

Analyzing Common Writing Errors Among College Students Enrolled in the Education Block of Aldersgate College

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in writing is a fundamental skill for academic success and effective professional communication, and proper capitalization and punctuation are essential to maintaining text clarity, coherence, and precision. However, many students struggle with applying these language conventions in formal compositions. This qualitative study analyzed a corpus of 90 student essays across three genres, argumentative (30), narrative (30), and persuasive (30), written by undergraduate students at Great Books to identify common writing errors, understand their underlying causes, and propose pedagogical strategies. Using systematic coding, frequency and pattern analysis, qualitative extraction, and statistical testing (chi-square), the study identified 615 errors across all genres, with punctuation errors (such as comma misuse at 38.7%) more prevalent than capitalization errors (27.5%). Distinct error patterns emerged by genre: argumentative essays exhibited frequent comma (45%) and semicolon (20%) errors due to complex sentence structures; narrative essays contained high capitalization errors (50%), particularly with proper nouns introduced during story building; and persuasive essays showed significant misuse of quotation marks (25%) due to direct citation integration. Surveys and qualitative insights revealed that primary causes include limited explicit instruction, influence from informal digital communication, and language transfer challenges. To address these difficulties, the study recommends incorporating explicit mini-lessons into writing curricula, implementing structured peer review and immediate feedback, and integrating technology tools like grammar-checking software to cultivate writing precision.

Keywords: *Student needs assessment, academic support services, student services, higher education, academic advising, time management, counseling services, digital infrastructure, student well-being, institutional support*

INTRODUCTION

This study examines common capitalization and punctuation errors in student essays and analyzes how sentence complexity, genre demands, and digital communication habits impact writing mechanics. Errors in basic mechanical conventions such as comma placement,

semicolon usage, and proper noun capitalization frequently obscure sentence clarity, diminish writer credibility, and hinder overall academic and professional expression. Additionally, inadequate explicit instruction, language transfer effects in English Language Learners, and reliance on informal digital communication contribute significantly to lingering grammatical inaccuracies. Ultimately, identifying these underlying patterns aims to guide evidence-based instructional strategies, automated grammar tools, and peer-feedback frameworks that enhance student writing proficiency.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to analyze the common writing errors among college students in the Education Block of Aldersgate College Inc. by addressing the following questions:

1. What writing activities do the participants engage in across various writing genres (argumentative, narrative, and persuasive)?
2. What are the specific writing difficulties of the participants in terms of capitalization and punctuation?
3. What instructional strategies and interventions can be recommended to address the identified writing difficulties of the participants?

Scope and Delimitations

This study analyzes capitalization and punctuation errors in a corpus of 90 student essays (30 argumentative, 30 narrative, and 30 persuasive) collected from undergraduate students. The research is delimited strictly to mechanics (capitalization, commas, semicolons, periods, quotation marks, and apostrophes) and does not examine broader rhetorical organization, vocabulary breadth, or stylistic variations. Data collection and coding were restricted to student writing samples from Great Books / Education coursework. The study does not evaluate external socioeconomic factors or full developmental trajectories over time, maintaining a cross-sectional focus on corpus-based error frequencies and patterns.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Writing performance is a complex capability shaped by instructional practices, linguistic transfer, and written communication habits. Capitalization and punctuation serve as structural signposts that ensure sentence readability and precise interpretation. Punctuation marks act as critical structural controls that dictate pauses and clausal organization (Truss, 2003), while proper capitalization marks sentence boundaries and specific proper nouns (Biber et al., 1999). Despite their necessity, mechanical errors remain among the most frequent issues in college-level academic writing, negatively affecting sentence clarity and perceived professional competence (Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008; Fahnestock & Secor, 2004; Kahn, 2007).

Several underlying factors drive the persistence of these errors. A prominent driver is the lack of explicit instruction and structured practice within formal writing curricula (Graham & Perin, 2007). Additionally, the widespread use of informal messaging and social media

formats leads students to neglect standard capitalization and punctuation rules in formal academic contexts (Baron, 2008). For English Language Learners (ELLs), language transfer further complicates adherence to mechanics, as learners often apply native-language punctuation and capitalization conventions to English composition (Ferris, 1999). To address these persistent errors, pedagogical literature highlights targeted interventions: explicit grammar mini-lessons combined with feedback improve mechanical accuracy (Saddler & Graham, 2005), while real-time grammar-checking software and interactive tools help students identify and correct mechanical errors during drafting (Hyland, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three key theoretical perspectives that explain mechanical error generation and learning in written communication. First, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) serves as the structural foundation, postulating that punctuation and capitalization function as ideational and textual resources that delineate clause boundaries, signal information hierarchy, and direct reading cadence. Second, L1-L2 Interlanguage and Language Transfer Theory (Selinker, 1972; Ferris, 1999) accounts for cognitive and cross-linguistic influences, explaining how students transfer punctuation and orthographic conventions from their native languages into English academic writing. Third, Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981) frames mechanics as a cognitive load issue, suggesting that when students manage complex argumentation or narrative planning, working memory capacity for surface-level mechanical monitoring decreases, resulting in more punctuation and capitalization errors.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an Input-Process-Output (IPO) model to analyze student writing errors and formulate pedagogical solutions:

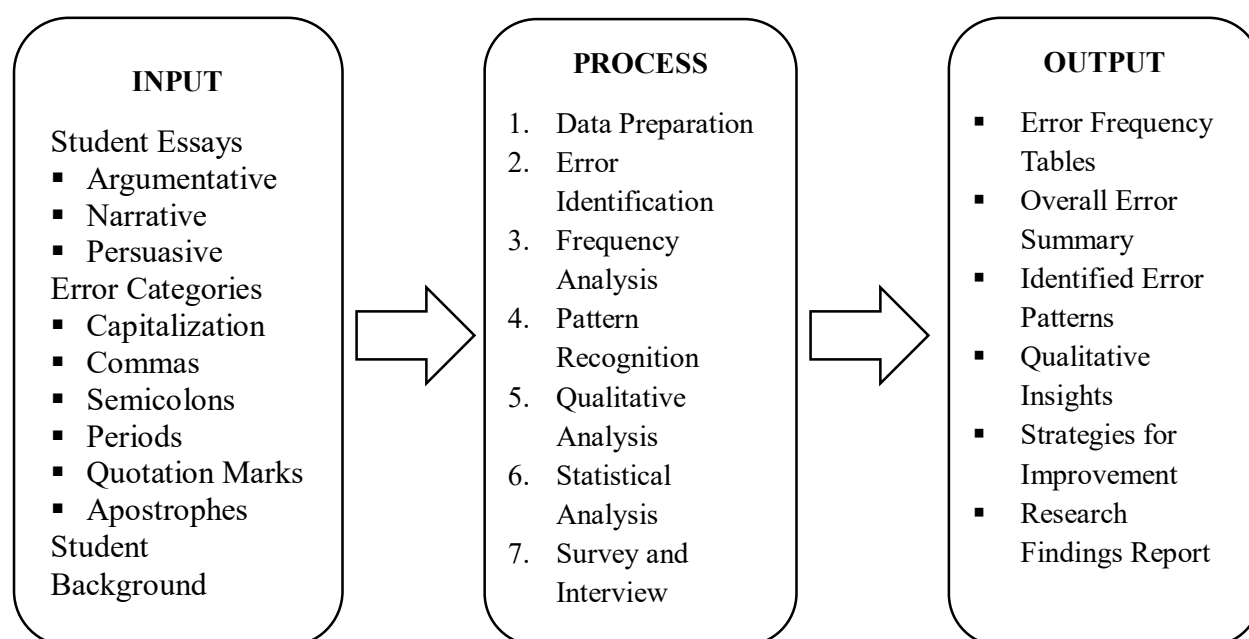


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design and incorporated quantitative error frequency analysis to evaluate capitalization and punctuation errors in a corpus of student essays.

Research Steps

The execution sequence followed a structured, multi-phase analysis to systematically evaluate the student writing corpus. In Phase 1, we digitized, anonymized, and assigned unique identifiers to all collected student essays to safeguard participant identity and streamline data handling. Phase 2 involved a systematic coding process in which we identified mechanical errors and grouped them into distinct categories, including capitalization, commas, semicolons, periods, quotation marks, and apostrophes. In Phase 3, we calculated frequency counts and percentages across the three essay genres—argumentative, narrative, and persuasive—to assess overall error distribution. Phase 4 followed with a qualitative contextual analysis of representative sentence excerpts to uncover underlying patterns and potential causes of common breakdowns. Phase 5 applied descriptive and inferential statistical methods, using chi-square tests to determine whether error rates differed significantly across genres. Finally, Phase 6 synthesized survey and interview findings to develop evidence-based instructional strategies and targeted writing interventions.

Data Collection and Sample Selection

The study compiled a corpus of 90 undergraduate student essays selected from coursework submissions. The sample consisted of an equal distribution across three essay genres:

- Argumentative Essays: 30 essays
- Narrative Essays: 30 essays
- Persuasive Essays: 30 essays

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages, mean) to measure error prevalence across genres. Chi-square tests of independence tested for significant differences in error types across the three essay genres. Qualitative context analysis was conducted on extracted sentence excerpts to categorize root causes of mechanical breakdowns. Inter-rater agreement was verified on a 10% sample using Cohen's kappa coefficient to ensure coding reliability.

Research Hypothesis and Validation

The research evaluated the operational null hypothesis (H_0) that no significant difference exists in the frequency and type of capitalization and punctuation errors across argumentative, narrative, and persuasive essay genres. The study established the content

validity of the error classification schema by aligning it with standard academic grammar frameworks and cross-validating it with published writing error studies.

Study Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The study's generalizability is limited by the sample size of 90 essays from a single academic institutional context. Automated tools and subjective interpretation present minor variations in error coding, mitigated by inter-rater agreement checks. Ethically, we secured informed consent from all participants, fully anonymized essay texts with unique code identifiers, and kept data confidential and securely stored.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

SOP 1: What writing activities do the participants engage in across various writing genres (argumentative, narrative, and persuasive)?

Students engaged in a range of academic and informal writing activities. Academically, students regularly produced argumentative essays requiring thesis defense and counterarguments, narrative essays detailing personal accounts or sequential events, persuasive essays integrating external quotes and evidence, and coursework research papers. Informally, students frequently used digital communication, including emails, text messages, and social media posts. The habitual use of unpunctuated or lowercased text in digital media directly carried over into their formal academic writing.

SOP 2: What are the specific writing difficulties of the participants in terms of capitalization and punctuation?

Analysis of the 90 essays identified 615 mechanical errors. Punctuation errors accounted for the vast majority of writing difficulties. Across the entire corpus, comma misuse was the most frequent difficulty (238 errors; 38.7%), followed by capitalization errors (169 errors; 27.5%), quotation mark misuse (73 errors; 11.9%), period misuse (62 errors; 10.1%), semicolon misuse (43 errors; 7.0%), and apostrophe misuse (30 errors; 4.9%).

Table 1

Writing difficulties of participants in terms of capitalization and punctuation

Error Category	Argumentative (n=30)	Narrative (n=30)	Persuasive (n=30)	Overall Frequency	Overall Percentage
Misuse of Commas	97 (45%)	57 (30%)	84 (40%)	238	38.7%
Capitalization Errors	32 (15%)	95 (50%)	42 (20%)	169	25.75%
Misuse of Quotation Marks	10 (5%)	10 (5%)	53 (25%)	73	11.9%

Misuse of Semicolons	43 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	43	7.0%
Misuse of Periods	22 (10%)	19 (10%)	21 (10%)	62	10.1%
Misuse of Apostrophes	11 (5%)	9 (5%)	10 (5%)	30	4.9%
Total Errors	215 (100%)	190 (100%)	210 (100%)	615	100.0%

Distinct Genre Patterns:

- **Argumentative Essays (215 errors):** Concentrated heavily in comma splices/omissions (45%) and semicolon misapplications (20%). The structural requirement to link complex clauses and contrasting claims increased punctuation errors.
- **Narrative Essays (190 errors):** Predominated by capitalization errors (50%), particularly failing to capitalize proper nouns, character names, and specific geographic locations introduced throughout story arcs.
- **Persuasive Essays (210 errors):** Showed high rates of quotation mark errors (25%) and sentence-initial capitalization failures (20%) alongside comma errors (40%). Difficulties stemmed from integrating direct secondary quotations into student-authored sentences.

SOP 3: What instructional strategies and interventions can be recommended to address the identified writing difficulties of the participants?

Addressing these empirical error patterns requires a multi-pronged instructional framework that combines direct pedagogy, collaborative practice, and modern tools. First, writing curricula must integrate targeted direct instruction through focused grammar mini-lessons that address high-frequency error zones, such as comma placement rules in compound-complex sentences, proper noun capitalization, and quotation integration mechanics. Second, institutions should establish structured formative practice and peer feedback by embedding regular writing workshops and peer-review sessions into coursework, allowing students to actively identify, code, and correct mechanical errors using standardized rubrics. Finally, technology integration plays a crucial role by incorporating automated grammar-checking software, such as Grammarly and interactive proofreading platforms, directly into drafting workflows to provide students with real-time feedback on punctuation and capitalization errors prior to final submission.

SUMMARY

This study analyzed capitalization and punctuation errors across a corpus of 90 undergraduate essays (30 argumentative, 30 narrative, and 30 persuasive). We identified and categorized 615 mechanical errors. Comma misuse (38.7%) accounted for the largest share of overall errors, followed by capitalization errors (27.5%). Error patterns varied significantly by essay genre: complex syntax in argumentative essays caused comma and semicolon errors;

narrative character/setting descriptions led to proper-noun capitalization errors; and citation/quote integration in persuasive essays drove quotation-mark errors. The study identified a lack of explicit instruction, digital communication habits, and language transfer as primary contributing factors.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that mechanical writing proficiency among undergraduate students is strongly conditioned by the syntactic demands of specific writing genres and external writing habits. Capitalization and punctuation errors are not random mistakes; rather, they reflect predictable cognitive and structural bottlenecks—such as managing complex clauses in arguments, identifying proper entities in narratives, or punctuating direct evidence in persuasive writing. Left unaddressed, persistent mechanical errors impede sentence clarity, weaken academic communication, and diminish perceived professional competence. Sustained writing accuracy requires moving away from isolated grammar drills toward contextualized instruction, structured peer review, and integrated technological proofreading.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve student writing accuracy and reduce mechanical errors, implement several targeted interventions.

First, English and writing departments should prioritize integrating grammar mini-lessons by adding micro-modules to writing courses that explicitly target high-frequency errors, such as comma splices, proper noun capitalization rules, and quotation mechanics.

Second, instructors ought to provide genre-specific mechanical instruction by aligning mechanics lessons directly with specific essay assignments—focusing on clause coordination before argumentative papers, proper entity capitalization before narrative assignments, and quote punctuation before persuasive essays.

Third, academic units must foster peer review and institutionalize writing workshops by establishing regular peer-editing workshops with standardized proofreading rubrics to help students systematically identify mechanical mistakes in peer drafts.

Fourth, educational institutions should support the adoption of proofreading technologies by encouraging and integrating automated grammar and proofreading software into student writing workflows to provide real-time mechanical feedback prior to final submissions.

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AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

Artificial intelligence tools were used to process this document, assist with formatting and structural organization, and create illustrative visualizations of survey metrics. Institutional personnel verified and authored all underlying survey data, analysis, and strategic recommendations.

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