An error in writing, like an error in other practices or texts, is a mistake, and there was a time when writing teachers focused on errors as a very important mechanism for helping writers develop. Today, we focus more on composing processes, purpose, audience, and genre. We also have a more informed sense of history regarding error: what “counts” as an error has changed over time. The word ain’t, which is understood as an error now, was recommended usage in Shakespeare's time. More generally, errors in writing can be viewed in four ways. One: errors change over time: what is an error in one age may be acceptable usage in another time. Two: errors depend largely on context: in a very formal setting, error-free language is often expected, while in an informal or casual setting, “errors” can be expected as part of a more relaxed discourse situation. Three: errors have their own logic, and we can’t understand what an error actually means until we inquire into its logic. Four: as writers try new genres, their writing often includes errors that are addressed as the writer becomes more experienced in the new genre. In other words, errors can be a sign of growth. At the same time, errors that interfere with a writer’s expression or an audience’s understanding need to be addressed: writing wants to be read.

Readers engaged with a text often don’t even notice errors, but errors that impact meaning merit attention.

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