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Writing problems changing with times

Today I had a brief chat over lunch with the owner of a small, but established accounting firm in Los Angeles. He emphasized to me that business communication, especially in written form, was the single most important concern to him for entry-level employees. His concerns echo comments that I have heard on occasion from other executives. Writing continues to be important, often critical, for success during college and beyond.

In June 2008, Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford published an article in the academic journal, *College Composition and Communication* entitled "Mistakes Are a Fact of Life: A National Comparative Study." The Lunsfords, working with a team of experts in English composition, evaluated the writing errors contained in 877 papers submitted by freshman composition instructors. The papers came from campuses drawn from a stratified sample of higher education institutions across the United States. The authors found that the top ten composition errors, listed in decreasing order, were as follows:

1. Wrong word
2. Missing comma after an introductory element
3. Incomplete or missing documentation
4. Vague pronoun reference
5. Spelling error (including homonyms)
6. Mechanical error with a quotation
7. Unnecessary comma
8. Unnecessary or missing capitalization
9. Missing word
10. Faulty sentence structure

Note that "incomplete or missing documentation" is an error in citation and reference handling. The papers submitted for this study likely exhibited anomalies in prose or rhetoric, but those concerns were not evaluated.

This 2008 study replicated a similar study conducted approximately twenty years earlier. In that prior study, errors in spelling errors were the most common, followed in decreasing order by "no comma after introductory element," "vague pronoun reference," "no comma in compound sentence," and "wrong word." The authors speculate that the adoption of word processing software has decreased the frequency of "spelling" errors while at the same time increased the frequency of "wrong word" errors. Finally, the authors note that the error rate per 100 words has increased slightly from 2.26 to 2.45.

Do you know which writing errors your employees make? Are the errors in writing correlated with errors in other organizational activities?