Volume 17 Issue 11
Originally issued as G4



Global Journal of human-social science: G
Linguistics & Education
Volume 17 Issue 4 Version 1.0 Year 2017
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460x & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

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GJHSS-G Classification: FOR Code: 200499



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Analysis of Common Grammatical Errors in Written Paragraphs of First Year Students of Wolaita Sodo University

Meshesha Make Jobo [α] & Endale Endrias Arega [σ]

Abstract- The purpose of this study was to analyze the common grammatical errors in the written paragraphs of the first year students of Wolaita Sodo University (WSU) by the academic year 2015/16. The subjects used for this study were 400 written paragraphs of students as written documents. These paragraphs were written by the sample of 400 students who were selected from 3,320 first year regular students of WSU by the academic year 2015/16 using systematic random sampling. The descriptive research design was used for collecting and interpreting the quantitative and qualitative data via document analysis. The analysis was made using the eclectic approach of data analysis. The result indicated that first year students of WSU make different grammatical errors in their written paragraphs: Tense errors, voice errors, preposition errors, article errors and errors in the usage of adjectives and adverbs. Based on these findings, therefore, the following recommendations are forwarded. First year students of WSU should give adequate attention to grammaticality when they develop their paragraphs and the teachers should provide pertinent emphasis to grammaticality when they teach their students paragraph writing and when they give feedback on their students' written paragraphs.

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I. Introduction

Writing is a demanding and troublesome skill (Murray and Moore, 2006). According to Fulwiler(2002), most writers find it difficult, ornery and often frustrating work. However, it is the second alternative to express our feelings and ideas to those we target to communicate. It is a productive skill that promotes the students' ability of written communication especially in the educational contexts of second/foreign language learning especially in the context of tertiary education. Thus, university students, in different parts of the globe, use the skill of writing for different purposes during their study. They use it to report their observation, to present their written works (assignments, term papers, laboratory reports etc), to answer written exams or just because they are required to do it.

In Ethiopia, students learn English for at least twelve years before they join university (Seid, 2012). In each grade level, students learn different writing activities from simple to complex. After joining the universities, in the first year, the students take the course "Basic Writing Skills" which primarily focuses on the lessons of sentences writing, paragraph writing and essay writing. However, when students' writing assignments are observed, their written English is full of errors; sometimes one cannot understand what a student wanted to say in his/her writing. Paragraphs written by the students are below their standard. To understand the paragraphs of these students, it needs the reader's dense thinking to interpret their written paragraphs in different angles. The paragraphs the students write do not clearly express their ideas and feelings.

In contrast to such the existing problem of Ethiopian universities students in expressing their ideas accurately in English by writing, Shahhoseiny (2015) stated that if a student cannot express his/her ideas and feelings in writing, we can say that the goal of his/her writing is not fully achieved. The same author (Ibid) claimed that writing is a bridge between a reader and a writer when it is accurately developed. This implies that the writing is useful skill of communication for transferring information to the targeted readers when it is properly handled (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Therefore, the writer has to state his/her idea/s clearly so that his/her reader/s can understand what he/she is intending to say without confusion and ambiguity. Thus, the general purpose of writing is to transfer certain idea/s to the targeted reader/s in the way that it makes sense (Richards and Renandya, 2002).

Therefore, the current study was designed to identify, categorize and analyze the common grammatical errors in the written paragraphs of the first year students of Wolaita Sodo University by the academic year 2015/16 and then to propose effective strategies that can alleviate the problem.

II. Research Design and Methodology

a) Research Design

The descriptive research design was used for this study. This is because the descriptive research design attempts to describe, explain and interpret conditions of the present (Kothari, 2004; Keith, 2000). It

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is also concerned with conditions, practices, structures, differences or relationships that exist in the ongoing educational process (Creswell, 2012). Thus, the researchers of the current study selected this research design with scientific rationale that it is suitable to identify, categorize and analyze the common grammatical errors in written paragraphs of first year students of Wolaita Sodo University by the academic year 2015/16. The researchers used document analysis as a prime tool of data collection. Then, the researchers analyzed the collected data using eclectic (integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches) of data analysis as this study requires a thorough, careful and exhaustive analysis of grammatical errors in the written paragraphs of the first year students of Wolaita Sodo University by the year 2015/16.

b) Research Setting and Participants

Wolaita Sodo University is one among 35 public universities of Ethiopia. It was established in 1999 E. C (2007G.C) registering 818 students as its first batch. The University is found in the administrative city of Wolaita Zone (Sodo, SNNPR), 330kms from Addis Ababa through Hossana and 160kms from the Regional Capital (Hawassa). Currently, in its three campuses (Gandaba, Ottona and Tercha), the university teaches more than 20,000 students in 43 undergraduate and 34 graduate programs in regular, weekend and summer modalities. The university has grown its yearly intake capacity (in three aforementioned modalities) to more than 10,000 students.

The major participants of the current study were all the first year students of Wolaita Sodo University by the academic year 2015/16. However, for the manageability of this study, 400 (12%) students out of the total of 3,320 first year regular students of WSU by the academic year 2015/16 was taken.

c) Sampling Procedure

For this study, the researchers used systematic random sampling procedure to draw sample of 400 (12%) students out of the total of 3,320 first year regular students of WSU by the academic year 2015/16. The researchers selected this specific sampling technique because of the rationale that it helps them to provide all members of the students, in the entire population, equal opportunity to be selected as a member of the sample. Using this sampling technique, the researchers selected sample of students having diverse academic, cultural and demographic backgrounds and provided them (the sample of 400 students) paragraph writing test having three different types of topics and then carefully collected the written paragraphs to be ready for analysis of common grammatical errors.

d) Instruments of Data Collection

Regarding the instruments of data collection, the researchers provided the paragraph writing test to sampled first year students of WSU by the academic year 2015/16. The test was given after the students completed the learning of paragraph writing lessons in the course "Basic Writing Skills," which was offered to all first year students across the disciplines in the second semester of the first year. The test had three types of topics; one topic for descriptive writing, one for argumentative writing and the other for narrative writing. Then, each of the students in the sample was ordered to write a paragraph of not less than 150 words in each type of topic (each student wrote the total of three paragraphs: one descriptive, one argumentative and one narrative). The students' paragraphs were evaluated and corrected to identify, categorize and analyze their common grammatical errors in paragraph writing. Thus, the prime tool of data collection for this study was document analysis.

e) Methods of Data Analysis

For this study, the researchers evaluated (corrected) the written paragraphs of the students, identified their common grammatical errors, categorized the errors into different grammatical themes and then tabulated them based on the frequency of the same error. Thus, they used both quantitative and qualitative approaches for data analysis (the integrated approach). The results were interpreted and analyzed using frequency counting and percentage (descriptive statistics; that is quantitative approach) and the discussion was presented using the common grammatical errors made by students while writing their paragraphs in English as examples (that is qualitative approach).

III. Results and Discussion

a) Analysis of Common Grammatical Errors in Students' Written Paragraphs

In this study, appropriate focus was given to the analysis of general or common grammatical errors (tenses, voices, prepositions, articles, adjectives and adverbs) that students make in their written paragraphs. As a stepwise process, the researchers identified the aforementioned errors via correcting students' written paragraphs, categorized the errors, counted each category for frequency, tabulated and changed the frequencies into percentages and discussed each of the the errors supporting it by sample examples from the written paragraphs. The overall results and discussions are presented below.

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i. *Tense Errors*

Table 1: Analysis of tense errors identified in the written paragraphs of the students

No	Errors identified in the usage of tense	Frequency	Percentage
1	Present tense	392	98
2	Past tense	384	96
3	Future tense	364	91

As clearly indicated in the above table (Table 1), more than 90% (in each case) of the first year students of Wolaita Sodo University make tense errors in their written paragraphs. Among these, 392 (98%) of students (as indicated in Table 1, item 1) made errors in the usage of present tense in general and simple present tense in particular. In almost all paragraphs of these students, it was found that students make errors in the correct usage of verbs in simple present tense especially with the third person singular subjects (he, she and it). As example, the following sentences are taken from written paragraphs of students.

1. My mother advise me every night. *The correct form*: My mother ***advises*** me every night.
2. My mother always start her advices by telling me stories. *The correct form*: My mother always ***starts*** her advices by telling me stories.
3. She advise me properly when nobody disturb her. *The correct form*: She ***advises*** me properly when nobody ***disturbs*** her.
4. My mother often do all kitchen routines alone without getting assistance from any of us. *The correct form*: My mother often ***does*** all kitchen routines alone without getting assistance from any of us.

As the above sentences indicate, the students do not use '-s' or '-es' as suffixes to their verbs when they use such verbs with third person singular subjects in simple present tense. This results in subject-verb disagreement in their paragraph writing which creates confusion for the readers to understand the intended meanings of their paragraphs.

The students also make the grammatical errors in the use of present continuous tense. As identified from their written paragraphs, they miss auxiliary verbs (either ***is*** or ***are***) when they express their ideas that demand present continuous tense. The following sentences (taken from the students' written paragraphs) clearly indicate these errors.

1. At this moment, our English teacher teaching us and we taking short notes of his discussion. *The correct form*: At this moment, our English teacher ***is*** teaching us and we ***are*** taking short notes of his discussion.
2. The students talking about their study styles when I enter into the classroom. *The correct form*: The students ***are*** talking about their study styles when I enter into the classroom.

Not only these students miss the auxiliary verbs when they write sentences in present continuous tense, they also make problems of concordance of subjects and verbs. They use singular verbs with plural nouns and vice-versa. As identified from their written paragraphs, the students misuse verbs without taking into account the singularity or plurality of the subjects in their sentences. Some of these examples from their written paragraphs are

1. My parents is taking care of me. *The correct form*: My parents ***are*** taking care of me.
2. Many of our family members is taking courses in moral education. *The correct form*: Many of our family members ***are*** taking courses in moral education.
3. None of the environmentalists, in our village, are striving for changing the exhausted situation of global warming. *The correct form:* None of the environmentalists, in our village, ***is*** striving for changing the exhausted situation of global warming.

Similarly, as identified from their written paragraphs, the students rarely use present perfect and present perfect continuous tenses. On those paragraphs the students used these two forms of present tense; they have committed serious problems like verb confusions (has became, have speaked, has buy, have readed… to correctly use ***has become, have spoken, has bought, have read…***). In addition, the students also made errors in subject-verb agreements when writing paragraphs using present perfect forms (specifically they use ***have and v_3*** with singular subjects). For instance, in their written paragraphs, the researchers identified sentences like

1. She have changed her attitude towards all her family members. *The correct form:* She ***has*** changed her attitude towards all her family members.
2. He have been working for days and nights to help his mother. *The correct form:* He ***has*** been working for days and nights to help his mother.
3. The teacher have been teaching in this school since 1998. *The correct form:* The teacher ***has*** been teaching in this school since 1998.

As similar to their errors in present tense, the students also make different forms of errors in the use of past tense (384(96%) of their paragraphs have errors in the usage of past tense, as depicted in Table 1, item 2). The students do not properly use the different forms of past tense. They use simple past form for the situations

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that demand past continuous and vice-versa. Similarly, the students also amalgamate the past perfect and past perfect continuous forms when they write their paragraphs. For instance, as identified in many of their paragraphs, the students write past tense with wrong verb forms, missing of verbs and making problem of subject-verb agreement. The following examples are taken from the students' written paragraphs and clearly indicate the aforementioned errors of past tense.

1. Last year, my mother was inviting all her friends to attend my birthday party. *The correct form:* Last year, my mother ***invited*** all her friends to attend my birthday party.
2. Until the end of last decade, all our village members had exerted their efforts for combating global warming. *The correct form:* Until the end of last decade, all our village members ***had been exerting*** their efforts for combating global warming.
3. Yesterday, our teacher telled us very inspiring story about Nelson Mandela. *The correct form:* Yesterday, our teacher ***told*** us very inspirational story about Nelson Mandela.
4. My father at home yesterday. *The correct form:* My father ***was*** at home yesterday.
5. When I entered into our reading room, both of my brothers was doing their assignments. *The correct form:* When I entered into our reading room, both of my brothers ***were doing*** their assignments.

In similar vein to the above two forms of tenses (present and past), students make different forms of errors in future tense when they write their paragraphs using future tense(as 364(91%) of their written paragraphs clearly reveal such the errors). They monotonously use the modal verb ***will*** in all their sentences rather than variedly using other forms of verbs with similar functions: ***shall, may, can***… Besides, the students also make errors by misusing ***will*** instead of ***'going to'*** for activities which are clearly planned to be done in the future time. The students also miss some part/s of verb phrase when they write their ideas in future continuous or in future perfect tenses. The sample sentences, taken from their written paragraphs, clearly show the aforementioned errors.

1. My sister *will* go to Addis next week. I *will* have the final exam on coming Monday. They *will* solve this problem very easily. *The more varied and correct form:* My sister ***will*** go to Addis next week. I ***may*** have the final exam on coming Monday. They ***can*** solve this problem very easily.
2. My father will buy automobile in next summer (already planned). *The correct form:* My father ***is going to buy*** automobile in next summer (already planned).
3. At this time next year, our family members will visiting USA. *The correct form:* At this time next year, our family members will be visiting USA.

From the above analysis, we can generalize the conclusion that first year students of Wolaita Sodo University make different forms of tense errors when they write paragraphs. The most common among these errors is the use of verbs in simple present tense especially with the third person singular subjects (he, she and it). The students also miss auxiliary verbs (either ***is*** or ***are***) when they express their ideas that demand present continuous tense and make problems of concordance of subjects and verbs. The students create serious problems of verb confusion when they write in present perfect and present perfect continuous tenses. Similarly, the students make different errors when they use past tense: use wrong verb forms, miss verbs in their sentences and making problem of subject-verb agreement. Again, they make various errors when they use future tense in their paragraphs: they use the modal verb ***will*** monotonously in all their future forms, they misuse ***will*** instead of ***'going to'*** for activities which are clearly planned to be done in the future time and miss some part/s of verb phrase when they write their ideas in future continuous or in future perfect tenses.

ii. *Voice Errors*

Table 2: Analysis of voice errors identified in the written paragraphs of the students

No	Errors identified in the usage of voice	Frequency	Percentage
1	Active voice	336	84
2	Passive voice	56	93

Even though the students' paragraph writing assignment does not require the use of passive voice, some students (60 students out of 400 in total) wrongly used passive voice in their written paragraphs. As can be seen from Table 2, item 2, 56 out of 60 (93%) of those students who used passive voice in their written paragraphs made errors. The more frequent error among this category is the missing of verb to be when students write passive form swith past participle form of the main verb (V3). For instance, the students incorrectly used …***has/have/had served by***… in place of…***has/have/had been served by…***(which is the correct form) or they use patterns like ….***supported by***… instead of the correct form ***…is/are/was/were supported by…***

Besides the missing of verb to be when writing their ideas in passive voice, the students also make errors because they hardly distinguish transitive and

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intransitive verbs in their writings. They use intransitive verbs instead of transitive verbs or the vice-versa. For example, they write sentences like ***She is spoken very carefully***…to write ***She speaks/spoke/has or had spoken/is speaking very carefully…*** (which is identified from their written paragraphs). Thus, the reader of this sentence will be confused to identify its central meaning.

On the other hand, the students also have problems in correct usage of the active voice. In their written paragraphs, it is identified that the focus of their active verbs is not clearly known. As the general rule, the focus of active verbs is to indicate the doer of the action. However, in the students' written paragraphs, the active verbs hardly indicate the doer of the action. For example, the sentences like ***All our family members do given our mother love and respect…***, ***Our father is take serious punishment when any one of our family members is make mistake***…. The correct forms of these two sentences (indicating their clear focus) are ***All our family members give our mother love and respect…***, ***Our father takes serious punishment when any one of our family members makes mistake***…. These sentences clearly prove the aforementioned scenario.

Therefore, we can infer the conclusion that first year students of Wolaita Sodo University make different forms of errors in the use of active and passive voices. They miss ***verb to be*** when writing their ideas in passive voice and wrongly mix-up the transitive and intransitive verbs as they hardly distinguish these two categories of verbs in English. The students also make errors in the use of active verbs by enervating the focus of those verbs in their paragraph writing.

iii. *Preposition Errors*

Table 3: Analysis of preposition errors identified in the written paragraphs of the students

No	Errors identified in the usage of preposition	Frequency	Percentage
1	Errors of selecting appropriate preposition	380	95
2	Preposition errors of placing them correctly	352	88

Preposition errors are among the most frequent errors in the written paragraphs of first year students of Wolaita Sodo University (as identified in the written paragraphs of the students). In most cases the students make preposition errors either by selecting inappropriate preposition that does not collocate with the words it has been written with (as 380(95%) of students' written paragraphs have such kind of errors) or misplacement of the correct preposition in the sentence (as 352(88%) of their written paragraphs have such kind of errors). For example, the following sentences, having preposition errors, are taken from the written paragraphs of the students.

1. A good family rule is grounded ***by*** mutual respect. *The correct form*: A good family rule is grounded ***in*** mutual respect.
2. My English teacher provides me feedback based ***with*** the errors that I make ***of*** my written works. *The correct form*: My English teacher provides me feedback based ***on*** the errors that I make ***in*** my written works.
3. I always disagree my younger brother ***with*** when he starts talking on football game. *The correct form:* I always disagree ***with*** my younger brother when he starts talking on football game.
4. Our English teacher often attaches ***with*** every mistake of a student his/her carelessness. *The correct form:* Our English teacher often attaches every mistake of a student ***with*** his/her carelessness.

From the four sentences taken from students' written paragraphs, the first two have errors of using suitable prepositions. The latter two have no problem with suitability of the prepositions selected, but such the prepositions are placed wrongly. Thus, in both cases, the meanings of the sentences have been distracted and do not clearly address their intended meanings to the targeted readers because of the preposition errors occurred in the sentences.

iv. *Article Errors*

Table 4: Analysis of article errors identified in the written paragraphs of the students

No	Errors identified in the usage of articles	Frequency	Percentage
1	Errors of using indefinite article 'a' correctly	344	
2	Errors of using indefinite article 'an' correctly	320	
3	Errors of using definite article 'the' correctly	386	

Article errors are again among the most frequent problems in students' written paragraphs. The first year students of Wolaita Sodo University frequently make article errors when writing their paragraphs (as more than 80% of the students' written paragraphs clearly show this problem, see Table 4, items 1-3). These errors happen in different forms. In some of the students' written paragraphs, the article errors are occurred because of missing of the needed articles. In some other written paragraphs of the students, the

article errors are occurred because of the wrong usage of the articles (using definite article '*the*' in place of indefinite articles '**a**' or '*an*' or vice-versa and sometimes because of interchanging the correct usage of '*a*' and '*an*'). The following sentences, taken from written paragraphs of the students, clearly demonstrate such the problem.

1. Being noisy is bad habit when others are reading at home. *The correct form*: Being noisy is ***a*** bad habit when others are reading at home.
2. Everybody in our village believes that ***a*** village where we live is very beautiful. *The correct form*: Everybody in our village believes that ***the*** village where we live is very beautiful.
3. ***A*** current government of Ethiopia takes serious measures on those who commit corruption. *The correct form*: ***The*** current government of Ethiopia takes serious measures on those who commit corruption.
4. ***A*** hour ago, she looked for something to eat. ***An*** hour ago, she looked for something to eat.

The above discussions and the supporting examples extracted from the written paragraphs of the students clearly indicate that first year student of Wolaita Sodo University make different forms of article errors; specially missing of the needed articles and wrong shifting of the correct functions of different articles which may distort the structure and meanings of the sentences in their written paragraphs.

v. *Errors of Usage in Adjectives and Adverbs*

Table 5: Analysis of adjectives and adverbs usage errors identified in the written paragraphs of the students

No	Errors identified in the usage of adjectives and adverbs	Frequency	Percentage
1	Wrongly using adjectives instead of adverbs and vice-versa	312	78
2	Misplacing adjectives or adverbs in the sentences	332	83

Incorrect usage of adjectives and adverbs is one among the most frequent errors that the first year students of Wolaita Sodo University make in their written paragraphs. They make these errors in two different forms. One is wrongly using adjectives instead of adverbs and vice-versa (as 312(78%) of students' written paragraphs show this error) and the other is misplacing adjectives or adverbs in their sentences (as 332(83%) of students' written paragraphs show this error) that causes confusion of meaning/s.

In written paragraphs of the first year students of Wolaita Sodo University, it was identified that students wrongly use adjectives instead of adverbs and vice versa. This may be because of the reason that they do not understand the functions of adjectives and adverbs or it may be because of their blurred understanding of words that are adjectives and those which are adverbs. The following examples, taken from the written paragraphs of the students, clearly show the problem.

1. Our English teacher told us the *really* dangers of smoking on human health. *The correct form:* Our English teacher told us the real dangers of smoking on human health.
2. Whenever given me responsibility from any one of my family members, I accomplish activities being *high* dedicated. *The correct form:* (1) Whenever given me responsibility from any one of my family members, I accomplish activities being ***highly*** dedicated. Or (2) Whenever given me responsibility from any one of my family members, I accomplish activities ***with high dedication***.

In the correctly developed meaningful sentences, adjectives are placed closer to the nouns or pronouns that they modify. Similarly, adverbs are also placed closer to the verbs, adjectives or other adverbs that they modify. However, the written paragraphs of the students clearly depict the distorted appearance of this scenario. For instance, in the written paragraphs of the students, the researchers identified the following sentences having such errors.

1. The teacher gave me a chance *mere* to answer the question. *The correct form:* The teacher gave me a ***mere*** chance to answer the question.
2. During family discussion, I always observe points of view *opposite* from each of our family members. *The correct form:* During family discussion, I always observe ***opposite*** points of view from each of our family members
3. In his marking style, our English teacher is becoming generous *more and more*. *The correct form:* In his marking style, our English teacher is becoming ***more and more*** generous.
4. The environmentalists have been striving to change the harsh situation of global warming *aggressively*. *The correct form:* The environmentalists have been striving ***aggressively*** to change the harsh situation of global warming

As clearly indicated in the above discussion and proved by the sample examples from students' written paragraphs, we can infer the conclusion that the first year students of Wolaita Sodo University make two categories of errors in usage of adjectives and adverbs when writing their paragraphs *i. e* ,reversing the proper functions of adjectives and adverbs and misplacing adjectives and adverbs in their sentences.

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IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

a) Conclusions

Based on the results and discussions of the current study, the following conclusions have been reached:

- The first year students of WSU make different forms of tense errors when they write paragraphs: errors in the use of verbs in simple present tense, miss auxiliary verbs (either ***is*** or ***are***) when they express their ideas in present continuous tense, create serious problems of verb confusion when they write in present perfect and present perfect continuous tenses, use wrong verb forms and miss verbs in their sentences when they use past tense and use the modal verb ***will*** monotonously in all their future forms and misuse ***will*** instead of ***'going to'*** for activities which are clearly planned to be done in the future time in the future tense.
- The students make different forms of errors in the use of active and passive voices. They miss ***verb to be*** when writing their ideas in passive voice and wrongly mix-up the transitive and intransitive verbs as they hardly distinguish these two categories of verbs in English.
- They make errors of using suitable prepositions when writing their paragraphs and place prepositions wrongly in their sentences.
- The students make different forms of article errors; specifically missing of the needed articles and wrong shifting of the correct functions of different articles which may distort the structures and meanings of the sentences.
- They make two major categories of errors in usage of adjectives and adverbs when writing their paragraphs i.e., reversing the proper functions of adjectives and adverbs and misplacing adjectives and adverbs in their sentences

b) Recommendations

Based on the discussions and conclusions made above, the following recommendations are forwarded:

- First year students of Wolaita Sodo University should give adequate attention to grammaticality of their writing when they develop their paragraphs.
- English teachers of Wolaita Sodo University should provide pertinent emphasis to grammaticality when they teach their students paragraph writing.
- English teachers of Wolaita Sodo University should give proper and adequate attention to grammaticality when they give feedback on their students' written paragraphs.

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