophes; no evidence of editing.

## Appendix 2:

### Transcripts of Research Interviews (tapes and notes) and Writing Logs

#### Key

- ( ) indecipherable  
(( )) gesture/non verbal/comments  
... ellipsis (used for interviewer only)  
- unfinished utterance

Writing logs are typed as written including any errors; only material related to writing has been included as much of the reflection was concerning presentations.

<b>Interview No</b>	<b>Student</b>	<b>Date</b>
Int. 1a	Derek Allan	7.6.00
Int. 2a	Diane Andrew	7.6.00
Int. 3a	Barbara Anthony	7.6.00
Log3b	Barbara Anthony	Oct. 99
Int. 4a	Paula Douglas	8.2.00
Log 4b	Paula Douglas	Oct. 99
Int. 5a	Peter Ivan	8.2.00
Int. 5b	Peter Ivan	21.6.00
Int. 5c	Peter Ivan	21.6.01
Log 5d	Peter Ivan	Oct. 99
Int. 6a	Christopher James	28.6.01
Int. 6b	Christopher James	20.6.02
Int. 7a	Naomi Jordan	8.2.00
Int. 7b	Naomi Jordan	6.6.00
Int. 8a	Jane Laurence	8.2.00
Int. 8b	Jane Laurence	21.6.00
Log. 8c	Jane Laurence	Oct. 99
Int. 9a	Francis Martin	7.6.00
Int.10a	David Michael	7.6.00
Int.11a	Phillip Miles	9.2.00
Int.12a	William Richard	11.10.00
Int.12b	William Richard	16.5.01
Int.12c	William Richard	20.6.02
Int.13a	Sally Sylvester	9.2.00
Int.13b	Sally Sylvester	31.10.00
Int.14a	Matthew Trevor	8.2.00
Log. 15a	Catherine Zadir	Oct. 99

**Int. 1a**      **7<sup>th</sup> June 2000**

**Derek Allan (Student 1)**

**P**      =      **Pat Hill**  
**D**      =      **Derek Allan**

P      Is there anything about the feedback that you particularly remember?  
D      About any of it?  
P      Any of it. Is there anything about the feedback that you've got on your work that sticks in your mind?  
D      Er. Not really. ((laughs))  
P      No. Well –  
D      They usually put some 'at like punctuation and things – I'm a bit rough on that.  
P      Right so in terms of your writing skills then punctuation is one of the things –  
D      Yeah.  
P      I've noticed that Brian talks about sentence structure.  
D      Structure as well yeah.  
P      Do you think it is sentence structure or is it punctuation?  
D      It's probably more sentence structure.  
P      Do you know the difference? ((laughs))  
D      Kind of.  
P      Is it the fact that your sentences are structured badly because they're actually not all the one sentence. That's what I'm trying to say and that if you'd used punctuation properly-  
D      Yeah, it might be I don't know.  
P      I think it might be-      So when you actually get feedback, what do you do with it?  
D      Read it through and put it away. ((laughs))  
P      Right. Do you think you actually-  
D      I do – like – take note of it.  
P      You do?  
D      Most writing.  
P      Do you think that has made any difference to your writing ? (      )  
Do you feel as though you've improved? Do you feel as though your later work is better or-  
D      No –  
P      No?  
D      Some of it is, some of it isn't  
P      Right. So what makes the difference?  
D      I think what they say like the punctuation bit and the sentence structure- It's gone better now 'cause the story - I got quite a good mark for that. That was like –free writing.  
P      So is it the academic stuff that you find a bit more difficult to control?  
D      Yeah.  
P      And why do you think that is?  
D      I don't know. ((laugh))  
P      Has it always been the same?  
D      Yeah (      ).

P So do you actually think about how you could improve your academic writing? Does it ever cross your mind?

D Oh I might do but it's just - get it done.

P So when you actually come to write a piece of work do you literally just write it how you write it. Do you think at all about you know 'Am I doing the sentence structure right here or -

D No I just write it as it comes into my head usually.

P You just write it. How do - do you draft - do a draft?

D Yeah I have done but I don't always.

P Do you normally do it in computer?

D Yeah straight on to the computer.

P Right so once you've - How do you typically go about writing a piece of work then?

D Just get all my notes together and just start ( ).

P Right.

P Do you ever print it out to look at it and then-

D No I usually do it on the screen.

P You do it on the screen. Right, that could be one of the things to think about.

D Right.

P Easy way to improve it -

D OK Just read it.

P Your second year marks... bearing in mind that you'd probably have to do them -

D I'll just have to take more time with it.

P Time. O I mean that's the other thing isn't it - having time to do it. But if you actually print it off the computer and read it -

D You see much more.

P You're more likely to see things. If you double line space it - I know that sounds- Yeah, but it's a common - But the actual thing is, it does make it easier to read. It actually makes it easier for you to notice errors.

D Yeah.

P Reading dense text ...it easier and it leaves space for-

D The marker to write as well.

P So someone who gets something which is clearly presented and easy to read is already on your side.

D Right.

P That's what ...plan of work -

D Mmm.

P ( ) from day one. ...professional approach-

D Yeah.

P I've noticed on a number of pieces it says 'Appears rushed'. Yeah? If somebody - If work appears rushed, even if it isn't, they've got that in their head - If you're not going to put a lot of work in to it why should I-

D put a lot of work in-

P put a lot of work into it. ...Do you know why - did you look at the sentences that it -

D Yeah. When I look back on it you notice that it's a bit all over the place.

P What do you mean by all over the place?

D It's just erm, like I don't put in commas and things and sometimes the sentence is really long or like I don't put full stops in so it doesn't make any sense.

P So in actual fact if you did a proof read-

D Yeah.

P You think you would actually pick it up and you would actually be able to improve on that?

D Yeah Give it a go.

P Anything else about your writing? Any other comments you've had about your writing at all? Do you feel confident about your writing style in general?

D It's alright.

P What does alright mean?

D Erm. It could be better but it could be worse. It's different things though. I'm better at other things than -

P Right. So what -

D Erm, I'm better at writing more freely than I am er quoting and -

P An academic style? The trouble is that -

D That is the thinking innit?

P Those are the things you need to aim at aren't they? How do you think you could improve?

D Just take my time with it and like you say proof read it first.

P But you've got to know what you're looking for.

D Oh I know the stuff.

P So do you recognise - no in terms of writing and your favourite style do you recognise what an academic hallmark should be?

D I think so.

P What about vocabulary? Do you find you use the appropriate vocabulary?

D It is- it is alright but it could be a bit more like, flowery. ((Both laugh))

P The thing is that there is a big difference now- bigger difference now between the English you're used to using outside the institution and academic English-

D Yeah

P -because academic English basically is stuck in a time warp-

D I need to buy a thesaurus -

P That's ...you're moving more towards-

D Getting on.

P Yeah, I mean, overall, how do you think you've coped this year?

D Average I'd say, not brilliant but-

P -but you've got what- Have you passed everything?

D I think so yeah. Well last semester I passed everything and this semester I think I've passed about three. I'm not sure but I don't know all the rest of the marks yet.

P So you're fairly confident about next year?

D Yeah should be OK ( ) ((laughs)).

P Good. Well that's all we need for now.

Int. 2a      June 7<sup>th</sup> 2000

**Diane Andrew (Student 2)**

**P = Pat Hill**

**DA = Diane Andrew**

P      Is there one particular thing about your writing or, you know, one or two things that you need to improve on?

DA     Well, with my writing -. I think that's my main problem. I can physically write, the problem is research, finding stuff in the library.

P      So once you actually get the research you think you do Ok. So quite short ( ) said and he's saying 'but note some niggling errors on the sheet'.

DA     Those are just spelling mistakes and punctuation –

P      Apostrophes.

DA     Yes. Apostrophes.

P      'Quite interesting. You manage to deal with a big subject in a relatively short essay but no bibliography'

DA     I don't know whether I put references in that particular one but I usually do. I usually embed them in the text when I'm writing.

P      But ...important that you do reference your sources. 'Style is sometimes unhelpfully vague'. What do you think about that?

DA     Well I know I rushed that one off.

P      'There are few significant features in *The Mill on the Floss* that are worth commenting on' Ooh! I bet she liked that ...Have you not got time to do it or do you just find it difficult to get organised?

DA     I know what it is. It's erm I don't go out that much but when I do go out it's not just for the night, it's for days.

P      Right ((Both laugh)).

DA     And if I don't I feel like I'm missing out on something. I mean, I suppose my work suffers because of that.

P      When you say that you go out for days, what do you mean?

DA     Well, If I, I don't go out to the pub I go to Wembley or Cardiff or something like that.

P      Oh right I see.

DA     If I get the chance to go somewhere, I'll go.

P      And that kind of throws you.

DA     Yeah.

P      So you have to start assignments very early then and try and get them in.

DA     I have been doing this time though.

P      You've got.... Some more on referencing again. 'Summary rather than critical analysis' 'You tend to wander away from the question' ( ) 'More secondary reading'

'Your writing style slips' Then it's just a case of things like the odd unacademic phrase like 'He's lived with lots of... and 'She got herself...'

Referencing and that sort of thing. Do you think you might ( ) of the year?

DA     Erm. I think I started off really well. I think I started off with a better attitude than – with the first set of assignments than I did with the second.

P Why is that do you think?

DA Well, I started to lose interest ( ) I thought I were gonna leave.

P Oh did you? Have you picked up the enthusiasm since or not? Do you know what you want to do afterwards?

DA I want to be a teacher but it seems like I didn't do very well in my A levels I got a C and an E. I got a C for English but-

P What do you want to teach?

DA I want to teach -I want to ((laughs)) be an English lecturer; I want to do something with Literature but it doesn't look to good from all my results.

P But ...got to do reading.

DA I do when it's – when it's something I really want to read I'll read it and then if it's not–

P The thing ...to have read them.

DA Yeah.

P Because ...you do have to do the slog first.

DA Yeah

P So ...got any other ideas in mind or –

DA Well that's the main one. I don't know it depends what I'm qualified for at the end of it. That's the main idea.

P Are you doing English or English and Media?

DA I'm doing straight English.

P Well your writing style seems fine... but it's the content instead –

DA Yeah.

P It's the fact that you're not really doing the reading around a subject and engaging with it ...but I think you're probably capable of it.

DA I know I am. I know I am it's just that I get distracted easily.

P It depends what ...doing 30 odd weeks out of a 52 week year.

DA Mmm. I mean I know 9 or 10 hours isn't a lot out of a week but it seems, it's not as bad as some people in other classes who've got like one at 9-15 and one at 2-15 in a day. If I had that I'd be really like-

P Yes but ...could go to the library-

DA Yes.

P and actually do some reading ...It makes it easier for you.

DA Mmm.

P This isn't ...with no marks at all.

DA Mmm.

P So you're going to have to decide aren't you - whether to go for it or not. It's motivation – so it's a case of saying 'Right. Well ( ) being a student or not.

DA Well when I was thinking of leaving I thought maybe I'm just too – at the moment I feel like I'm young, I'm, – if I don't do things now, when am I going to do them and I thought well maybe I should leave and get a job, get a part-time job or something and go and do all the things I want to do now and then come back to it later. And then I thought well no I've got older friends who've done that and they haven't gone back to it.

P That's right ...So you were referred on your essay Content Analysis or – Audience Research and what was the other one-

DA And the second writing assignment –

P The third one - the Report-

DA Oh yeah that was it.

P Let's see what you could do about those ( )

DA Yeah.

P I suppose you've forgotten all about what Content Analysis means.

DA Most probably ((Both laugh))

P Well try to make sure that you don't get referred on any others now, just try and keep them up to date. It's really up to you now, nobody can do it for you-

DA I know. I made a decision that this semester I was going to get everything I did in on time at least. That's like the minimum but the maximum is to do really well as well

P Yeah. I mean do you know when your assignments are coming up. Have you got a timetable and you know when they're coming up?

DA Yeah.

P The... when you do study.

DA Well, I have all Saturday to myself so I use that and it's very rare that I do anything else on a Saturday and Tuesday and Friday night as well.

P What about in the daytime when you're not-

DA When I've got a gap, erm well I always stay until about half-past four, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday and I usually go to the library and do some work then but for the past – since I got that media one I've just been measuring a newspaper for two hours- ((Both laugh))

P Oh ...it's the analysis that you get the mark for so-

DA I didn't quite focus there in a sense or I wish that we'd all just like got into 2s and done a broadsheet and tabloid each.

P That's what I suggested.

DA Yeah well I know if I'd have done that I'd have messed it up for somebody-

P You shouldn't be too hard on yourself there.



**Int. 3a June 7<sup>th</sup> 2000**

**Barbara Anthony (Student 3)**

**P =Pat Hill**

**BA = Barbara Anthony**

- P Is there anything overall that you think about the feedback that you've had? – Whether it's actually done anything to improve your writing. – Are there any elements of feedback that you recognise that you keep on seeing?
- BA I think that the ones that are more or less the same are Description of English. Everybody's given me the same sort of mark. I don't really like( )that subject and that-
- P Right. And what are they basing that on do you think?
- BA I think it's my understanding of it. I'm not sure if it's the way I write, it's just what I've been writing.
- P OK. Well one of the things to talk about is your spelling. I mean do you get that across the board?
- BA More or less yeah. I seem to do yeah.
- P So – You're at the end of the first year. Do you think it's improved?
- BA Yeah. I think it's definitely improved. I think my writing scores improved definitely.
- P What aspects of it have got much better do you think?
- BA It's hard to say. I just know it has because my marks are getting better.
- P Do you think that's to do with the content or is your writing- Are your writing skills improving or is your knowledge of the content improving? Which do you think?
- BA I think it's more the content –
- P That's actually moving – so you feel as though you are learning and you understand more about what you're doing but your actual writing systems are still...
- BA Yeah
- P Apart from you say your spelling's improved?
- BA Yeah.
- P What have you done to improve it?
- BA More reading. A lot more reading.
- P So you notice – do you think – now?
- BA Yeah.
- P How do you check your work?
- BA Usually I do spell check and proof-read it er spell-check. I'm really bad for this. When I've done something I usually just –that's it. I don't really go over it at all.
- P So do you proof-read it on the screen?
- BA Yeah. That's about it.
- P And when it's done, it's done?
- BA Yeah It's done. I'm really bad for that. I should be checking it but I don't.
- P Well that can make a big difference can't it... in your head rather than what's on the paper.
- BA Yeah.
- P So. If you think about it now going into the second year; those marks count.
- BA Yeah I know.

P So you ...more about the content in this one isn't he? He's not actually saying anything very much about your writing skills as such.

BA Right.

P So there's nothing there to actually-

BA Yeah.

P All of this ...listened to the feedback

BA Yeah

P Again... how much credence do you put on feedback? Do you actually read it?

BA I do read it yeah but I must admit once I've read it, it's like ( ) I know I shouldn't do that, I know I should be looking at what everybody's saying but er ( ) I think I read it when I get it back – the day and I think 'Oh yeah ' but then you forget or just –

P Yeah so when you come to do another piece of work you wouldn't think of looking back at previous work to see-

BA ((shakes head))

P ...par for the course. So here you're getting 60 and it says 'well written' ...-Can you feel that your writing has developed. That your writing skills have improved?

BA I think they are yeah. I'm more confident. At the start –as I had a year out – you sort of forget don't you? You sort of forget how you should be writing back in school. I'm more confident-

P And what are the main things that you think have actually contributed towards that change. What's given you that confidence?

BA I think it's like you said, it's more, just understanding the subject a lot more and probably what they write on your work as well. What I'm doing wrong.

P Although a lot of your feedback is to do with content ...or is it one particular module that you've done that's actually - you've thought – I need to-

BA Probably 'Reporting Fact' cause A's helped me a lot with that. I've taken a lot of notes and he's my personal tutor.

P And because you put a weekly log in you're getting more feedback –

BA Yeah and he's told me a lot about how to set out a bibliography. I didn't really think it was that important at first but he told me how it is, the way it should be written and stuff, so yeah maybe it's A that's had the most effect.

P So what contact do you have him...? Do you actually have a tutorial –

BA We only see him once a week. That's for the actual lesson. We don't have a - We used to do when we first started but we don't have that any more

P So it's not feedback that you've been given individually as your personal tutor it's just feedback through your work.

BA yeah

P So how confident do you feel about next year?

BA A lot more than this year. I'm a bit worried though because well we're all splitting up this year( ) so I'm a bit worried about that because it's not going to be the same lessons.

P So are there any aspects of your writing that you feel could still improve?

BA Erm I don't know. Probably the spelling definitely needs a lot more work. I think it's just the way I write –the style you know it let's me down sometimes.

P How do you mean?

BA It's hard to explain erm

P Does anybody give you feedback on it?

BA I just know myself. No I've not had feedback on it

P So do you use colloquial expressions? Is it not academic enough?

BA Yeah I think er-  
P the vocabulary's lacking?  
BA I think sometimes – I find it really hard to start essays off. I'm like get - all the knowledge I know quick and then I try to put it all together and then I read other people's and think 'Mine's not like that'  
P So it might be to do with planning, structure  
BA Yeah maybe that's what it is yeah.  
P So perhaps you need to think a little bit about concentrating on what the question requires -  
BA Answering the question - Definitely – I find that in exams as well.  
P Do you?  
BA Yeah 'cause I just write everything I know but I haven't answered the question  
P So that might be ...some kind of order.  
BA Yeah.  
P So organisation in terms of structure and as you said earlier – reading. The more you read the more you actually absorb the different styles.  
BA Yeah.  
P The fact that you can read somebody else's ...what do I need to do with mine to be able to change it to what they want.  
BA Yeah Yeah.  
P As from now it will count.  
BA Yeah.

### **Writing Log 3b October 1999** **Barbara Anthony**

21.10.99

This was my first seminar of an Introduction to writing since changing courses.

I have written many essays before as I studied A level English literature however I am not very confident as I have realised that I must change my writing style.

I was asked to choose an essay title depicting the theme of popular culture:  
The media relies upon negative stereotypes to portray the youth of today – discuss”

It was decided I should bring aspects of my previous course 'BA Community Education' into the essay.

I have made a list of essay writing skills to help me with the rough draft:

- Balanced argument
- Good intro & conclusion
- clarity
- correct use of quotations
- factual info
- supporting evidence
- Research
- Bibliography

28.10.99

Today's seminar concentrated on 'Essay Skills' and the importance of fact and opinion. We were asked to think of one fact and one opinion in each of our essays, (sic) fact. negative interpretations of young people press/television/films etc. Opinion that the media influences our negative view of young people.

We were then given some points to create the right academic style of the essay:  
distinguish between facts and opinions  
Be objective  
Support facts  
conclusion – must be opinion based but balanced.

During the seminar we also discussed different styles of writing, formal and informal. My understanding of this is that in order for my essay to be an acceptable academic essay I must be flexible with my writing style and change it dramatically to a formal style of writing.

During today's seminar we were all given feedback on the progress of the Popular Culture essay.  
After leaving the draft to one side for a week we were then able to objectively analyse the essay and decide what positive changes need to be made to present a successful academic essay

There are many changes that I need to make to my essay the first is to look at my title and make sure it is a statement for discussion and not a question.

The essay must be written in an academic style. It must be relatively factual and balanced.

One of the most important changes however is that of the introduction. This is the opening to my argument and must capture the interest of the reader. I have made the mistake of using 'meta' language in my rough draft. to rectify this I must present the issues to the reader rather than stating what 'I aim' to achieve.

I am now also aware that any rhetorical questions must be put into context and if possible be avoided altogether.

Another important aspect of an academic essay is the referencing and quality of the Bibliography, it is not acceptable to reference newspapers, headlines etc without showing the reader evidence. All statements and factual evidence must be backed up through footnotes and references.

The final change was that to the conclusion, the essay must lead to this closing statement, linking the conclusion to both the title and the opening introduction is a must.

The feedback of today's seminar was immensely helpful to me as I now know what is expected of the academic essay. Putting the draft to one side proved beneficial and I will apply this to my introduction by firstly making a rough note form introduction then later go back and analyse it objectively making sure it is in the same context as the essay.

02.12.99

After receiving back assignment one I was fairly disappointed, but feel that my mark was justified. I know I have the capability to achieve so much more in this module.

The feedback was very helpful as it provided me with the information I need to improve on future assignments.

When I completed the redraft of the first assignment I was aware that there were many weaknesses within it, however I have benefited by knowing how my essay was read from someone else's perspective, allowing such weaknesses and those which I may have missed be detected and resolved in future assignments.

I found the overall general comments of my essay very reassuring and agreeable, I too believe that I have improved my style slightly from the first draft and that with the right approach and improvement of my style and presentation I will therefore be capable of raising my marks.

I personally believe that the overall mark is obviously important however I am more concerned with the feedback from the tutor as this allows me to understand where I went wrong and how I can rectify my mistakes and improve my style.

**Int. 4a February 8<sup>th</sup> 2000**

**Paula Douglas (Student 4)**

**P = Pat Hill**

**PD =Paula Douglas**

- P What do you think your strengths are?
- PD I like researching and finding things out like for reports and I'm good at organising stuff and laying it out.
- P Which piece of writing do you think is your best?
- PD I got good marks for my logs in Media.
- P Why, do you think?
- PD They were just short things that you had to research, stuff like Visual Illusions and I got it off the Internet.
- P You got a good mark for Information Technology too?
- PD Yes, I am good at computers and I'd already done it at college like C.V.s and that. It was easy. I'm good at typing too. I always got good marks for my writing at college
- P Is there any particular aspect of your writing that concerns you?
- PD You keep saying that I'm doing it too personal and my language isn't right and my punctuation's not good sometimes.
- P What aspect of writing do you find hardest? ((PD shrugs shoulders))
- PD Punctuation and referencing I suppose. I don't always know what they want. I mean it's not always straightforward. You think they want one thing and it's not right.
- P Do you ask if you're not sure?
- PD Yes, sometimes but if you think it's right you don't need to ask - like that advert analysis seemed easy but I only got 50% and she said I'd got some of it wrong.
- P So is it the content that worries you?
- PD Not always, it depends how hard it is.
- P Do you always read feedback? How important is it to you?
- PD Very. I always read it to find out what I've done wrong.
- P And right?
- PD Yes.
- P What are the main points that you remember from feedback?
- PD Well, referencing and punctuation and about being too personal – not formal enough.
- P Anything else?
- PD No, not really.
- P Do you act on feedback given?
- PD Well I try to but I still got referencing wrong last time. I've been trying to make it sound more formal and I get my mum to check the spelling, punctuation and grammar. I think it's a lot better than it was.  
((Phone interruption))
- P What about here where it says your work lacks cohesion and detail?
- PD I think it follows through OK. I got someone else to read it and they said they understood it OK.
- P How do you start a piece of writing?
- PD I do a plan in my head and then I write it up in rough.

- P On the computer?
- PD No, I always write on paper first and then type it up after. I always do that first. I like to have it in front of me.
- P Do you work from notes?
- PD Yes but sometimes I just have the book there and I get a bit off the Internet.
- P Do you ever look at the writing guidance in your handbooks?
- PD Not really.
- P Why not?
- PD I just don't think of it and I know most of it really.
- P Do you think your writing has developed over the semester ?
- PD Yeah. I think so. Some of the marks aren't very good though.
- P Can you think of any specific changes you have made to your writing style?
- PD Well I've tried to make it more formal and punctuation.
- P How do you make it more formal?
- PD Well I use a thesaurus and that. I think my writing's getting better because I work very hard at it but it's obviously not good enough for some people.

### **Writing Log 4b October 1999**

What I think of myself as a writer.

As a writer I think I do well writing factual pieces of writing but find it difficult to write imaginative pieces. I find it hard to structure my essays in a way that is easy to understand and so the essay flows. I don't have any problems with grammar or spelling. I don't like writing essays and in the past I haven't done a lot of essays so I think if I had more practise at it I would enjoy it more and find it easier.

I found it easy to write this because it is about myself so I knew exactly what to write and this exercise enabled me to realise what the advantages and disadvantages were regarding my writing ability

Evaluation of essay (popular culture)

I didn't find the essay too hard but I had to do lots of research on my chosen subject which was eating disorders. I used a few resources for this including a video, TV news and books. If I did the essay again, I would use a range of resources such as the Internet and the CD Rom to give me more information. I got a C for the essay which I was very happy with and I feel that my essay writing is getting better because at 6<sup>th</sup> form college I didn't used to do very well in essays

**Int 5a**            **8<sup>th</sup> February 2000**

**P Ivan (Student 5)**

**P = Pat Hill**

**PI = Peter Ivan**

- P        What do you think your strengths are?
- PI       My media stuff is better than my German. My essay was ok on popular culture because I was interested in it.
- P        Aren't you interested in the German?
- PI       Well yes but I could choose the topic in Media.
- P        Does that make a difference?
- PI       Yes I think you put more effort in if you're interested and you enjoy it more.
- P        Is there any particular thing about your writing that you're worried about ?
- Prompt - Which bits do you find hardest?
- PI       I used to worry about spelling but now I use a spell check on the computer. I use the grammar check and thesaurus as well.
- P        Are you pretty confident about your writing?
- PI       Yes, more so now. At first I was nervous because I wanted to make a good impression.
- P        Do you always read the feedback?
- PI       Yes.
- P        What are the main points you remember from feedback?
- PI       I learned that it isn't a good idea to use rhetorical questions but that I should go back to the original sources when I can instead of quoting second hand.
- P        Anything else?
- PI       Yes. That I should always go back to the title to make sure I'm not going off the point.
- P        What about this? (Log 2)
- PI       I missed a seminar and didn't really understand it. I got notes from someone but I didn't do any reading.
- P        So you've learned something there?
- PI       Yeah.
- P        Do you act on feedback given?
- PI       Yes. I always try to. I want to do my best but not everyone says the same things so it's hard sometimes.
- P        Can you give me an example?
- PI       Well you always say loads about the writing style but R just ignores it.
- P        Yes but as long as one of us is telling you?
- PI       I suppose so but it's hard to know if it's important or-
- P        If I'm just being picky?
- PI       Yes.
- P        Well you've got to think about how a prospective employer would look at it.
- PI       I suppose so yeah.
- P        How do you start a piece of writing?
- Prompt - For instance, do you do a plan?
- PI       Yes. I make lots of notes during my research and then do a plan.
- P        Always?



PI Yes. I well I write a draft out. I used to draft on paper and then type it out but now I do it straight onto the word processor.

P How do you check your work?

PI I used to just check it straightaway but I've learned that it's better if I leave it for a couple of days. I set my deadlines a couple of days before the real one.

P Do you think your writing has developed over the semester?

PI I learned some things from the handbook - like double-line spacing and referencing and I still check back to that if I'm not sure. I think I'm doing well on the media but the German is hard.

**Int. 5b      21 June 2000**

**Peter Ivan (Student 5)**

**P = Pat Hill**

**PI = Peter Ivan**

- P      How do you feel about your writing?
- PI     I feel that it's improved since the first semester.
- P      The marks certainly seem to have improved.
- PI     I feel more comfortable writing than I did.
- P      That's good. Are there any problems you still have- anything that you need to sort out do you think?
- PI     Spelling.
- P      Spelling. You're still having a problem with spelling?
- PI     Not really but I occasionally get confused with words like 'where' and 'were'
- P      But as long as you're aware – yes 'were' and 'where'
- PI     (      ) check it on the spell checker.
- P      The trouble with a spell checker is that it doesn't pick up things like that does it? It could be because of your accent as well. You say 'were' don't you - you say it the same? The thing is that once you know that that's what you do you have to look out for that particular... feedback 'is that a sentence?'
- PI     Yeah, I meant to put a comma there instead of a stop.
- P      Yeah ... What do you think overall about the feedback that you get?
- PI     It's useful to help you where you're going wrong.
- P      Any particular modules that have been useful?
- PI     Description of English because D of E is meant to be about improving sentence structure.
- P      Actually finding out about – so do you think you can actually transfer that knowledge? Do you think you are more conscious of your writing style?
- PI     Yes and it's helped with German because (      ) with German grammar.
- P      Oh that's good. So how are you doing on the German side?
- PI     All right. I find it easier (      ).
- P      You've also got Journalism – writing 2. What did you think about that?
- PI     I enjoyed that because I can write about what I really want to.
- P      What about in terms of developing your writing skills?
- PI     I think it helped a lot because he gave us feedback and then we had to redo it. That helped a lot with my writing.
- P      Yes and once you'd got feedback and you had to redo it did you know what to do about it and they were improved?
- PI     Yes I think so.
- P      So this is a translation. So do you read it through to see if this does actually make good English?
- PI     Yes.
- P      You are actually trying to make something which sounds English rather than translated. So you think overall that your writing style has developed?
- PI     I think so.

P Do you it would have developed in the same way if you had had very little feedback...Do you feel as though you understand what they're saying when they feedback?

PI Yes I do.

P Have you ever had any feedback where you didn't really know what they were getting at or you didn't know how to put things right ?

PI No.

P And if you did what would you do about it?

PI Ask the tutor.

P You'd feel confident enough to ask?

PI Yes.

**Peter Ivan (Student 5)****P = Pat Hill****PI = Peter Ivan**

- P If we start as we did before saying how you feel about your writing generally.
- PI Right. How I feel it's progressed?
- P Yes, if there is anything in particular. Things that you've noticed – any particular problems or successes.
- PI Not any major ones. I just find it hard to begin an essay. Once I get going I'm all right. Conclusions – beginning and endings I'd say are problems.
- P Do you feel more confident than you did?
- PI Yes a lot more. A lot more than I first did.
- P Are you conscious of any changes in your writing?
- PI A few. Only the stuff that I get on feedback that I've got to try to remember and not to do mistakes that I've made before.
- P What kind of things?
- PI Apostrophes.
- P So do you think you've mastered apostrophes?
- PI I think so. Just about.
- P How did you go about 'mastering them'? When somebody said 'Oh your apostrophes are not right' What did you do?
- PI Well I know what they are really – just recognise that I get careless.
- P So when did you – Why do you think it went wrong in the first place? Where did you learn about apostrophes and what do you think confused you?
- PI I don't know because I do actually know but it's just a case of being careless and not checking properly.
- P You just stick them in wherever?
- PI Yes Hmm.
- P So when somebody says 'apostrophes' you just- You don't think 'Oh I don't know that' You just think 'Oh- dear- I've not checked'?
- PI Yes.
- P ((looking at written work)) So that is just careless?
- PI Yeah.
- P Because it's a plural and you know... What about that one?
- PI That one, I thought that was right because it was written in a book and because every time I wrote 'Levi's' without one it came up wrong on the spell check and when I put in an apostrophe it said it was right.
- P So it's their trade name?
- PI I think so. I'm not sure.
- P This is a lot better isn't it? I mean –the only other thing is sentences like that.
- PI I've put a full stop.
- P So what about the capital letter?
- PI It was meant to be all one sentence.
- P I think ...sometimes 'correct' it wrongly. What do you think about that one? You put 'The effects of postmodernism were ((changed to 'was' by tutor))
- PI Is he saying that it should be singular? I thought it should be plural because it was 'effects'.

P Well it's interesting that you can stick to your guns there Ian ...main problems which you had and did do in one of the essays is 'where' and 'were'. Do you think you've really got that sussed now?

PI Yes.

P Do you know why you made the mistake in the first place? Any idea?

PI Confusing 'where' and 'were'? Don't really know unless I've just not thought ( ) I've always got them confused?

P Yes.

PI Hmm No not particularly.

P You've done it since the first year here. Do you think it just wasn't pointed out or...

PI Not sure. It probably was. I can't remember doing it.

P When you say they were and you write 'where' do you consciously think about what the word means?

PI Sort of.

P Where you write thing like -You've written 'The particular categories that I have chosen where done so because they where the categories which appeared' and you've written it 'where'.

PI Have I?

P Would that not- You wouldn't think about - I find it very difficult to understand that you don't notice the difference and I'm just trying to find out why because sometimes you use 'were' and sometimes you use 'where'. You've used 'were' there.

PI I don't know. I sometimes forget what I'm typing and just type a word and don't really think about what it's supposed to be.

P Wouldn't you notice it when you read it through?

PI I notice it later but I don't actually proof read them as much as I should do.

P So it's not something you've had pointed out when you were younger?

PI No.

P You can't remember people pointing it out and saying 'You're putting 'where' for 'were'.

PI Probably – in primary school but I can't think -

P But when you see that and you read it, what would you read?

PI I'd read it but it's wrong.

P You'd read it as 'where' but realise it was wrong?

PI Mmm Yes. In the first year I didn't actually proof read stuff much before I handed it in whereas now I would do.

P The latest stuff is hugely improved so you have actually changed your ( ) style. Do you think it's all down to proof-reading?

PI No not just that.

P What actually makes... So what do you think makes the difference?

PI Spending more time on it I suppose. Starting it earlier because in the first year I only wrote them straight off and handed them in whereas now I take- I start earlier and re-read what I've already written.

P Was that because you didn't realise what was wanted or- when you first came/

PI When I first came. The first few essays – I wasn't sure what the University expected.

P So you thought that just writing and putting them in was fine?

PI Well no. I knew that it was wrong.

P Did you know?

- PI I didn't think it would be as bad as that. I didn't think it would make much of a difference whether or not I did it.
- P Right so when you got the essays back and you got feedback –what did you learn?
- PI ( ) Be more careful and put in more work.
- P So you can tell the difference between the mark you got for one /two etc/ What makes the difference. Is it that you didn't know the subject or is it that you didn't take as much care or?
- PI This one I didn't really make that much of an effort so that could have been part of it. I wasn't interested.
- P So if you're not interested, you can't put the time in. It's difficult to put the time in and that makes a difference to the way that you write?
- PI Yes.
- P So if we go back to this feedback ...Is it the fact that you get feedback or is it that you think you'll get better marks? What is it?
- PI I think a bit of both. The feedback and the fact that I am getting better marks.
- P What did you feel like when you got the feedback from that?
- PI I know what he said was all great and that most of them are sixties and those weren't just because I wasn't – I was being careless and I wasn't putting any effort into writing that and so-
- P What about referencing... Would you think your references and sources are correct and if not-?
- PI I thought they were.
- P Have you noticed anything about them?
- PI Well some of them say that the bibliography is fine and then other pieces of work they say it's not.
- P And what do they say it's not?
- PI I think on the latest one A said I hadn't cited some things.
- P The other thing that you don't do and it has been written on several of them is that you don't put the place.
- PI No.
- P You don't only put the publisher ...what did you think was wrong with it? Is it just the actual references?
- PI I thought it was to do with the way I've referenced it in the text, the way he'd written it.
- P So is it something that comes through –...That you had to put the place in?
- PI I think so because I've never thought about having to put the place in.
- P No, it's just not been noticed.... Originally when you first came to do them did you not refer to the booklet? Did you just do it from what we did in class – can you remember?
- PI Do you mean the booklet from the writing module?
- P Yes or the original handbook that you were given? Did you use them?
- PI I think I just did it from what we did in class. I think I looked it up a couple of times in the book but then I lost the book.
- P Yes. ...It just seems odd that it slipped through...I assumed it would have been marked...The other thing is the actual references themselves. It's a bit hit and miss. What do you think you should do in terms of referencing?

Long discussion on how to incorporate references into his work

**Peter Ivan**

What makes a good essay?

The most important thing about an essay is that it must be coherent to the reader. In order for this a number of rules need to be kept. The essay must have a good structure beginning with a good clear introduction and concluding with a good evaluation and conclusion.

Between the introduction and conclusion the essay must flow nicely between the paragraphs. The paragraphs must lead on from each other. Paragraphs are an extremely important feature in an essay. Also to aid the flow of paragraphs the writer should keep straight to the point and not fill the essay with unnecessary information.

All statements should be backed up by quotes or references to show that somebody else holds your point of view. If quoting the quotes should be clearly set out so that the reader can tell that it is a quote. Quotes over two lines long should be indented and used with single typing as opposed to the rest of the text being typed in double spacing.

And finally the last thing to mention is that the title chosen should be discursive in that it gives you something to argue about.

**Christopher James (Student 6)**

**CJ == Christopher Jordan**

**P = Pat Hill**

- P      What do you think your strengths are? Which piece of writing do you think is your best?
- CJ      Well the later stuff's obviously better because I had other things going on in the first year. When you know the marks don't count towards anything you think 'Well as long as I pass'. When you know 40's the mark you need you just don't bother. I was more into getting out and getting wrecked and stuff. I did a good report for B. The grammar was crap but there's some good stuff in it 'cause I know the facts. Writing is what I want to do. I've sent off some stuff and had one article published ((discussed this for few minutes))
- P      Is there any particular aspect of your writing that concerns you? What aspect of writing do you find hardest?
- CJ      I know I still rush things through at the last minute. You can tell where I've rushed things. When you put all the effort into reading and stuff you can't always be bothered to keep going through it. I get my mates or my girlfriend to proofread for me. My mates don't always do it properly but she's very picky about these things so I don't know why there's so many marks on that one. I found some bits myself –like there and their and that.
- P      Do you read and act on the feedback given to you?
- CJ      Yeah I look at it but really it's the marks. I know what I need to do but it's working out the odds.
- P      What do you mean?
- CJ      You know if it's for you I'll make sure it's checked and that but R and A don't bother if you've got the right stuff in there. As long as the information's in you can get away with it.
- P      Can you think of anything that's impacted on your writing style?
- CJ      Well I try to keep the sentences shorter so that I don't have to bother about semi-colons and things. I will do some reading about grammar and punctuation and stuff when I get some time. Either that or I'll get a secretary ((laughs)). No I have started noticing it more when I'm reading – if it just flows and that I look at how they've done it.
- P      How do you start a piece of writing? For instance, do you do a plan?
- CJ      Yes I do but not always a written one. I know what I want to say before I write. The ideas are buzzing and I just want to get it down.
- P      Do you think your writing has developed over the last two years? Can you think of any specific changes you have made to your writing style?
- CJ      Well I started to see that things like punctuation were bringing my marks down so I got my girlfriend to check it for me and it seemed to get better. Some people are very picky on that but others give you marks for what you say.
- P      Do you think you ought to learn about it yourself?
- CJ      Yeah well I do try. Your handout on apostrophes is pinned up on my desk. I know most of it but I could do with brushing up on it so I might do it over the summer. I want to be a writer so I'd better get it right.



**Int. 6b          20<sup>th</sup> June 2002**

**Christopher James (Student 6)**

**CJ == Christopher James**

**P = Pat Hill**

P        Can you tell me how you think your writing has developed over the three years?

CJ        I think I've always been able to write and get ideas and that. It's more difficult when you're not really interested in the stuff. As you know I had other things going on in the first year. Then when you get fed up getting crap marks you start working a bit harder. In the second year you're feeling your way a bit and learning how to do it. Like who wants what and which bits to put more effort into. I was glad I came to you with that CV for my work placement 'cause it got me in. I felt a lot more confident about my writing in the third year 'cause I was getting good marks and I knew the stuff. I got that mark changed you know on that report because what I'd done was put the appendices in halfway through so they'd only read half of it. It's what you said about thinking of the reader and standing back and checking –If it's important I'll do it now. I was really pleased with that report when I gave it in. I knew all there was to know about it so I was gutted with that 45. Just goes to show that you need to be careful. Got 68 in the end.

P        So what do you think you've learned about writing?

CJ        Well I've learned to really think about who's reading it and what for but I know I'll still leave things too late to really check it. I'm going on a one year journalism course

P        Postgrad?

CJ        Yeah so maybe I'll learn about punctuation and stuff there so it won't need as much checking.

**Int. 7a 8thFeb 2000**

**Naomi Jordan (Student 7)**

**P = Pat Hill**

**NJ=Naomi Jordan**

P What do you think your strengths are?

NJ I thought I'd done Ok in my narrative essay because I really liked it and spent loads of time on it but I was really disappointed with the result. She said I went off the point in my first one so I really tried hard for the second one but the mark went down.

P Why do you think that is?

NJ I don't know.

P It says here that some sentences are nonsensical; do you agree with that?

NJ Yes when I read them again but at the time I knew what I was going to say and the grammar check didn't say it was wrong. I use a thesaurus sometimes if I'm not sure of a word.

P Do you think that helps? Do you ever use a dictionary?

NJ Not really.

P Prompt - Which piece of writing do you think is your best?

NJ I don't know any more. The one I thought was the best turned out to be crap.

P Is there any particular thing about your writing that you're worried about?

NJ The first term has been pretty much a shock - you think you write OK and then you get your work back and they all say you're crap.

P I'm sure that's not the case. What seems to be the main problem?

NJ Well it's waffle really. I just tend to waffle and put things in that aren't asked for. And stupid mistakes. Sometimes when I get stuff back I think 'How did you not notice that?', but other times I really don't think I could have changed it because it seemed alright to me.

P What are the main points you remember from feedback?

NJ That my sentences are all over the place and I use the wrong words sometimes.

P Prompt - do you always read the feedback?

NJ Yes but it's pretty depressing really and I try my best but I don't seem to know what they want and they don't all want the same thing.

P What do you mean?

NJ Well like A said I should spell things out more and when I did M said I was making it too simple.

P Do you try to act on feedback ?

NJ Yes but like I said it's not easy. I read it through when I get it back but I know what I've got to do really. I need to do a bit of work on grammar and M says I should read more. Time is always a bit of a problem though.

P How do you start a piece of writing? Do you do a plan for instance?

NJ Yes, usually. It depends how much time I've got. If one piece of work takes longer- I end up in a bit of a rush sometimes. But I've got the plan in my head.

P How do you check your work?

NJ I usually just read it through when I finish. To be honest I'm usually on the last minute. What with working and the travelling in I don't always have the luxury to proof read.

P Is that the case with this piece do you think?

NJ Well no I did actually check that and I got my mum to read it but I thought it was OK.

P How do you think your writing has developed over the semester?

NJ I think it's got better overall. I know more about what's wanted now. There are some good bits and I've done better than I thought on the language side.

Naomi Jordan (Student 7)

P = Pat Hill

NJ=Naomi Jordan

P Let's start with the creative writing then. How did you feel about that?

NJ I really really enjoyed that module. The only thing is I like attended all my lessons and everything I felt really strongly about it I sort of do I think I did two poems and more or less |I left I'd planned the short story I left it all like to two or three weeks before the deadline. It was you know the outcome weren't what I wanted it to be, but I've continued with poetry which I think is brilliant- I've tried to ..I'm really gonna try because the final grades that I got at the end of last semester have like dropped a full grade. First semester I got Bs and then I got Cs. I think part I can say it weren't all my fault because |I did find the second semester modules a lot more difficult but I don't know I think I could have definitely tried harder.

P Yeah ...you'd just not put enough time in or...did you get any input-

NJ Simple time. Yeah I think he's a brilliant teacher. Every lesson I came away feeling like you've really understood something; the ideas he were giving us were really good but it's like my poems I just wrote whatever come then I didn't like go back and look at my structure and form and everything that I know now that I should have done or I would have wanted to. The ones that I really didn't enjoy Literature in History module and Description of English I found – I think that were my most difficult. I think Literature in History were mainly because like subjects like and history and everything and I don't know- I didn't really understand the lessons.

P Although you got a good mark because he's not an easy marker.

NJ But I attended extra- PT put on about three extra seminars for our group because we had teaching problems and so I attended them and you know made sure I understood.

P 'Good expression' and sense of structured approach.

NJ I was shocked really with my grade for that and Description of English

P You did better than you thought or worse?

NJ Better. Yeah I thought I wouldn't even pass them cause –same with the exam for D of E I thought 'Oh God' – I do prefer the Lit side but I seem to be able to cope with the language better than what I thought I would before you know I come to university

P So what did you think about the feedback that you got from this because you got quite a lot of feedback didn't you? Did you read it?

NJ I can't really remember. Yeah I always do. Yeah. He seems to make more comments on and you know I do struggle with that sometimes you know like my punctuation and where to and you know when you're quoting and I think as well I need to stick to some sort of revised way of referencing sometimes I'm unsure whether to do it one way or whether to do it another way or-

P The thing is as long as you can-

NJ I don't leave myself enough time you know to make footnotes and things like that so in the end it's just like whatever bibliography and-

P So what you need to be doing is whenever you're writing thinking 'Do I need to reference this?'

NJ I think I just do it and then obviously yeah when you're typing it up you are a bit rushed and then I think you've got to give yourself time-

P When I'm doing it I put REF in capital letters. Put it in so that I know I've got to go back.

NJ yeah.

P Have you still got your guidance booklet?

NJ Yeah I've definitely got that at home. There was another way other than giving footnotes. I think I prefer to do it that way.

P The Harvard ...How do you feel generally about your writing? Do you think it's improving?

NJ To be honest it's not something I really think about. I think it's improving; I hope it's improving but it's not something that I stop and I don't, you know, think about.

P But ...obviously you've got to work on -

NJ I think my structure tends to be fine. I tend to plan well but I think sometimes my expression's a bit- it seems to go all round the houses rather than get to the- you know what I'm wanting to say.

P But if you do do a plan-

NJ It's like that's why sometimes when I've been rushed doing essays I think I'd never get a better mark I think - maybe it's because I just haven't had time- you know I've waffled.

P yeah but ...you've done it again there.

NJ Yeah.

P These are just blips that you didn't check? You're putting apostrophes in plurals.

NJ Yeah. Well I obviously didn't check that because the computer does it for you as well.

P Sometimes that's more trouble than it's worth isn't it?

NJ Yeah

P So he's talking about.... You just start a new paragraph when you feel like it.

NJ Mmm.

P But if you think ...you want to pick up your marks again.

NJ Yeah I do but then I must be saying it yeah.

P Then how do you think you're going to push your marks up?

NJ I think planning's one for me definitely because I just tend to- it's always in my head - it's like that project now for Variety in English- I sort of know what I want to do but I need to really really sit down and have a good few hours thinking right.

P So have you got a clear idea what you want to do?

NJ I think I want to do something like Lancashire versus Yorkshire - dialect.

P Why don't you make an appointment with me for next week?

NJ Yeah I might do-

P And that'll force you into spending a couple of hours thinking about it and getting something down on paper. If you came to see me this time next week.

NJ Right. Cause it's like 100% isn't it?

P Yeah and you can't afford-

NJ As well what I've found the last few weeks is that the more time I put in- ((subsequent break in tape but already transcribed))

P Perhaps- What do you think about the feedback that you get. Do you think it's detailed enough? Do you think it helps?

NJ Yeah I do Yeah. Compared to what I've had previously at college you know you never had like a couple of sheets given. It were just like comments but you know yeah.

P So it's just a case perhaps of making sure you plan out your time so that you've got time to do these things.

NJ Yeah definitely

P What you want to do is give the best possible work in-

NJ Yeah I do

P that you can... come back to it and pick it up-

NJ Yeah definitely – instead of being last minute

**Int. 8a      8<sup>th</sup> Feb 2000**

**Jane Lawrence (Student 8)**

**JL = Jane Lawrence**

**P=Pat Hill**

P      What do you think your strengths are? Which piece of writing do you think is your best?

JL      I'm good at getting ideas and I'm usually enthusiastic - I like the media stuff cause it gives you something to get your teeth into. My report was OK but I could have made it a bit more formal like.

P      Is there any particular thing about your writing that you're worried about ?

JL      I know I don't always check it very carefully, but I'm getting better at proof-reading. I just want to get it down and get the ideas right.

P      What are the main points you remember from feedback?

JL      Proof-reading. I make stupid little mistakes but it's because I'm rushing to get things in. I can do it really.

P      Do you always read the feedback?

JL      Yes but I had lots of assignments to do at once so -It's better now I've got a computer at home. I used to write it all by hand and check that but once I'd typed it up I just ran it off but now I can check it on the computer and I ask other people to check it as well.

P      Have you tried reading your work out loud - like we talked about?

JL      No not yet but I'm going to try it.

P      Can you think of anything that's made a difference to your writing style?

JL      Not really. If I had a bit more time to think about it. Some of the stuff is a bit hard to get your head round so you are all on to do that really.

P      How do you start a piece of writing? Do you do a plan for instance?

JL      Yes. Once I've got my notes from my research I do a plan but I don't always stick to it. Once I've done it it's in my head when I'm writing but I sometimes change it as I'm going along

P      How do you think your writing has developed over the semester?

JL      I'm getting better at checking and I'm going to get better organised this time.

P      Do you think better time management will help your writing?

JL      Definitely. I know I skimp on stuff like checking and referencing 'cause I just concentrate on the topic and that but I'm definitely going to be more organised next year.

**Int. 8b            21 June 2000**

**Jane Lawrence (Student 8)**

**P = Pat Hill**

**JL = Jane Lawrence**

P        What do you feel generally about your writing?

JL        I feel like I mentioned last semester that my time management is pretty poor and because I'm doing a combined degree with French as well. I find that it feels like I'm weakening on one, like last semester I was quite weak on French and I was making stupid mistakes so I concentrated more on it this semester so I was a bit weaker-

P        You feel as though your writing suffered?

JL        Yes definitely.

P        When you say this is weaker, what are your particular problems? Do you know what they are?

JL        I think like this documentary essay- I'm not sure I wrote what I was supposed to write- you know, don't know if it like answered the question properly what was asked of me because I did do a lot of reading but I wasn't sure whether I was reading the right stuff or getting the right information. I did a lot of reading and looked up on the 'net and stuff like that so-

P        Looking at documentaries – but the idea was to write a review.

JL        Yes. The first part, the abstract, the first part of that I really concentrated on that because I looked in newspapers and seen how these things are written and that's alright, how I wrote that one-

P        So you actually knew what you were doing in that-

JL        Yes

P        And it's quite good, but this you've actually done really what you would do in an academic essay.

JL        Yes.

P        You've not thought enough about the style-

JL        Yeah that's what I'm not very good at though like pinpointing what type of- and how I need to write it and where to look for it. I remember asking Shelley and Ian to read it for me and they were like 'yeah, but I did this but I don't know if I've done it right because no one's got the confidence to say 'yes I'm confident that I'm getting it right this.'

P        Did you look at any reviews? Did you manage to get any out of the magazines – *Sight and Sound*?

JL        I looked at a couple but it was when it was like when I'm writing it's still I automatically will just write it like that because I think I've got the information in I think 'Oh it'll be all right' because I think 'Oh I've got the information in' You sort of think you can get away with it because-

P        The content's all right?

JL        Yeah.



P But style is different and the trouble is because this was meant to be a review that was a big part of the mark goes to the fact that it should read like a review-

JL Yeah.

P It should be reasonably entertaining ...nobody wants that kind of factual information about documentaries in a review so what about -

JL Can't remember. Oh is that where we looked at two different newspapers.

P Yes it's the newspapers this one.

JL Oh yeah. Yeah, that one was all right. When I handed that in I didn't feel worried about it. I was quite all right about that. I thought I'd done what I was supposed to do-

P Because it's a more academic-

JL Exactly. That's what I'm used to you see.

P Right. Do you feel that your writing has changed at all? Do you think you have learned things about your writing style? ...Do you think it's improved?

JL I think so but it's like in areas where, you know, writing for journalists, you can see your writing improve a lot more because you got your first piece of writing back; you've got your comments and you knew exactly where to improve it. You can read it again and again and then you'd see the mistakes and you'd see how it doesn't flow and you'd do it again so that the next time you wrote another article it was easier to write.

P I've not got those here?

JL No, that's what CP has got. I found those easier to write – a lot easier because at first I found it really hard to write the articles because when you're reading it it's different to when you're having someone else read your work. It's a lot different so but yeah because we had to write the same article again but just improve on it grammatically, how it flowed, everything about it.

P So that's actually worked because you had to reflect on what you were doing-

JL Exactly. You didn't just read it and think 'Oh I've made a mistake again. Oh dear.' You thought 'Oh right, I've got a chance to improve it so you do. You work harder on improving it because you know you've got a chance to do it again. Rather than 'Oh well that's it I made a mistake so-

P What kind of feedback did you get on those?

JL Well he'd like say for example, I wrote one about Huddersfield and some parts of it were a bit chatty and so he could just give me a couple of words on how I could improve it and then I'd read it through and think 'Yeah that makes more sense'. So I wrote a review of a TV programme that came on and again the content was there, again I'll get the content in but it was just how I'd written it and it wasn't interesting enough for the reader and it didn't give enough information for the reader to see what the programme was about. It was a bit brief and so doing that automatically when I read it back I thought 'Oh yeah that's exactly what they were looking for' and then you'd read some again- somebody else's, 'cause he'd read some out and you'd hear it and then you'd think 'Oh yeah, I could have done that'. You know what I mean 'cause you always know what you can put in but it's just doing it when

you're there and you've got to do it. You know what they're looking for but it's hard when you've actually got to put it on paper.

P So you think it works- the fact that you've had chance to look at it again, that you've got feedback and been able to-

JL And the fact that he reads out somebody else's as well-

P And the fact that you've heard – you've got models to go for.

JL Exactly.

P So that's the kind of feedback that you need?

JL Exactly. You need models to go on so you know exactly what you're doing.

P So based on what you've done this year have you got any ideas – any changes that you need to make? Do you feel able to cope with it now. Do you feel as if-

JL I feel able to cope with it but I also feel-especially after this semester I feel there's room for improvement again because I'm travelling back and forth and sometimes I'll get home and I'll be tired- sometimes I just won't proof read and I'll just think so long as I'm getting it done that's fine but now I realise that it's not enough. Sometimes I'll need to read it again or just to make sure that it does actually make sense. I'm not missing out little words that'll change the sense of it.

P So you need that false deadline – you need a deadline before the real deadline so that you can do it and then put it away for a couple of days.

JL Exactly and go back to it.

P And next year it counts.

JL Yeah but I can't wait for next year. I'm looking forward to it 'cause I'm going to think 'right I'm gonna concentrate'

P Sometimes the first year is just getting it done so you can-

JL Yeah know where you've gone wrong so you can just improve on it for next year.

### **Writing Log 8c October – December 1999**

#### **Jane Lawrence**

Me as a writer

I lack flow and consistency- I have the ideas however it does not always link

I often lack confidence with my writing and worry about what is there and often don't look at the comments.

20.10.99

... NB: Reader must follow + understand argument interest

\*choice of vocab – slang etc

\* Any academic research

Nov. 99

Popular Culture Essay

Do I go through feedback?

Anything to improve?  
Forgetting to hand in draft etc?

Just as my tutor pointed out – proof reading is necessary and would probably make a difference between passing and failing –

i.e. – check grammar, spelling & sentence structure.

i.e. – check where points – linking is possible – clarity and flow.

Dec. 99

1000 wd. Report

- see pages 16-19 in order to make sure correct writing style and information is submitted.

\* As learned from bibliography Assignment

- make use of all resources available espec. CD-ROM.

**Francis Martin (Student 9)**

**P** = **Pat Hill**

**FM** = **Francis Martin**

P Can you think of any overall ideas that you got from feedback you've been getting? Anything that sticks in your mind? Anything that you know that is -

FM I'm writing colloquial a lot of the times and I don't know, they always-

P When they say you write too colloquially-

FM They say I don't write in the standard that it should be for an assignment.

P In academic-

FM Yeah an academic standard. I write as if I'm still ( )

P Right and do you know how to change that?

FM Yeah I just come out with bigger, fancier words.

P How do you think you can change it?

FM I don't know. There's just a style to writing things. I get carried away when I'm writing I just put points in like I think.

P So if you write as you speak as you say-

FM It's not entirely as I speak but it's like I always put in like 'I think' or things like that instead of just writing and backing things up. I don't put my references in enough

P Why do you not put your references do you think?

FM I do put 'em in, I just don't back 'em up well.

P Right. How many times do you draft your work?

FM About twice. To be honest with you I haven't put that much effort in this year as I should have done- thinking that my final two years are the two years for my degree and they are when I need to put more effort in, which is a bit silly.

P So basically you just -

FM I just aimed to pass this year which is-

P -aimed to get them in and pass which - you're not on your own.

FM -stupid really. Yeah I know.

P But ...if you've got grammatical problems to just change them like that -

FM That is a first draft that one.

P What strategy do you think you'll use for changing it?

FM I'll have to read things like I'm reading things and change 'em and get people to see 'em.

P Are you planning to do something else ( ) about it?

FM Yeah, I am actually erm I'm planning to work on my writing and stuff, like, my friend's mother's is a teacher and she's gonna give me help and she teaches English.

P Righ.

FM 'Cause I do really need to put effort into next year plus I'm trying to do work shadowing but that's nothing to do with my writing ((laughs))

P Spelling seems to be-

FM Mmm. These were on my - when I first started term I had a laptop which was a company laptop therefore it didn't have any programmes -

P A spell check.

FM -didn't have a spell check or anything

P But you've got a spell check now?

FM I've got one yeah but at the start I was just going through and then I wasn't really checking them like I should have done.

P Right.

FM And that was one of the first ones where I- I read it afterwards and I was laughing to myself. There were just silly spelling mistakes.

P So I've said 'non-standard forms' and 'proof-reading skills' so you're very aware of that yourself?

FM Mmm. I haven't proof-read properly which is my own fault.

P When you proof read at all do you proof read on screen or do you-

FM No I do print it out and proof read it but it's just a case of whereas I should print it out, proof read it and then leave it for a few days and go back to it and then read it again and make my miss-things. I'm tending to do it the night before -proof reading it the hour before it's due in.

P So here again you've got 'Loose writing'. What do you think 'Loose writing' means? That's two people that have said that - 'Loose writing' What do you think that means?

FM I'm not too sure.

P Neither am I. ((Both laugh))

FM Maybe it means I'm not to the point and I go off.

P 'Poor phrasing. Too many 'this' constructions, incomplete sentences and weak punctuation, shame because you've...so actually, he says it's an intelligent response but 'the quality of your writing- too involved and cramped -stops you getting the mark that you deserve.' Now it's a shame isn't it?

FM Mmm.

P The fact is you're right, the marks don't count towards your degree but it's practice. It's practice at getting something that actually does meet-

FM You don't realise that until the end of the year. It got a lot harder at the end of the year when, with R's, when I failed that - that brought it home but these other two, not sailed through, but I passed them and not put the utmost effort in

P Right, ((reads out feedback - difficult to decipher fully)) descriptive. So have you been doing much research yourself?

FM That was er- Is that the one with the questionnaire?

P Yeah.

FM We should have done. We did do a questionnaire round Ashenhurst and things like that and we took from personal experiences. We did get quite a bit of information.

P See ...did make an effort.

FM Was that one not for you as well?

P No it was A.

FM I don't know what that one is then. There's one where I did a questionnaire with you but I don't know what that one is.

P So, you can do it. It's just a question of -

FM Trying.

P -of effort..., your writing habits are actually quite set and you have to-

FM I've noticed that from a lad Paul who's a good friend of mine on the course. When we both do it at the same time like, if it's a deadline and we're doing it really late, we'll write practically the same essay but he's just got the flow of language. He's got such good writing style whereas he's getting 60's and 70's from the way he's writing and that's where I get the 50's for the same essay.

P That's right ...your writing at this stage, by the time you're your age, it's very much ... But you can do it. But as you say, it will take some organisation; it will take a different approach.

FM Well I'm definitely going to put more effort in next year and get some help to improve because I want to get a decent degree.

Int. 10a      7<sup>th</sup> June 2000

**David Michael (Student 10)**

**P = Pat Hill**

**DM = David Michael**

- P      Can you just tell me in your own words what you think about your writing- your writing style – any problems or anything particularly good about it or-
- DM     I'm not too good at the literature side of it because I did language at A level so I'm not good at the description bits. I don't know- my style's a bit informal sometimes. I always go for like a newspaper or magazine style rather than a formal –like- I always seem to get the wrong kind of style.
- P      So it's the actual writing style, how you put it together. So what kind of feedback do you remember? What kind of feedback have you been getting- what has it been mainly about?
- DM     Erm
- P      Is there anything that sticks in your mind about the feedback?
- DM     (      ) become lax in referencing.
- P      And have you done anything about it? Do you think you know what to do about it?
- DM     I think my work's getting better now because I've changed the way I do it - try to be more formal.
- P      Formal in terms of writing-
- DM     Yeah.
- P      So what's the difference? What are you actually – When you say formal, what are you changing?
- DM     Well I was addressing- I was speaking like I was addressing like myself er I don't know.
- P      Let's have a look at a bit of the feedback and see- It says here 'Sentences' underlined and exclamation mark ((both laugh)) so presumably you weren't always writing in sentences.
- DM     That's probably because I didn't understand what I was writing about and I was writing just –I was just babbling.
- P      Right so you misunderstood so this isn't as much to do with the writing as the content.
- DM     I didn't understand what I was writing about. I was just trying to make a thousand words.
- P      Right. Let's have a quick look. What do you think you could do if you didn't understand? What did you try to do?
- DM     Dunno. Got as much research as I could about, about the two books and read it
- P      So you actually put information together rather than actually thought about what it actually meant?
- DM     I was basically writing – getting as much information as I could and then putting it into my own words rather than- because I didn't understand, I didn't understand the basic topic.
- P      The Narrative?
- DM     Yeah.

P Did you get any background information to help you understand it. I mean do you understand it now?

DM Erm better because I did a bit of reading afterwards ((both laugh)) which is a bit silly. I end up leaving too late and then I did the reading afterwards.

P So perhaps that was more the content but it doesn't look like an essay does it? I mean that's part of thing – the different colours and the lines and it looks less like an essay doesn't it and your spelling is a little bit erm-

DM I didn't know- I couldn't- That was one of the first pieces and my spell-check wasn't working for it. It's -

P So do you have a problem with spelling?

DM No. It's just typing sometimes.

P Right so it's the typing ... 'Check possessive apostrophes also watch grammar. You should refer to Simpson ( ). So 'A reasonably good explanation'

DM With that one. I've done that before. I didn't do my background reading I was just thinking a lot of what I already know. It worked but I should have done more background reading.

P So you didn't reference it because you'd done it at A level... more than the actual getting into the real-

DM ( ) and it's in sections and I can break it up I don't have to write so much on I don't end up having to babble ( ) I can break up the sections and write detailed things in each area.

P One way.... Do you plan your essays at all?

DM No. I always put like, start off I just write it down on the computer screen, things I want to mention ( ) and then fill in the gaps where required.

P So you end up with headings but you need to perhaps think about making sure it stands on its own without the headings as well. What about proof-reading? What do you do about checking it before you hand it in?

DM I just read it. I print off a copy and read it - I think it's best to print it off.

P So you do actually print it off for a final look through. The thing is if you read it through and try and find everything then you probably won't do a particularly good job-

DM I don't, I just glance through it really because once I've done it I just want to look at the cohesion of it – see if it's good

P Yeah but...been watching for that since? Or does it go straight in and straight out?

DM I just carry on as normal.

P I mean when you noticed that did you think 'What does she mean about apostrophes? Do I know how to use them?

DM No. I do know how to use them. I don't know it's just I make mistakes during typing.

P So you do know how to do it... she means by 'Watch grammar' Do you have any idea?

DM No.

P When you get something back would you look at it -in detail?

DM I think so.

P ((Reads out a sentence from work)) Is that grammar or is it just a missing word?

DM A missing word.

P What should it read?

DM ((Discusses possibilities))

P ... but we're going back to time here-

DM A day's a luxury.



P Yeah... You've not got all of your work here.

DM No ( )

P Could you have another look to see if you can find anything else?

DM I'll have a look; there's a few folders ( )

P High mark from-

DM Yeah.

P 'A lot of relevant information. You organise it quite well. The overall argument could be more effective. ( ) presentation, a few points of style to look at'

DM I did two drafts of this. The first one he said about the style was too informal and relaxed like a magazine article or journalist.

P This is meant to be an essay is it?

DM Er, yeah.

P Erm I'm not quite sure ...J had marked that you'd put bullet points in. So

DM I'm trying to think what else I had.

P There must be others because- other literature ones perhaps. What literature have we got? Who was that with?

DM I don't know his name at all. He turned up for about two lessons.

P P?

DM Yeah I've not got two for J have I? There was another one that's been sent off. I don't know where it's gone.

P The second one but you've not got it back.

DM J hasn't chased it. I don't know where she is I can never find her. I caught her once and she went 'One of the staff's off ill' so-

P She's in today

DM Is she. She said one of the staff's off ill so and she's marking yours and she remembers seeing it and she knew what my mark was round about and she said you can have it back soon.

P What subject was it for?

DM Introduction to Narrative.

P Oh it's the second one. So you think your writing's improved anyway?

DM Yeah

P What has improved it do you think? Have you taken note of feedback or is it that you've generally got more experience

DM I'm not sure actually. I mean the feedback, some of the stuff I didn't know like the punctuation cause it wasn't- I don't think I'm bad at punctuation 'cause I know how to do it all; it's just typing and stuff.

P So a lot of it's to do with time management rather than-

DM Yeah as far as grammar's concerned if I had time to do all that, get myself time I'd be fine but at the time I'd leave it till the last night all the time; other times I've got on to it a day before

P So have you been any better this year – studying?

DM No not at all. Well I have actually yeah. I've been doing it the night before. Some people have been doing it on the day

**Phillip Miles (Student 11)**

**P** = **Pat Hill**  
**PM** = **Phillip Miles**

- P Is there any particular thing about your writing that you're worried about?
- PM No it's just if I've no previous knowledge of the subject I sometimes struggle to get started.
- P So it's more the content? ( )?
- PM At the moment we're doing a history module which I've never studied about before so I'm doing an essay I have to go and get all the books I've got do all the research and read pages on the subject.
- P So once you've got familiarity with the subject-
- PM I feel more confident getting started when but ( ) sometimes if you have no previous knowledge of the subject you're not definite about your answer.
- P No you can't really write if you don't know what you're talking about -
- PM ( it's hard sometimes )
- P What do you think your strengths are? Do you feel pretty confident about your writing?
- PM Yeah. If I've got previous knowledge of the subject. I-
- P What are your best bits of writing? What do you like doing?
- PM I liked journalistic style and the Introduction to writing module I enjoyed that. Once in rough – do this – easy to do.
- P So it's more factual writing that you like. So what about the feedback that you get? What do you remember about the feedback?
- PM Some say you need more research and some say 'more practice in your writing style.
- P What do you think they mean by the writing style?
- PM Sometimes I just start waffling on to like take up your word count. Make sure that every sentence you use is worth saying and doesn't repeat on the same subject - repeating myself all the time.
- P So how do you start a piece of writing? Do you do a plan?
- PM Well, especially with the history essays you get like a kind of general debate of the essays. Sometimes it's like two sides of the argument so I get those into like paragraphs and deal with-introduction ( ).
- P So do you actually plan it on paper?
- PM Yes.
- P You actually decide which bits you're going to do in relation to the title?
- PM You usually have two sides to the argument and you discuss each side of the argument. An introduction just to kind of introduce my essay and then the main points you're going to discuss and then a conclusion about what you've discussed.
- P So the main feedback is about style you think – 'Your writing needs to be tightened up'. What do you think they mean by that?
- PM I think that's about... ( ) He wants to make sure that I'm not saying things that aren't necessary ( ) sentences.
- P -and about references and that kind of thing.

PM Yes our first - I've not been doing any references I've just picked up what to do.

P So where did you pick up - ?

PM ( ) Well usually I try and get them off the list.

P So you just realised through feedback -

PM Yeah S K ( ) about plagiarism( ).

P So there's some ( ) says that you didn't answer the question.

PM Yeah Well I did one and got stuck with a certain part of the essay like this one I wasn't entirely sure and I struggled so I just stuck bits in -

P You knew about something so you put it in - You won't do that again?

PM ( )

P So what about when you've finished a piece of work. How do you check it's OK?

PM Well usually I just read it through - read it through maybe once or twice.

P Are you using a word processor?

PM ( ) using a computer ( ) using the spell check.

P Do you think that's making it better?

PM Yes Our first er. Well I got used to using it on Introduction to IT and having to do work on and get used to it's like ( ).

P So you use the spell check. Do you use the grammar check as well?

PM Yes I usually use it just to check my sentences.

P So if you're going about doing an essay now. Someone gave you an essay to do, you plan it. Do you plan it out still on paper or do you go straight over to the word processor.

PM No I'll go and get some notes -

P get your notes from your resources.

PM Yeah and then do make a draft with different - not just write it all entirely but with different sections of the essay. Then do like an introduction and conclusion( ).

P So you plan it on paper first then go to the word processor. So when you've typed it out what do you do then?

PM Before I hand it in I just read it through and then if it's if there's anything that I need to change it's easier to change on the word processor obviously that's a big advantage.

P So would you type it all out and then read it through straight away?

PM Yeah.

P On the screen?

PM No I'd print it out.

P You'd print it out?

PM Yeah then read it ( ) in the screen( ).

P But you'd print it out and then you'd check it straight away?

PM Yeah I think sometimes I've started getting someone else to see - Does this make sense or-

P Do you ever manage to get it so that you're actually doing it before the deadline when it's got to be in by?

PM Last semester's - it's half an hour sometimes on the day of the deadline ( ).

P Yes... So once you've checked it now - What have you felt about the feedback you've had? Do you always read the feedback?

PM Yeah, I always read the comments, - if it's constructive hopefully ( ).

P So do you think you've noticed a difference in your writing?

PM Yeah I think I'm getting more confident ( ) I always try to - I was just thinking about getting the content.

P Do you get any handbook or -

PM I've got this from the History Dept.

P 'Guide to Writing Essay Writing' and did you use it?

PM I've read it but not really. I referred back to it but it's quite dull. If you get stuck-

P So when you got it did you just read right the way through it or did you use it when you got an essay –

PM I flicked through it and then read it again. That was past the start of the year.

P And does this tell you what's wanted?

PM Yeah it does.

P Right Michael. Thanks... If you can give me as much work as you can.

**William Richards (Student 12)**

**P =Pat Hill**

**WR = William Richards**

P      Right so the first thing is, in terms of when you came here what you thought about your writing skills. What you thought you might need to develop – as honestly as you can.

WR     Erm things like, obviously the content.

P      But you were quite confident about your writing skills?

WR     Er no. They needed polishing.

P      That's what you felt when you came at the time?

WR     Definitely. Yeah. I needed to learn the nuts and bolts of essays and assignments.

P      So what had you done before you came here then?

WR     Just GCSE and A level.

P      So you expected essays and so on to be different?

WR     I did yeah.

P      What about when you got your first piece of work?

WR     What do you mean?

P      When you actually got the first assignment to do and you had to start writing, did you feel that you could approach it confidently or-

WR     No I felt as if I was just stabbing in the dark.

P      Which one was it do you remember?

WR     It was Media, Perception and Inquiry, seminar log. I wasn't sure how to go about setting it out.

P      What about when you got it back?

WR     Well after the first one I knew what to do, even if I did write too much.

P      Yeah so the feedback was useful even though you weren't sure to start with?

WR     Yeah.

P      What about working after that because you had quite a lot of different types of assignment. What about the first essay?

WR     That was Introduction to Narrative. I more or less just stuck to like an old A level paper.

P      And how did that go down?

WR     Quite well.

P      So you didn't think there were any massive changes there?

WR     Not massive. Things like having bibliographies.

P      Bibliography is one of the biggest changes isn't it?

WR     And also you treat your quotations and things like that differently, embody them in your text, in your writing.

P      But you picked that up from?

WR     Just reading textbooks.

P      And was the feedback from your first assessment useful?

WR     Yes very much. That was one of the first ones.

P      Well written and well presented so; You need to make an example of (     ) so you knew you had to do that. You understand these obviously.

WR     Yes.

P It says 'You have a lovely turn of phrase'. So that's something.

WR It was a very encouraging ( ).

P ((reads from feedback))...commas.

WR I stop ( ) I need to work on my punctuation.

P 'A well written piece of analysis ( ) apart from fairly minor points of expression. There's hardly anything on it. You've written 'intrinsically' twice ( ) but that's about all. But you were obviously following it; you were getting marks in the sixties so...

WR Yeah.

P Probably with me you had more of a problem; is that fair to say?

WR Yeah definitely I think that the task we had to do each week was such a broad, such a wide amount to cover.

P Yes. The thing is that getting you to the idea that-

WR Editing.

P when you come to a degree..., not attempting to write absolutely everything but didn't you have towards the end ( ) I seem to remember.

WR I think I reached a point where I got bored.

P I can't remember ...we didn't really understand what you were trying to write.

WR Oh yeah. It must have been a Media one.

P This looks like it. Less than encouraging; 'Don't you know what a word count is W?' This is where you had to do the review wasn't it. ( ) And again it's to do with style where you, 'In this assignment I've endeavoured to illustrate' ...we're expecting a more lucid ( ) style. 'Unwieldy sentences' Would you accept that?

WR I do yeah. I need to consider the reader more.

P Yeah. The feedback that you've got here from me. Well expressed overall but some sentences start to break up at the end so perhaps again it's that you start off enthusiastically and - (reads from feedback). What about your creative writing? What did you think about that?

WR Some feedback but I can't read it.

P I should have a copy of that sheet. Let's do that.

'You did well to sustain the central ( ) and the control of the dialect ( ) As a fiction though it needs more central opposition of some kind, more focus on ( ). Yeah so that's - obviously- Did you base it on some experience?

WR Not really. Well secondary experience. My mum did this caring job for a while and I managed to get some of the anecdotes.

P I think if...put more of what's necessary for the story rather than keeping to the 'truth'.

The poems: 'Impressive in range and in ambition. In fact in some cases too ambitious. But it's to your credit that you approached the themes so openly and afresh. This paid off with some striking lines of metaphor ( ) Even if some poems are not entirely convincing or successful, the real success is the bite and edge. So do you approach creative writing and academic writing differently.

WR Definitely. Yes.

P In what sort of way?

WR Well academic writing I suppose I do apply the structures of the essay format more concretely whereas I view creative writing as ( ) It's creative.

P Yeah that's obvious from your poetry yes. You just go for it. Do you enjoy doing it?

WR I do yeah.

P The thing about ...trying to tussle with actually how you put it on paper, how you express it so hopefully this year you'll find ( ).

So how do you feel about your writing now. Do you feel quite confident starting your second year?

WR I feel that I've got a lot to develop. I need to be more succinct, more focused.

P How do you think you'll ( )?

WR Spend more time. Be more focused on –

P How do you approach an assignment? Do you just do the reading and then-

WR Yeah I'll do the reading and see if I can get some notes from that. Work out key points to include.

P One point to focus (advice on focusing on question)... that should stop you doing this massive amount of reading and then having to knock it back. Do you think that would help?

WR Yeah.

P So then you know that you'll have been focusing on the question and that the information that you have will be relevant.

WR I've just started doing seminar logs for poetry. The first one I found it difficult to focus on because I've been going about it in the same way as I usually do. I just ended up with, instead of getting my own ideas and concepts I've ended up with just a page of quotes to stick in an essay.

P Is it a weekly log?

So have you got a better idea of how to approach it?

WR Yeah I think if I do what you suggested.

P Always work from ...rather than everything there is to know on a subject.

WR I tend to see things as a complex mass. It might sound strange but I have a problem focusing on simple-one or two points.

P But the questions ...work out the complexity of the question and then think what you need for each of those areas.

WR Another area I struggle with in writing things like seminar logs is I always feel like I want to write a critique or something like that. We've just been doing FR Leavis and I'd like to put my opinion and I feel restricted.

P Engage with it? ...all you're doing is showing that you understand.

WR One thing I don't like about it is that you're just regurgitating- paraphrasing.

P Yes well ((long section suggesting ways to approach writing for an intelligent but inexperienced audience so that he would be forced into making arguments clear)) ...feedback. How much of it was useful? Were there any bits that stand out as being particularly useful?

WR I think some of the points that you've pulled out about keeping focussed and all about how to write essays. Those are the main points.

P So do you think your writing has changed in the year you've been here?

WR Yeah it has. I think it's matured a bit more but it still needs some work. It needs expressing so it's not exceptionally complex so I need to work on that.

P I think ((advice))...you would be less likely to go off on one in terms of using technical language inappropriately or not explaining things

WR I think that's one of the things I find hardest.

**William Richard (Student 12)**

**WR = William Richard**

**P = Pat Hill**

- P      You know that we agreed to talk about your writing so did that engender any thoughts. What do you think about your own writing?
- WR     In general I think it's deteriorated terribly.
- P      You think there's any specific reason for that?
- WR     I think it's a culmination of reasons. I think I'm feeling a bit tired of university and I'm a bit tired of work to be honest.
- P      Right so-. If you take it back to actually to what you've produced, does writing in the way we ask you to write- is it much harder than writing the way that you want to write. Is it much harder to produce? When you say you're tired of writing-
- WR     Yes.
- P      So what is it that makes it difficult?
- WR     The structure and the format. I think the way we have to write the essay- the style – I think that's in contradiction to what we're actually learning. I mean the content makes you critically conscious and very aware of the theory so that makes some students more critically aware of your own work.
- P      Self conscious?
- WR     Yes.
- P      So you mean that being self conscious of yourself as a writer makes it more difficult to write?
- WR     Yes. You see the paradoxes and the kind of contradictions in what you're learning is kind of telling you to question things so when you apply that to your own writing to the actual academic system and the assessment process- well with me anyway it er manifests itself strangely in bad marks and bad writing and poor syntax and poor grammar. It seems to confuse my writing.
- P      That seems to be what's coming through in places that you're confused but it's not all that way is it? I mean some of the feedback that you've had suggests confusion but on the other hand you've also got things like 'Generally well written – well structured' so it's a combination isn't it. In some pieces it seems better.
- WR     If you think about things that I've learnt this year – things like erm the subjects deconstruction, structuralism - those kind of more philosophical areas those seem to contradict the way I write because they kind of say things like death of the author so the writer is the scripter and on the other side of the assessment there's the reader who's got all these preconceived ideas about their language and meaning is lost.
- P      But the system is that you are writing for the reader. ...reader has to understand clearly that you have understood those concepts.
- WR     Yes but if the concepts you are actually learning say that understanding between two participants in the reading and writing process- if the meaning is kind of dissipated –
- P      It's a question of best fit isn't it? So it's a question of being as clear as you possibly can. The reader-
- WR     What's clear to one person can't be clear to the other.



P Well I wouldn't say ...you've got an idea of what they expect from you so it shouldn't be as much of a problem as you seem to make it?

WR Yes maybe I make it a problem.

P Let's stick to things that you've had in your particular writing so there's still a problem that you write too much.

WR Yes.

P It comes back time and time again: 'Sorry but too long'. So have you made any kind of direct efforts to address that?

WR Yes I have but not wanting to for fear of missing relevant points out that if I did knock down the word count I'd miss out.

P So do you ever read over anything and think 'Well perhaps that wasn't quite as relevant as I thought it was?'

WR Yes.

P Afterwards, when it comes back. So ...Do you think you have a problem finding what's relevant to the question?

WR Yes.

P Do you think you have a problem understanding what's wanted from people?

WR Sometimes er I'm not so sure about how much is required of my own interpretation of something or just the actual – regurgitation of someone else's ideas.

P Well that's always difficult but ...even in essays you quite often tag bits on to discuss why you have gone over the word count or why the question wasn't satisfactory.

((Ended in long discussion centred on his personal ideas about particular staff members))

Int. 12c      20<sup>th</sup> June      2002

**William Richard (Student 12)**

**WR = William Richard**

**P = Pat Hill**

P      Can you tell me how you think your writing's developed over the last three years?

WR    Well it's not developed in the way I'd hoped as I seem to be more self conscious about it.

P      In what way?

WR    Like I said before, they make you think about who you are writing for and I feel like being perverse and not giving them what they want. I don't even think that I want to write anymore whereas before I came it's what I wanted to do.

P      Why?

WR    Well there's this feeling that whatever you want to say will-can be interpreted by someone else in a different way. I don't feel as if I can communicate what I'm thinking.

P      You did some good writing though?

WR    Well yes. There were some essays where I thought I got to the nub of it but there was still so much to say.

P      Do you think your actual writing style has changed?

WR    Yes I think so because I used to write in very long convoluted sentences and I've learned that the reader can't always follow my train of thought so I try to keep them shorter but then I read Derrida and people like that and it's so complex. I don't mean I'm like Derrida I just mean it's hard to put complicated ideas into writing sometimes.

P      Do you think punctuation is important in writing?

WR    Yes I know what you're getting at but it's not that I don't know how; it's just that proof-reading is a bit of a luxury; by the time I've spent so long on a piece of work I get tired of looking at it. I should be thinking of the reader like you say. I do think about it more than I used to. I'm going to leave writing alone for a bit after uni see if I can get the spark back. I'm thinking that teaching might be an option at some point but not yet.

Int. 13a      9<sup>th</sup> February 2000

Sally Sylvester (Student 13)

P = Pat Hill

SS= Sally Sylvester

- P      Is there anything in particular about your writing that you're concerned about?
- SS     Definitely –Yeah. A lot of people say my style is a bit odd. I don't understand what they mean, but from- I've made improvements as I've gone on obviously but-
- P      When you say you've made improvements, do you mean you've just got better marks or have you consciously tried?
- SS     I've tried. I've consciously read what I've done and tried to figure out and then- I've realised yes I could have put that a different way but I've written in the way I've always written. That's what's odd that suddenly that's not right or not 'not right' but could be made better; it's been a bit strange and a lot of my grammar I've had to really sit down and look at it cause it's something I've never been told to look at before even at A level.
- P      What did you think - When you say you've changed your style what do you mean?
- SS     When I've got work back and it said my style's odd or 'try and rephrase this', at first I've looked at it and thought 'there's nothing wrong with my style'. I've had to really sit there and think 'Yeah Sally you've got a ...and you could have reorganised this and then when I've done a draft now I really, really look at it extra specially to see what I'm doing and what's going on.
- P      And you can see that there are things that you can change?
- SS     Oh yeah I think I'm just a bit stubborn ((laugh)).
- P      What kind of things are you actually changing?
- SS     The sentence structure itself, more erm like semicolons and not just-I normally just shove loads of commas in and maybe, I don't know if it's out of laziness or just because that's how I've always done it but I've really had to look at it and think now what I really need to-or that paragraph goes in there or-
- P      So you're looking at structure as a whole as well as sentence structure
- SS     Yeah and then like-
- P      Do you think you tended to write as you speak without really thinking about-
- SS     Yes definitely
- P      What about ...There is a difference between-
- SS     There's some right odd marks
- P      So the feedback that you've got- What do you remember most about the feedback? Good or bad. Are there any particular points from the feedback that have stuck in your mind?
- SS     Definitely. There's one the assignment we did for Narrative, the one on *Beloved*, and I spent about two weeks writing it. I were really pleased with it and I thought it were really good and then I got that back and it's something about 'This is an odd style' and I 'go away from the title' and stuff and I just thought.... I thought it was much better than that but I've read it since and I realise exactly what I've done but I was so pleased with it when I'd finished writing it.

P So you think that even if, you know, you did actually try really hard with it.

SS Oh yeah I spent so long and so many different books and so many drafts and I thought 'right I've really done - cause I really enjoyed the lessons on it and I spent about two weeks solid preparing it and it took me a whole weekend to write it and to actually finish it and I were really proud of it when it were there and when I got it back I were like, I were really disappointed. I mean 54 in't terrible but I were expecting much more.

P You were expecting a better mark?

SS Yes definitely.

P Let's have a quick look at it then and see - because she actually does say: 'You have a slightly odd style; you need to break up your sentences and use conjunctions' ( )so she's saying that you're making your sentences too long.

SS Yeah and when you read it you can see exactly what it is. It wanted some paragraphs that should have gone together.

P Here she says 'syntax '(*Reads out sentence - indecipherable*)Can you see what she's getting at?

SS Yeah it sounds like I should be saying it rather than you should be reading it. It's - That's like an answer I'd have given if I'd been talking about it. It's a bit too-

P You see ...I've automatically stopped-

SS Yeah, you've stopped.

P -and you've just carried on

SS Yeah

P And then 'She is symbolic of the trials of slavery.'((Goes on to discuss sentence structure from the passage in some detail))

P When you did this one you said that you took a long time over it. How did you check it? Afterwards-

SS I just read through it a few times and changed bits and then read through it altogether again and then when I've printed it I sit down and read it again. I don't read it out loud though.

P But all at one stage?

SS I don't leave it.

P We did talk about that didn't we?

SS Yeah.

P Have you tried doing that since?

SS No. I've not had the opportunity yet. This is one of the last things I did.

P It's quite difficult because obviously you have to set yourself a deadline earlier than the deadline but can you see how, when you come back to things -

SS Oh yeah.

P You see things differently don't you?

SS Don't you!

P And reading it out loud, certainly with sentence structure and punctuation-

SS Another thing I'm not worried about is that she says the thought's there and everything's there; it's just the way I'm putting it together. It's not the actual understanding; it's just the actual getting it on the paper.

P How do you start a piece of writing?

Prompt - Do you do a plan for instance?

SS Yes I do a basic plan just like one word for each paragraph and then I'll look at my notes and then highlight it with different colours so that I know which bit goes with which bit and then I'll do a detailed plan and then I normally write my introduction and change that a few times and then I'll write a draft of the essay and then I'll do it

on computer. I don't do my draft on the computer. I know some people say it's a waste of time writing it out but I prefer to have it there so I can scribble.

P It's something that does save time though eventually so...

SS Yeah.

P But you're right ...make your changes.((Reads out a sentence - indecipherable))

SS That doesn't really make sense on its own as a sentence does it when you read it?

P But you can see what you're trying to say.

SS It's not in chronological order at all is it?

P So it needed another word and you actually need either a semi- colon or a full stop to actually make that break.

SS Yeah ((discussion on other sentences))

P If you try to get a draft done ...actually get things like punctuation...  
Let's have a look at some other work ( )

SS I just think he felt sorry for me so he gave me good marks.  
I didn't deserve the marks he gave me.

P And there isn't any-

SS No there's not any feedback.

P There's no feedback.

SS I thought that- I didn't realise they were our marks. Someone told me. I got it back and thought he must have left out a sheet then someone said 'No. They're the marks at the top'

P So you've actually not got any feedback.

SS No, well there were one or two comments in pencil

P 'Well argued and well presented work' and what about the other one?  
75 for that one. What was that one?

SS I got 75 for my report. That's my report which I did spend a long time doing it but I know it could have been much better basically because I think he's had to mark it like that because you know all our work was put back and back.

P 'Excellent. Interesting material. Brilliantly presented but see my comments on (indecipherable)' - ((Reads out sections of report and discusses academic style and aspects of syntax))

SS It's not worth 75%.

P It's not worth 75%. But ...- that you'd worked hard on it so it's not entirely undeserved....- the first year is all a learning process -

SS Oh yeah.

P You've obviously thought about what a report is ...how you might have improved it. ((Discusses more aspects of formal writing)) The spread of your marks is-

SS It's amazing. It confuses me a little bit.

P I'm sure it will Sally.

SS Everyone's like it though. Everyone's the same at the moment, getting different- The thing is that I've always been better at - not the technical - like the semiotics and - I've always been better at the narrativy stuff, and this time I'm much better at the - I'm not saying 'much better at' but there's only one way of doing it right - phonetics and transcription and stuff.

P So you've got 75 65, 60 60 on your analysis, semiotics yeah?

SS Oh yeah that was the advert wasn't it?

P So you're doing fine on that and then you've got 'good insightful analysis. Clear understanding of the terms but be careful of sentence structure and punctuation'.

SS Yeah. It's the same in everything.

P It's the same thing that's coming back every time isn't it? So – you should be really encouraged by the marks you're getting. The content seems to be –

SS Yeah. That's what - at first I thought oh no I'm never going to be able to do this cause obviously I haven't got the knack ( ) but I'm not worried because the knowledge is – I am worried about it but I'm not desperate because the knowledge is there.

P The thing is- the content is there and, in fact, people are obviously pulling out that you're trying and understanding the concepts especially-

SS yeah ((reads out feedback and discusses – indecipherable))

P 'a multitude of basic errors in English'

SS ( )

P I mean the thing is that we're all human and all tutors will have different ideas

SS Oh it's fine yeah

P – but there should be a consensus as to what's good and what isn't so you need to think about – ((reads out a sentence – indecipherable)). You can see that he's right about the sentence structure there?

SS Yeah

P I mean you've not even attempted to put it into sentences.

SS No

P You've just actually put it as it comes. Now in the past perhaps ( ) They've got the sense of what you're saying and they've been putting the punctuation in for you. Has anybody ever commented on that before?

SS No. No. That's what's so strange. But when I'm embarrassed – like this. I just went back and like forgot about it because I just thought- I thought he's right; I mean obviously he was a bit petty because he didn't want to be there and we didn't want to be there –

P ((Reads out a sentence from essay -indecipherable))  
What makes a sentence? What's the most important thing?

SS It's got to make sense – on its own

P What's the ...had been on the third page instead of the first you might have ended up with a different mark.

SS Oh yeah. I do realise -

P The fact that they're on the front page as being not complete sentences –

SS I don't know what on earth I was trying to say there. I've looked at it for ages and I even asked my mum I said 'What have I put here?' I don't know what on earth it was supposed to be.

P ((reads out sentence)) Again you've not got a main verb  
But reading that out- I'm sure if you read that out to yourself, you'd pick it up.

SS Oh yeah. ((Goes on to discussion about 'personality clash' with individual tutor))

**Int. 13b**                      **31 October 2000**  
**Sally Sylvester (Student 13)**

**P = Pat Hill**  
**SS= Sally Sylvester**

- P        So if we start with just looking at some of your work and talking about how you feel about it and explain generally.
- SS       That was Writing 2.
- P        Yeah creative writing. How did you feel about that?
- SS       I don't like doing creative writing at all which some people think is odd because I like to tell stories.
- P        You like to tell stories but you don't like to write them.
- SS       No I just don't know I didn't enjoy it at all I had to force myself to write a story for a-
- P        You like to know what's wanted of you don't you? – More structure.
- SS       Yeah oh yeah I need- Yeah I like a structure and so it was- I do like to express my own opinions and things but to a structure and not just-. He said that everything's got room for improvement -that I did -which I could see but if you can't put your mind to something then it's never going to be- but he also said that he marked everyone very low; that's what he does. Everyone got around the same mark anyway so I know that it wasn't terrible and I know that I could do a lot better with things I did write.
- P        ((reads from feedback too low to catch))
- SS       Yes I can see that.
- P        He does actually say 'Poor expression and punctuation affect this mark again'.
- SS       Yeah which is -
- P        How do you feel about that?
- SS       Which I knew was going to happen because I wrote it in about an hour to be quite honest. The story itself I wrote in a couple of nights and then I only checked it the once.
- P        So you feel it's down to not checking it?
- SS       Oh I know I didn't put enough. – I know that if I'd checked it, it would have been-I would have got a better mark for the story but I know that everyone else were in the same boat; it was just the way that - We got so fed up of going for an hour to a lesson when we knew what we had to do and he couldn't help us anymore. It was like going to so many weeks for a lesson when in the first week he told us what we had to do for us assignment and then.
- P        So you felt that in terms of creative writing there was nothing you could learn?
- SS       No I don't think I learnt anything just because I thought and I struggled with the idea of 'How can you think my poem is any better than anyone else's when I've written it. How can you say I've got 50 or 70 when I've written a poem that means something to me?
- P        You don't think that studying other people's poems gives you an idea of technique? I mean the ideas are yours.
- SS       Yeah. I just –
- P        What did you do in the lesson?
- SS       We did study- the creative writing - the story – we hardly did anything on that was just for us to do which we did.
- P        You didn't do anything on techniques of story writing – narrative and-

SS Yes but it never seemed to come off; It was always- we had a lecture down at Canal side West after the lesson and he was always obsessed with the fact that we only had half an hour and if he hadn't have gone on about us only having half an hour for the entire lesson we would have actually had some lesson. Everyone was getting so frustrated that we just- Saying that the story itself as soon as I'd written the draft I liked parts of it but because I'd left it until the last minute I couldn't do anything else with it but the poems I did a couple of them I really enjoyed writing and the rest I just. There is one that I really liked which is that one and he does mention that it has a lot of room for improvement and |I can see that it does. I did enjoy writing that one but because I was 'I'm not going to do this I don't like it but when I actually did it I did quite enjoy it but basically the reason the punctuation's bad in the story is because I didn't check it enough.

P So when you say you didn't check it enough, you don't automatically punctuate it; is that what you're saying?

SS No I struggle; oh I do struggle with my grammar and punctuation definitely.

P Do you not find it any easier than you did?

SS Yes. I do find it easier than I did because I read it out, due to you actually I read it out loud to myself and it helps an awful lot. These two are the Literature in History ones that we had all the problems with you know in the lessons with -----

P ((Reads out feedback)) 'Problem with apostrophes and possessives. Well expressed in general despite some confusing sentences' There's still- What can we do about this?

SS I don't know. I can read it and think it sounds fine but then if someone sits there and points it out to me I think 'Oh that's terrible' But I do leave it now. I do leave I and then go away and then come back to it a couple of hours later and some of it; it's definitely helped. It's improved; I know it's improved.

P You're not putting apostrophes in.

SS I don't understand apostrophes at all. I've got so many books at home and I've read about apostrophes and I just get so confused. It might sound really simple but I do not understand apostrophes. I do not understand semi-colons and I do not understand apostrophes.

P Did I give you a handout on punctuation?

SS I don't think so.

P Here. Let's just quickly go through this. ((Explains apostrophes and semi-colons from handout and goes through some of the sentences from essay))

P There's a lot of feedback and it does seem relevant. If you understand what he's saying; he's marked very closely hasn't he.

SS Yes he has.

P Details ( ).

SS I couldn't do anything with that one at all. I know how to do the logs but we didn't know anything.

P You just got handouts.

SS Yeah so everyone's is exactly the same.

P One way of doing it is...

SS I think that's the other one.

P ((reads from feedback) )So he's not said anything about-

SS No about- I've read that and he says 'Good for my ( ) but it's not.

P 'Good general- Well expressed'

SS Yeah I know.

P Well he must have felt it was or he wouldn't say so.



SS This one we didn't have him at all for these lessons. This was another one where we just had to do it on -off our own back. We had ----- who came in for a few lessons but he actually marked them so.

P ((Reads from essay))

SS It makes sense when you've explained about the –

P You've just got to put the ideas together. Reading it out should actually do that for you; it should give you that kind of-

SS But I think that sometimes that I force myself to make sense of what I've written. Do you know? Yeah.

P Now there, a semi-colon would be appropriate because it still joins it but a comma isn't really strong enough.

SS 'Apostrophes'.

P But you know about that. It is quite well expressed though. You can follow it.

SS It's getting a lot better isn't it than it was last year/semester. I was writing like I thought.

P It's strange that he's not said anything about your apostrophes because there are just as many as in that one.

SS As the other one.

P That's my writing. One I've done.

SS Yes it's Media.

P 'I appreciate the effort gone into presentation but it makes it difficult to mark'. Oh yes, it's shiny paper and you can't write on it ' There are places where sentences are unwieldy'. The thing is about doing it in the style of a newspaper review you would expect shorter sentences anyway in this kind of entertaining-(( Reads out a sentence)) Does it start there?

SS When I read the reviews they all started with where it was set.

P ((Reads out a sentence))

SS It's a huge sentence isn't it?

P And it doesn't help the sense of it does it?

SS No.

P So how could you break it up do you think? ....  
((Quite long extract from piece)) semi-colon?

SS That'll be the computer; it won't be me. It won't be me at all.

P ((Reads out several sentences.)) Can you see how that works?

SS That would have made it more words though ((laughs)) It was difficult.

P Yes that might have affected- ((strict word count))

SS 'To side with...'

P Did you know why it was underlined?

SS No.

P I should have made it clearer - expression – support perhaps?

SS Yeah.

P There where you've used 'the bad guys' you've put it in inverted commas.

SS Yeah I'm aware of that.

P ((reads out very long sentence))

SS ((Laughs))

P You know don't you? But there was a good attempt to get the style. 'Syntax and expression start to go off at the end' Let's look at the end then. These are- You probably just missed a word out. Yes that's what it is you've just missed a word out; it makes perfect sense but you've missed a word out. ((Reads out))

SS More formal tone.

P Yes (( reads out)). It doesn't make sense does it?  
SS No it would without –  
P You've changed it and not deleted the other one. It's minor; it's not-  
SS It's better than it was.  
P You've probably got fed up of checking it. It's a long piece of writing isn't it? The thing is it's never going to be easy because you're learning something late.  
SS Yes. It's really difficult to realise that you've been doing things wrong for such a long time.  
P Good eh?  
SS I enjoyed doing that; I thought it was really good fun.  
P Was it English in Context?  
SS Yeah and I really enjoyed ( ) so it's much better.  
P Do you think it makes a difference if you enjoy doing it?  
SS Oh Yeah I love being able to ( ).  
P You picked it for the right reasons did you apart from who taught it?  
SS A little bit. That had to play a part didn't it?  
P ((Reads out and discusses punctuation)) Ooh look an apostrophe in the right place...  
I wonder what you were trying to say there?  
SS If I'd just written 'is'-  
P But you wouldn't have a comma would you?  
SS I know what I'm trying to say. That needs to be a new sentence.  
P Remember if you could take it out and it would still make sense then you need commas around it.

**Matthew Trevor (Student15)**

**M T= Matthew Trevor**

**P = Pat Hill**

- P What do you think your strengths are? Which piece of writing do you think is your best?
- MT I don't know really.
- P Are you confident about your writing?
- MT Yes mainly. I know I could do more research but I usually understand what's wanted.
- P Is there any particular thing about your writing that you're worried about? Which bits do you find hardest?
- MT I repeat phrases sometimes and I need to do more research.
- P Anything else?
- MT Not really. I've always been OK with writing-getting it down like. I could do with timing things better and checking it more.
- P What are the main points you remember from feedback? Do you always read the feedback?
- MT I always read it and try to do what it says.
- P What about the double-line spacing here? You did it for me in this piece.
- MT Yes but I thought that was just what **you** wanted. I didn't realise it was general.
- P It says here that you need to check punctuation.
- MT Yes, I know it's not up to it .
- P Do you know exactly what's wrong with your punctuation?
- MT No, not really. I'm not sure about commas and my sentences run on a bit I think.
- P Do you think about checking the punctuation specifically when you proof-read?
- MT No. I just check it for spelling and if things sound right.
- P How do you think you could improve it?
- MT I don't know really. We never really did much on punctuation and grammar at school.
- P Have you thought about reading through your work out loud to see where the natural breaks come?
- MT No. I could try it.
- P Perhaps it might be worth getting a book from the library, and there is a little bit in your handbook.
- MT I haven't got a handbook.
- P Didn't your personal tutor give you one?
- MT I don't know who my personal tutor is. I think they were off sick. A. went through some things with us.
- P Can you think of anything that has made a difference to your writing?
- MT Not really. I suppose I'm learning as I go but the marks are OK so it should be OK
- P How do you start a piece of writing?
- MT I do a sort of plan - just one word for each paragraph. Then I use my notes and type it up.
- P Straight onto the computer?
- MT Yes.
- P How do you check your work?

MT I read through it.  
P On the computer?  
MT Yes.  
P Do you think it might be useful to run a draft off and look at it on paper?  
MT Yeah you do see more I suppose.  
P What do you look for?  
MT Well I think about whether I've answered the question and look for obvious mistakes.  
P How do you think your writing has developed over the semester?  
MT OK. I think I'm going to do better this semester. I'm going to try to finish things earlier so I can check it properly.  
P What about looking back to earlier work and seeing if the feedback applies to the current piece?  
MT Yes. I might try that.

**Writing log 15a      October 1999**

**Catherine Zadir**

I feel I am not a very confident writer when it comes down to essays etc, but when working with creative types of writing I do this with ease. To back that up I have had a number of articles published in magazines which I have had a free run at. I know I have a problem with grammar but I now this could be fixed with a bit of help, also my spelling leaves a lot to be desired.

What makes a good essay?

Structure – including ledgible links between points, a clear introduction, main body and conclusion

Coherence – a strong point which is kept throughout, clear paragraphs and well written.

Quotes in context, following a point and before a comment.

My Essay

I new as soon as I had finished it that I needed help. I have trouble taking words from my head and putting them on paper, so what I am trying to say does not come across as clearly as I would like. Also I left it to late to get the information from the library so I struggled with quotes.

## **Appendix 3a: Sample agreement form**

### **Research into Student writing**

I am agreeable to having my first year work and feedback photocopied by Pat Hill.

I understand that any use made of this material will be anonymous and that I will not be discussed by name with any other tutors other than would normally be the case.

I agree to having two short interviews with Pat Hill to discuss the development of my writing style.

Agreement:

Name:

Signature

***Please return this form to me whether you agree to take part or not. If you return it unsigned I will presume that you do not wish to be included in the research***

***Thanks***

***Pat Hill***

## Appendix 3b: Permission letters

Dear

Writing Research

I know that you will be busy with assignments at the moment but I hope you can spare a minute or two to think about my research. I have been working on this for over two years now but will not be able to complete it properly without your help.

As you have already given me some of last year's work, all I need is some marked second year work. It would make sense to have interviews between the end of teaching and the exams so if you are willing to be interviewed, even on a very informal basis, you can arrange this with me at short notice. It won't take more than half an hour.

You can telephone me (work-x\*\*\*\*;home 01422\*\*\*\*\*), e-mail me (p.a.hill@hud.ac.uk) or simply put a note under my door (SPA204) if you can't catch me in. The best times to find me are Tuesday and Wednesday mornings but I am in most days this year. If you simply want to leave work, you can leave it with one of the secretaries

Thank you for initially agreeing to take part in this research. I hope you'll feel able to assist me in completing this so that the results will be valid and useful.

Regards

Pat Hill

Dear

Writing Research

Thank you for the help you have given me with my research so far. It would be very useful to me if I could photocopy some of your advanced level work. With your permission I can do this before it is returned to you. If you would not like me to do this, simply return this letter via my pigeon hole. If you would like to discuss this with me, please call in or telephone.

Best wishes

Pat Hill

SPA2/04  
Ext 1770



## **Appendix 3c: Sample interview questions**

### **Semi-structured interview guide**

Where appropriate, use actual pieces of the student's writing to generate comments on specific aspects of writing.

#### **1. What do you think your strengths are?**

Prompt: Which piece of writing do you think is your best?

#### **2. Is there any particular aspect of your writing that concerns you?**

Prompt: What aspect of writing do you find hardest?

#### **3. Do you read feedback?**

Prompt: What are the main points that you remember from feedback?

#### **4. Do you read and act on the feedback given to you?**

Prompt: Can you think of anything that has impacted on your writing style?

#### **5. How do you start a piece of writing?**

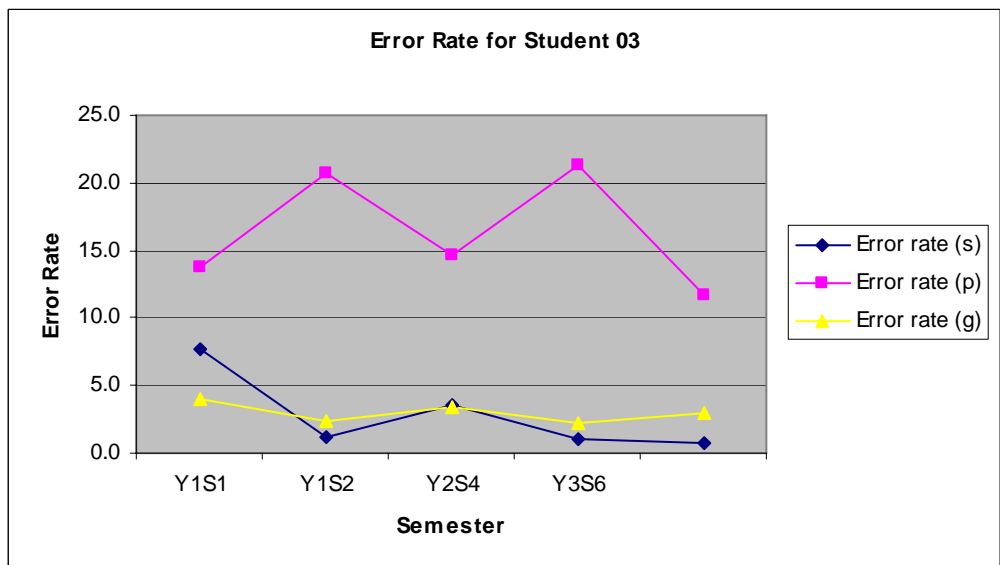
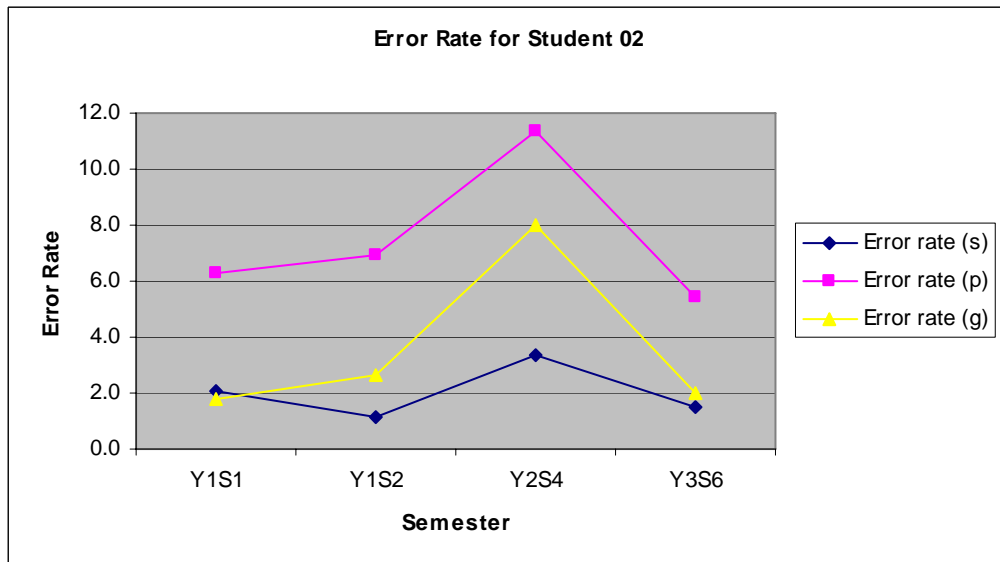
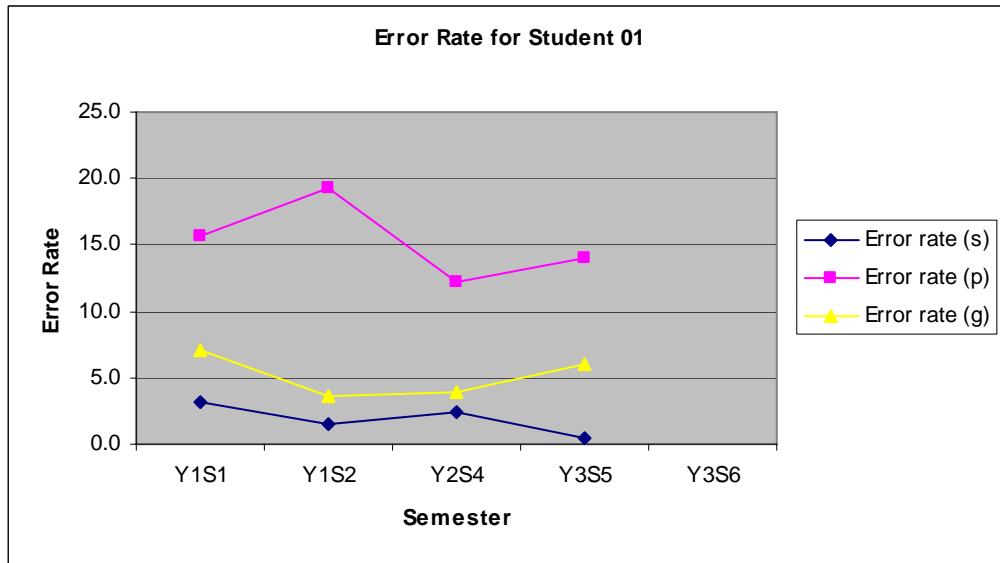
Prompt: For instance, do you do a plan?

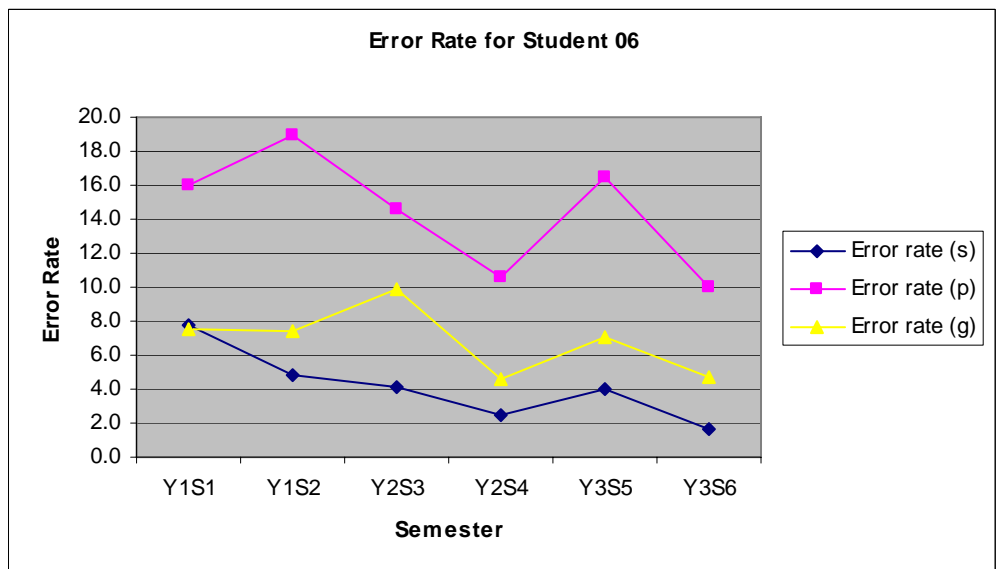
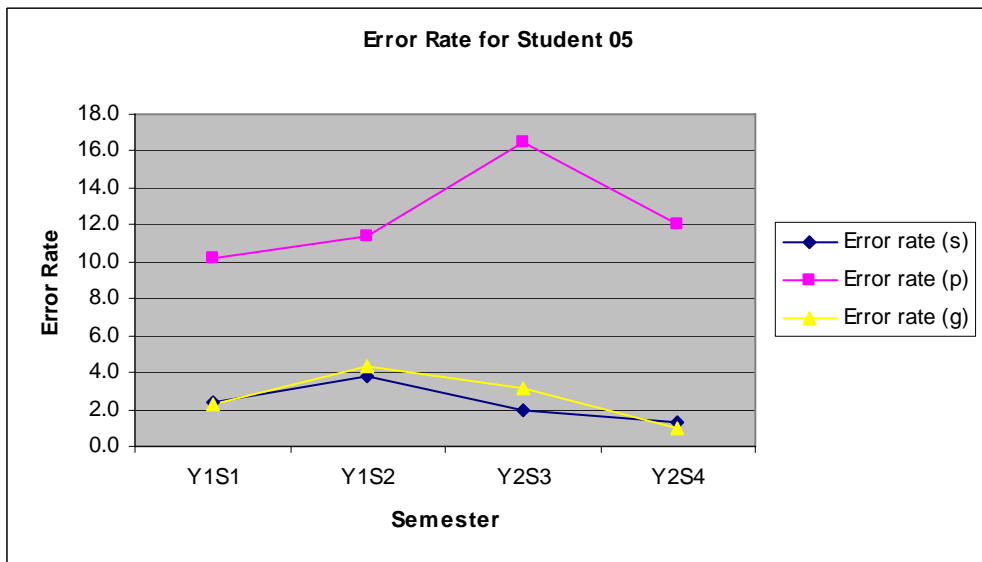
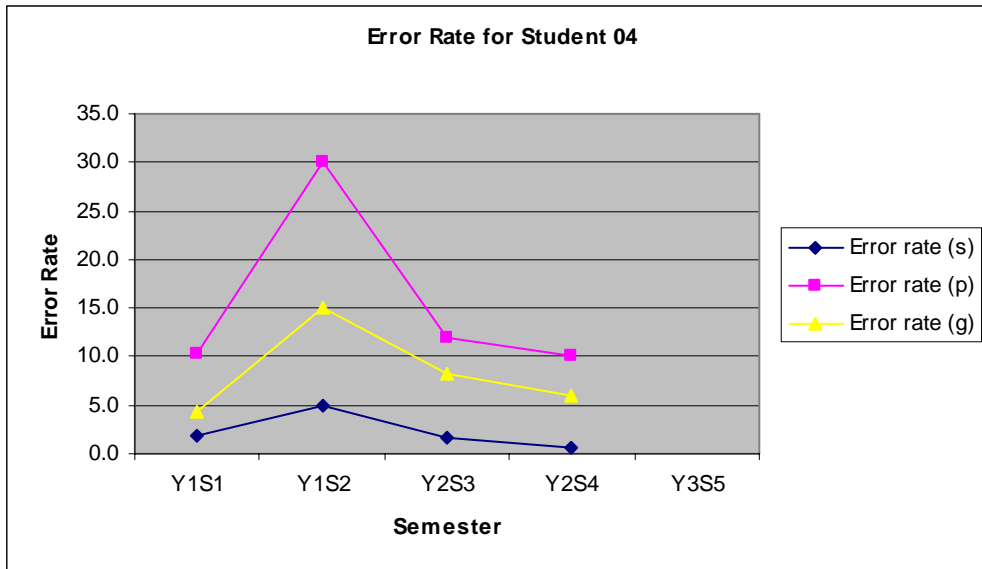
#### **6. Do you think your writing has developed over the semester?**

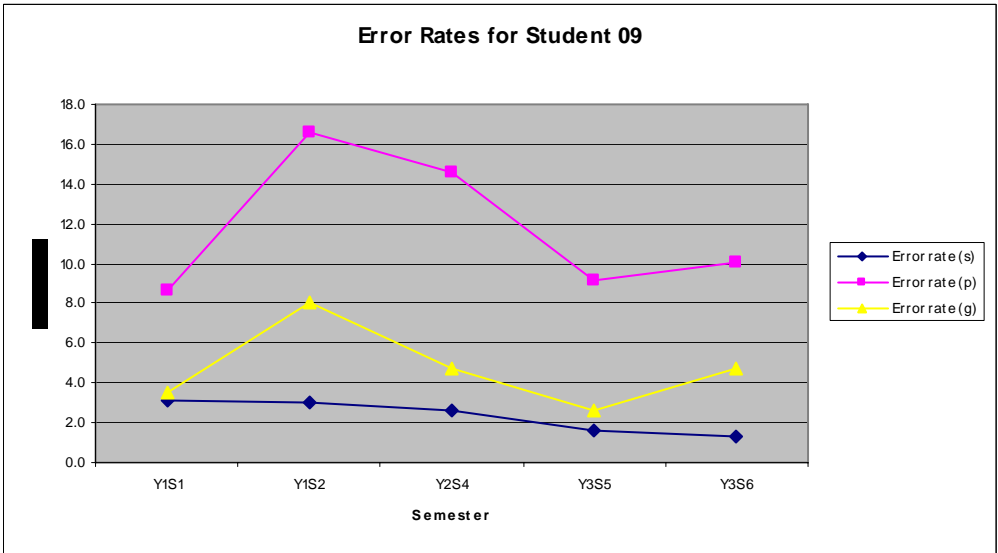
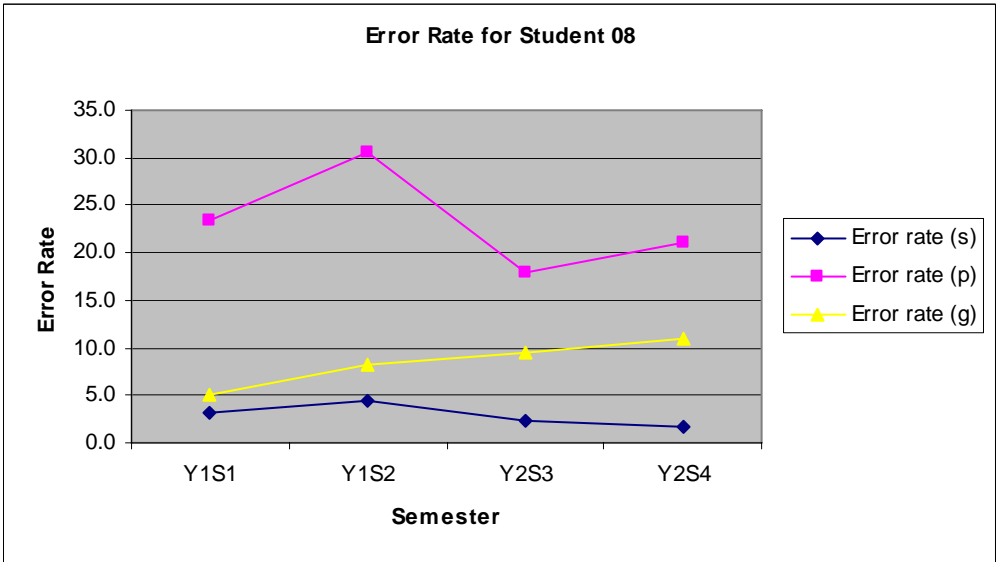
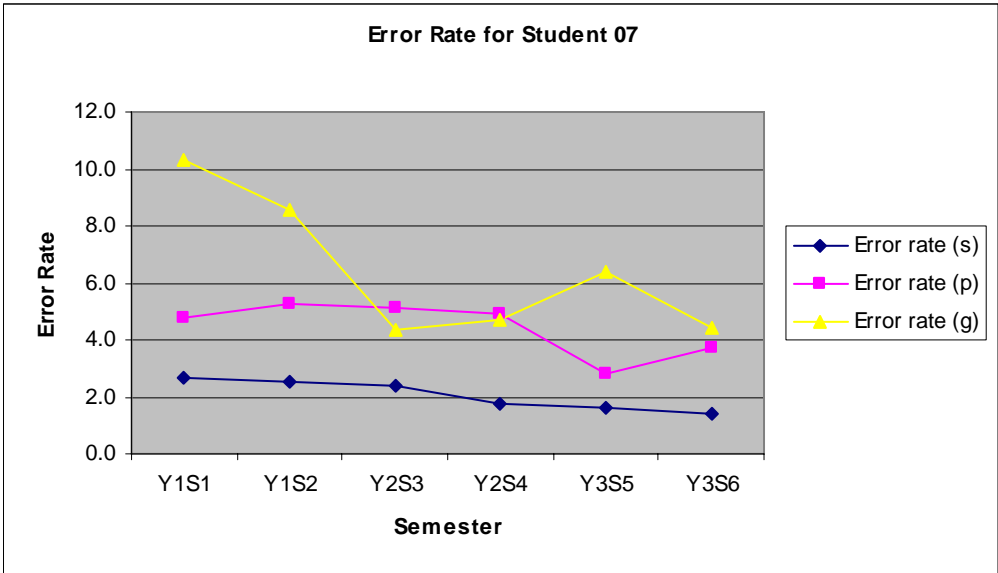
Prompt: Can you think of any specific changes you have made to your writing style?

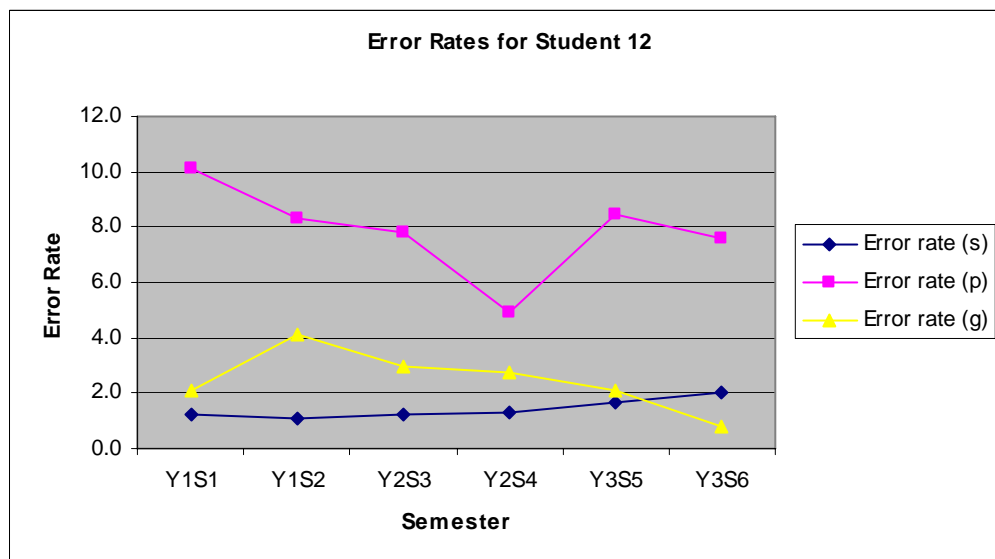
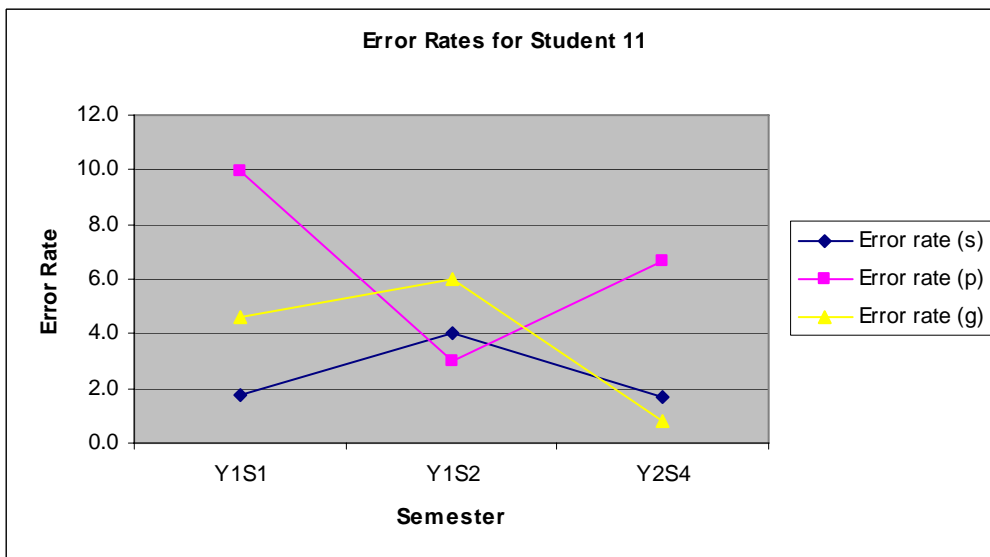
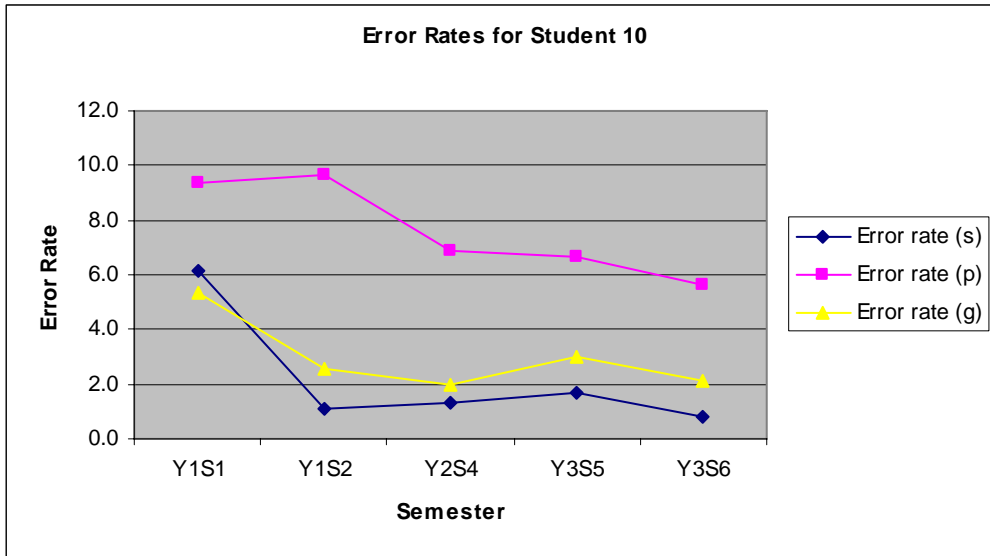
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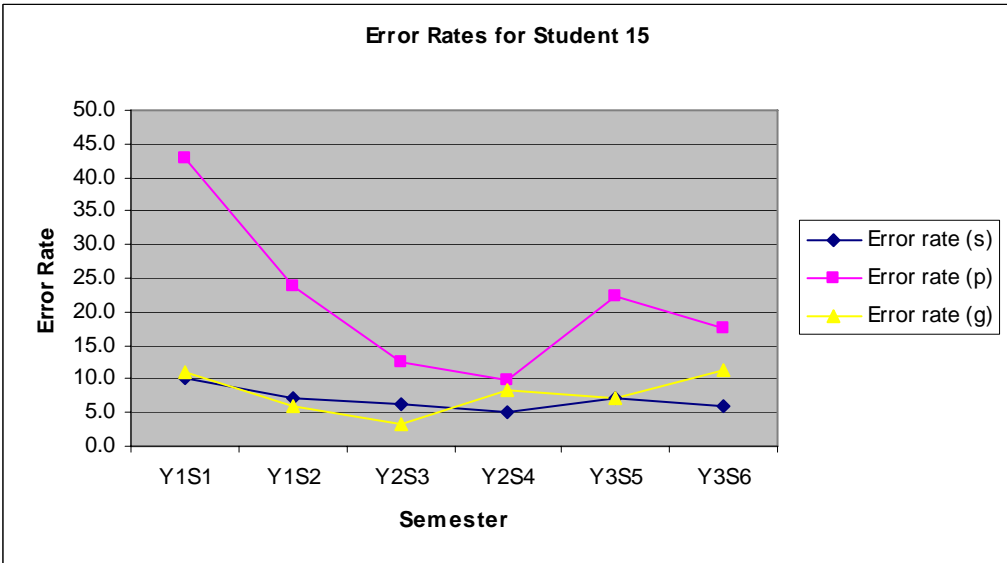
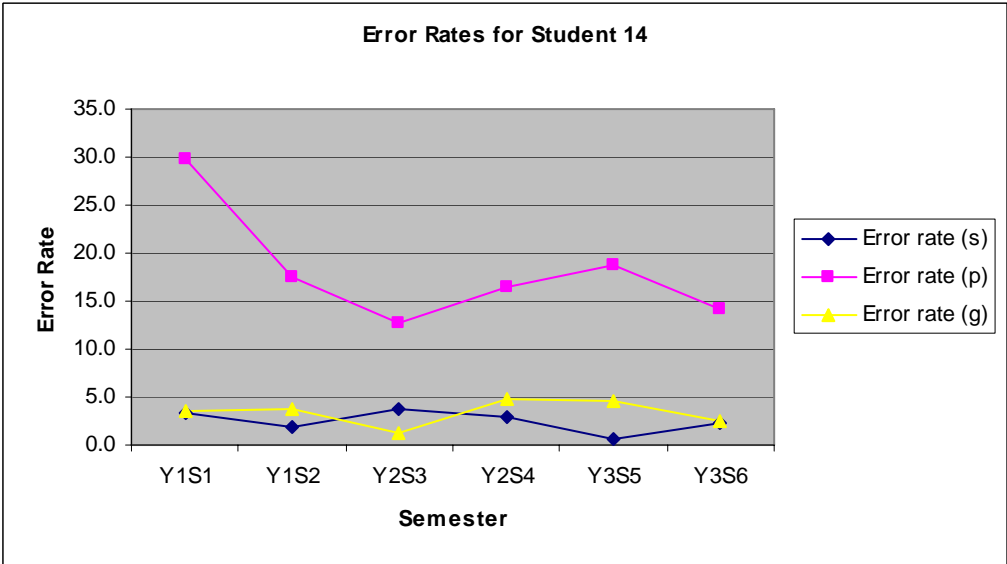
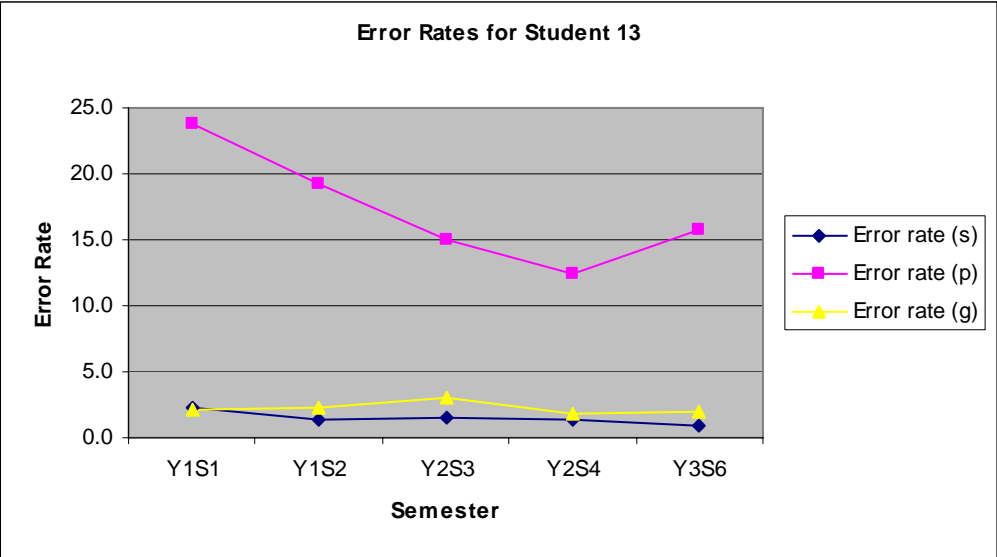
## Appendix 4: Student Data Graphs











## Appendix 5: E-mail tutor survey

Original Question sent 30 May 2001

Dear All

As many of you will know, I'm doing some research on the development of student writing. I don't want to bore you with a questionnaire but I'd be really grateful if you could spend a few minutes in listing your main frustrations with the writing you assess. You don't need to think too long about this as I'd like the ones that immediately spring to mind rather than the little niggles.

Regards

Pat Hill

### Replies

1.

In brief, the ones that get me are:

Poor structuring of essays, sometimes including poor development of an argument, failure to identify a central theme or argument, lack of coherence.

Inaccurate or inappropriate referencing

Grammatical errors, especially incomplete sentences

Get back to me if you want further details.

2.

Poor overall structure, illogical/incoherent sentences, misuses of words, attempts to cover up lack of knowledge/undersatanding with pseudo-academic register . . .spring to mind.

Clumsiness of style is one I forgot to mention, though it is probably the thing I most often comment on.

3.

-misuse - or no use - of punctuation

-use of apostrophe for plural

-statements rather than analysis

-description rather than analysis

-reiterating the plot

-faulty logic

-lack of proper paragraph structure

-lack of conclusion

-use of internet! - for research sources, essay writing web sites

-unsupported claims

-subjective value judgements

-lack of proper citation - students cannot or will not grasp what plagiarism is!!!

4.

There are four main problems I encounter:

1) basic grammatical errors, particularly apostrophes and verb-less 'sentences'. The subordinate clause is often treated as a sentence rather than being preceded by a comma. Students are also far too trusting of the spell-check function on their computers.

2) a confused sense of style. Essays slip between the vocabulary of the academic debate and that of the fanzine.

3) plagiarism. The internet has made it terribly easy to slip material downloaded from websites into essays (this causes some of the confusion I cited under (2) above). I'm not sure that students realise they're doing this or that it's plagiarism.

4) a failure to observe the advice of our Department's presentation style guide.

5.

Sentences are often too short and too simple in structure. Similarly, paragraphs are just physical devices to stick a few sentences together. As with the functions of punctuation, there's almost no sense of the logic of ordering ideas, nor the direction of an argument, both of which would help with the sentence/paragraph structures.

Punctuation is casual, if not random. Commas are merely a point at which someone has paused to think, or there not used at all. The feeling of "parenthesis" with either comma pairs or even brackets is almost entirely absent.

Too much one finds that the driving pattern is first person singular, or something very close to it. The only alternative is often the third person passive voice that sounds like a chemistry experiment.

I hate the regular spelling errors: necessary, receive (etc), accommodation, separate....

I hate the misuses of few and less (see our Media special instructions) but even BBC journalists get that wrong "there were less policeman on patrol".....

and then there's the problems of plurals and possessives .... and the big IT'S battles.

6.

Almost EVERYTHING bothers me about student writing - many students do not know what a sentence is, or what a paragraph is, or how to use semi-colons. They seem to have little sense of how to write formally, as opposed to conversationally. I do not think they do anything with the critical feedback they receive, and sometimes I wonder if we should have some hard and fast rules about levels of literacy so that we aren't graduating students with low-level writing skills. After all, a prospective employer would be forgiven for thinking that a degree implied a certain level of skill. Thank you!

7.

The main niggles are poor spelling, poor grammar and poorly structured writing.

8.

- inability to argue a case: too much description rather than analysis



- inability to follow admittedly somewhat daunting guidelines for presentation: footnotes, bibliography layout, quotations, etc.
- limited reading to provide context for essay answers
- too much 'general' material, insufficient detailed focus on subject
- limited vocabulary, especially use of colloquial or slang
- poor punctuation, especially ignorance of use of apostrophe
- poor syntax, especially sentences with no active verb
- split infinitives (how boring am I??)

9.

Students often do not define the topic, outline the debates, or indicate a line of argument in their introductions. They should do all of these in setting up the essay.

10.

1. Incorrect PUNCTUATION ! notably, lack of commas (even fullstops).

2. using the word 'however' in the middle of a sentence rather than as the beginning of the next, e.g.

'Because of the lack of punctuation I couldn't make sense of this sentence however perhaps that was the students intention.'

3. The omission of the word 'that' e.g.

'He said (that) he didn't care.'

As you requested, these seem to be the most common mistakes which raise my hackles!

11.

Because we deal exclusively with writing by users of English as a foreign or second language, it is difficult to generalise about frustrations. Themes which seem to crop up again and again regardless of student background are problems with prepositions, articles and verb tense grammar.

It's my job to deal with such problems. What is more frustrating are persistent problems relating to 'ownership'. Despite great efforts, we are every year faced with a number of cases where students borrow text either without any form of referencing or with inadequate referencing; and where they have provided bibliography entries these commonly do not fit accepted norms.

I imagine that this is a common enough problem among L1 students too, and it seems to exist here and there across the range of our students. However, despite wanting to be even handed, I have to say that that students from certain cultural backgrounds seem more prone than others.

Although I run (non-credit) workshops which include practical sessions on these topics, it is often the students who most need to attend who in fact do not.

12.

Apart fr the obvious, like weak general literacy skills, I find inappropriate & too informal language problematic at times, & lack of experience in striking a balanced critical / sceptical tone. Students themselves often feel insecure in planning & structuring their work, & the finished products frequently bear this out.....groan.....moan.....

13.

My only teaching of Writing this ear (sic) is Writing 2 (portfolio of poems + short-story). I can'y (sic) say that I have many frustrations about marking these, apart from the sheer volume and limited time in which to do it.

14.

Very specific features: sentences run together using commas

lack of paragraphing

more general: failure to actually make the changes suggested (by supervisor, etc.)in redrafting.

not proofreading carefully despite ease of alterations on word-processor.

lack of overall continuity and coherence.

15.

Here are the first few thoughts off my head:

Inability to punctuate a 'legal' sentence, which means that whole paragraphs together can contain nothing more ambitious or helpful than a comma.

A 'tin ear' for commonplace expressions and metaphors, so that phrases are used jarringly out of context.

Attempting to use said expressions without thinking of what they actually mean, so 'based around', 'bridging a vacuum' and other such hybrids.

Not taking responsibility for the logic of a set of sentences, or ensuring that a consistent line of argument is followed.

Appalling spelling, which is not improved however often a tutor corrects it: the idea that it is the tutor's job to go through all these petty technicalities and sort them out.

Misspelling even of direct quotations, from material that is lying in front of them at the time. Names, ditto.

Various 'errors of the day' come and go in the school population, as they always have.

Currently, a favourite is that students begin a sentence with 'Although...' when they actually mean 'However...'. You read on at the end of the sentence to find the other half of the 'although this... nonetheless that', and it isn't there.

Overall, a lack of a sense of 'ownership' of the style and quality of the writing, and instead a sometimes hostile view that so long as the key factual elements of the answer are present, written style is somehow an optional extra. Overall, too, a lack of any feeling for language which suggests that students read only a narrow range of literature, if range is not too grand a word.

PS I estimate that over one third of my Year II students this year (about 50 in all) have \*serious\* deficiencies in basic literacy. I have nagged them all year, given them skills reading etc., and at least half of the really bad ones have mended their ways and made noticeable improvement. They are the victims of bad schooling, but it takes a huge effort to get on top of the basics at the age of 19 or 20, and it's a depressing thing to have to urge them to do.

16.

These are some that come immediately to mind:

Descriptive rather than analytical. Sometimes too much telling of story of text.

Too generalised and lacking in detailed reference to texts.

Often reductive and naive, seeking easy closures rather than recognising complexity and alternative possibilities.

Over dependence on quotations from secondary material which are not explained or used within the student's own argument but simply presented as definitive and without qualification or discussion.

17.

Main issues:

apostrophes

non-sentences - strings of clauses, or short grunts without a verb

confusion of subjects, and consequent problems with verbs

sloppy and informal writing, and also personal use of 'I'

An unwillingness to use introductions to explain an agenda rather than just rehash the question.

18.

My main frustration is essays where the writing is so bad I don't know where to start in suggesting improvements to students who don't understand what a sentence or a verb is and why what they've written is so ungrammatical that it doesn't make sense and who don't see the point of punctuation but just pour everything out in a garbled stream of consciousness just like this only for pages at a time.

Pet hate is ie for eg when I've told them they shouldn't use abbreviations at all.