

Harry Potter and the Truth of Annoying Errors

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English Language 350: Basic Editing Skills

October 31, 2018

Introduction

There is a certain authority that comes with a published piece of writing. Edited writing should be nearly flawless, right? While I have high expectations as a reader and hold writers to a high standard, I can't help feeling a glow of pride when I catch typos or other mistakes in otherwise polished, published books. I understand that no editor is perfect and that mistakes, small as they may be, are likely to creep into any writing, yet I can't help but judge a book by its grammar and usage. A number of studies have explored why and how these errors attack an author's credibility. Beason noted that many teachers primarily focus on errors that impede communication, yet he stressed that "our effectiveness, perhaps our ethos, can be impeded if we stress matters that other professionals see as trivial—or if we trivialize points they deem consequential. . . . We at the very least need to know if the messages we send students will be reinforced or negated by how other professionals read errors" (2001, 34). He makes a valid point; to some extent, the specific errors writers and editors try to prevent do not matter if those errors seem unimportant to the audience.

Saller supports this idea in her book *The Subversive Copy Editor*. "Your ultimate boss," she writes, "is the *reader*. You, your boss, and your boss's boss all work for the same person, and you all have the same goal of making that person's reading experience the best it can be" (Saller 2016, 5). Despite my fondness for the details of the English language, I wonder how many other readers hold writing—especially novels—to such high grammatical expectations as I do. If the average reader were presented with a less-than-clean document, would he or she still enjoy it for the sake of the story? Few academic studies focus on the everyday consumers of fiction; but editors help to publish novels, too, and so must understand which errors the readers, their "real boss," will notice and find most annoying.

Research Question

To better understand the preferences of fiction readers, this paper will seek to answer this research question: which kinds of errors are seen as the most annoying in the context of popular fiction novels? While the survey in this paper has been done on a small scale, the results can still lead to further, more in-depth research in an attempt to help editors narrow their priorities accordingly and potentially improve the efficiency and productivity of lighter edits made when constrained by time and resources.

Methods

To answer this research question, I modeled this research project after the procedure outlined in Beason's study on errors in business writing. I identified five common errors generally emphasized in English curriculums: punctuation mistakes (especially around dialogue), misspelled and misused words, sentence fragments, ambiguous pronoun references, and mismatched pronoun cases. I selected five small portions of the well-known novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* for each of these common errors and adjusted the text to include the respective error. I bolded the errors to ensure that participants in the experiment would be able to identify the mistakes clearly and not feel pressured to find each mistake. I created a Qualtrics survey to ask participants to rank each of these examples on a scale of one to four, one being the least annoying and four being the most annoying. I then emailed the survey to my immediate family members (including my in-laws) and invited them to participate. My goal was to acquire at least six responses, and ultimately ten individuals filled out the survey. Seven males and three females took the survey with ages ranging from fifteen to fifty-one. I analyzed the responses by tallying up which errors received the most rankings in each category. For more detail, please find the survey in Appendix A.

Results

After the participants had finished the survey as outlined above, I collected the resulting data. The data showed that incorrect pronoun cases were the most annoying, followed by misspelled and misused words, sentence fragments, punctuation errors, and finally, ambiguous pronouns. The five sentences containing incorrect pronoun case errors received a total of twenty-two rankings of four and eight rankings of three compared to only eleven rankings of two and nine rankings of one. This means that for incorrect pronoun case, thirty out of fifty ranking opportunities declared these errors to be more annoying than not. To better visualize this data, please see Figure 1 below.

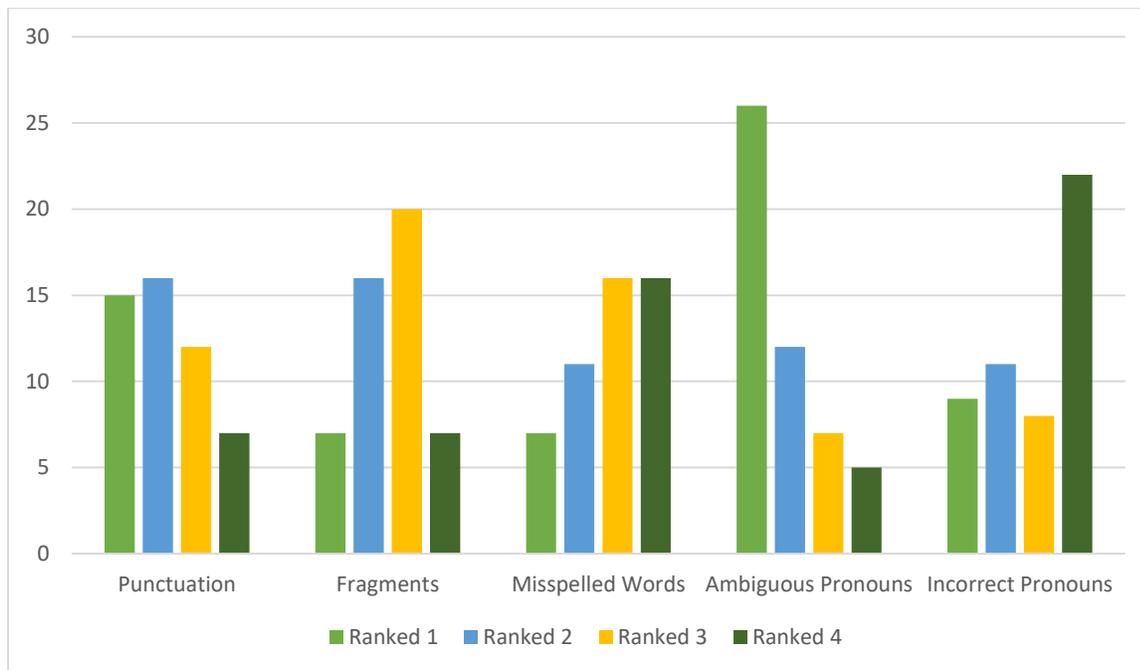


Figure 1. Total number of annoyance rankings

Similarly, sentences with misspelled and misused words had a total of sixteen rankings of four and sixteen rankings of three, but only eleven rankings of two and seven rankings of one.

Thus, thirty-two out of fifty ranking opportunities found these errors more annoying, albeit with a bit more tolerance for misspellings than for incorrect pronoun case mistakes.

Sentence fragments received a total of seven rankings of four, twenty rankings of three, sixteen rankings of two, and seven rankings of one. Twenty-seven out of fifty opportunities to rank sentence fragments marked these errors as more annoying.

Punctuation errors received a total of seven rankings of four, twelve rankings of three, sixteen rankings of two, and fifteen rankings of one. So, only nineteen out of fifty opportunities to rank punctuation errors marked these errors as more annoying.

The sentences with ambiguous pronouns received a total of five rankings of four, seven rankings of three, twelve rankings of two, and twenty-six rankings of one. Thus, only twelve out of fifty opportunities to rank ambiguous pronouns marked these errors as more annoying. For a graphic summary of the data, please refer to the various charts in Appendix B.

The last question of the survey, which was optional, asked if there were any other additional mistakes that bothered the participants, and four out of five respondents mentioned misused or misspelled words again, including using incorrect character names. The other respondent mentioned run-on sentences and mistakes with reflexive pronouns. I included this question to ensure that I had not excluded any critical errors in the survey. Since most participants who answered this question mentioned errors already included within the survey, I concluded that the survey was fair in exploring these five particular errors.

Discussion

The data mentioned above yielded a number of interesting conclusions. First, while the incorrect pronoun case errors were rather annoying to the participants, many of these mistakes were glaringly obvious to most native English speakers. For instance, one question presented the

following example: “He was so relieved to have been chosen and not put in Slytherin, he hardly noticed that **him** was getting the loudest cheer yet.” This sentence received seven out of ten rankings of four and never received a ranking of one or two. However, two of the sentences, which contained the errors of “between you and **I**” and “who” instead of “whom,” received fewer rankings of three and four and many more rankings of one and two, showing that some issues of pronoun case are far less annoying than others. It seems that while some differences between pronoun case can cause more irritation in a reader, the lesser-known rules may not matter to the general audience. Since an editor is less likely to find errors in these widely applied rules for pronoun case in a manuscript, these errors may be less important, allowing editors to potentially set the more intricate pronoun case issues aside when pressed for time.

Another interesting finding from the data is that although participants overall ranked misspelled and misused words as the second most annoying of these mistakes, many of the comments from participants re-emphasized how annoying they found these errors to be. Since the data relating to pronoun case may not be entirely straightforward and accurate, we can reasonably assume that the majority of readers will find misspelled or misused words more annoying than most other mistakes. One comment in particular validated the principle that this error could attack the credibility of authors and editors: “Its/It's and your/you're are big ones. Things that passed spell check but are wrong show a lack of review.” To help show that a manuscript has indeed been reviewed with care, editors of fiction should pay close attention to words that spell check might not mark as incorrect whether those words have been used correctly or not. Editors are likely to gain respect and help their authors maintain credibility by paying the most attention to commonly confused words and misspellings.

As an editor myself, I intend to keep these findings in mind as I work with fiction throughout my editing career. My purpose is to please the readers with the books they read and to protect the credibility of the author by correcting the most noticeable and bothersome mistakes. Since fiction readers tend not to notice ambiguous pronouns as much, I may choose to let these inconsistencies slide. However, I will be on my guard for misspelled and misused words and other glaring mistakes that show a lack of attention. In this way, whatever my restrictions in time or resources may be, I will be able to balance the expectations of not only the author and my publishing managers, but also the readers.

Appendix A

Thank you for taking this survey. It should take approximately five to ten minutes to complete. After some general demographic questions, you will be presented with five questions displaying five quotes from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. Errors have been inserted into each of these snippets and bolded. Please rank how annoying you feel each error is on a scale of one to four, one being the least annoying and four being the most annoying. The information you give will be completely anonymous and used purely for research purposes.

I do not claim to own any of J. K. Rowling's writing; the changes I have made to her words are purely for research and educational motives.

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

How old are you?

- 10-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60

Have you read any of the Harry Potter books? (This is not required to take the survey.)

- No.
- No, but I've seen at least some or all of the movies.
- I've read part of book one.
- I've read book one.
- I've read books one through two.
- I've read books one through three.
- I've read books one through four.
- I've read books one through five.
- I've read books one through six.
- I've read books one through seven.

The following snippets from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone have fabricated punctuation errors. Please rank the annoyance of these errors on a scale of one to four, one being the least annoying and four being the most annoying.

1. "I would trust Hagrid with my **life.**" **Said** Dumbledore.
2. "I'm not Fred, I'm **George**" **said** the boy. "Honestly, woman, you call yourself our mother? Can't you *tell* I'm George?"
3. "How exactly do they sort us into houses?" **He** asked Ron.
4. "Ah, yes," Snape said **softly** "**Harry** Potter. Our new—*celebrity.*"
5. Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought **Harry, there** was a quaver in Neville's voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

The following snippets from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone have fabricated sentence fragments. Please rank the annoyance of these errors on a scale of one to four, one being the least annoying and four being the most annoying.

1. The dragon egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; **a funny clicking noise.**
2. It was the unicorn all right, and it was dead. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. **Its long, slender legs at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane pearly white on the dark leaves.**
3. "Keep playing," Ron warned Harry as they slipped out of the cloak and crept toward the trapdoor. **The dog's hot, smelly breath as they approached the giant heads.**
4. If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. **Almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide.** He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild—long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of trash can lids, and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins. In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets.
5. **A scarlet steam engine next to a platform packed with people.** A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven o'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words Platform Nine and Three-Quarters on it. He had done it.

The following snippets from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone have fabricated misspellings and misused words. Please rank the annoyance of these errors on a scale of one to four, one being the least annoying and four being the most annoying.

1. Mainly to avoid all the staring eyes, Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard Hermione whisper, “**Its** bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts, A History.”
2. “**You’re** father would have been proud,” McGonagall said. “He was an excellent Quidditch player himself.”
3. “Can’t a person eat in piece in this place?” said Ron.
4. “Right,” said Wood. “Now, Quidditch is easy enough to understand, even if it’s not too easy to play. **Their** are seven players on each side. Three of them are called Chasers.”
5. Quirrell shivered suddenly “My master does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to **steel** the stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me . . . decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me. . . .”

The following snippets from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone have fabricated ambiguous pronouns. Please rank the annoyance of these errors on a scale of one to four, one being the least annoying and four being the most annoying.

1. Harry was going to ask Ron if he’d had any of the treacle tart, but **he** fell asleep almost at once.
2. Harry sat up and gasped; the glass front of the boa constrictor’s tank had vanished. **It** was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house screamed and started running for the exits.
3. This morning, however, Hedwig fluttered down between the marmalade and the sugar bowl and dropped a note onto Harry’s plate. Harry tore **it** open at once.
4. The club flew suddenly out of the troll’s hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over—and dropped, with a sickening crack, onto its owner’s head. **It** swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.
5. It took perhaps thirty seconds for Snape to realize that he was on fire. A sudden yelp told Hermione she had done her job. Scooping **it** off him into a little jar in her pocket, she scrambled back along the row—Snape would never know what had happened.

The following snippets from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone have fabricated pronoun case errors. Please rank the annoyance of these errors on a scale of one to four, one being the least annoying and four being the most annoying.

1. “Ah, now, I’m glad you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and **I**, that’s saying something,” said Dumbledore.

2. Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole hall. He took off the hat and walked shakily toward the Gryffindor table. He was so relieved to have been chosen and not put in Slytherin, he hardly noticed that **him** was getting the loudest cheer yet.

3. “Ah! Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans! I was unfortunate enough in **mine** youth to come across a vomit-flavored one, and since then I’m afraid I’ve rather lost my liking for them—but I think I’ll be safe with a nice toffee, don’t you?”

4. Suddenly, people were pointing at Harry all over the stands. His broom had started to roll over and over, with **he** only just managing to hold on.

5. Snape put them all into pairs and set them to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. He swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, **who** he seemed to like.

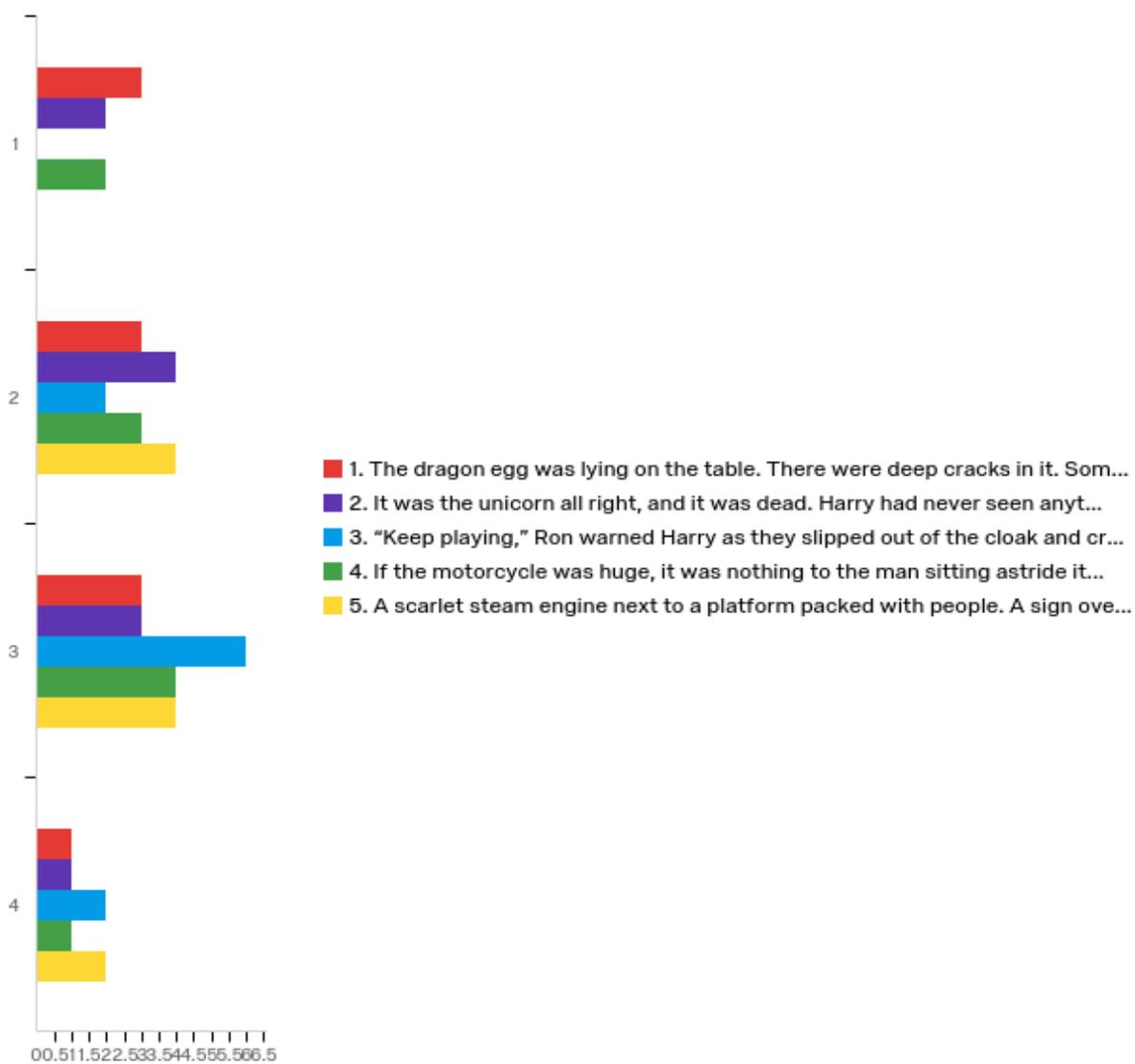
Please describe any other common errors that are annoying for you to see in novels. (This question is optional.)

Appendix B

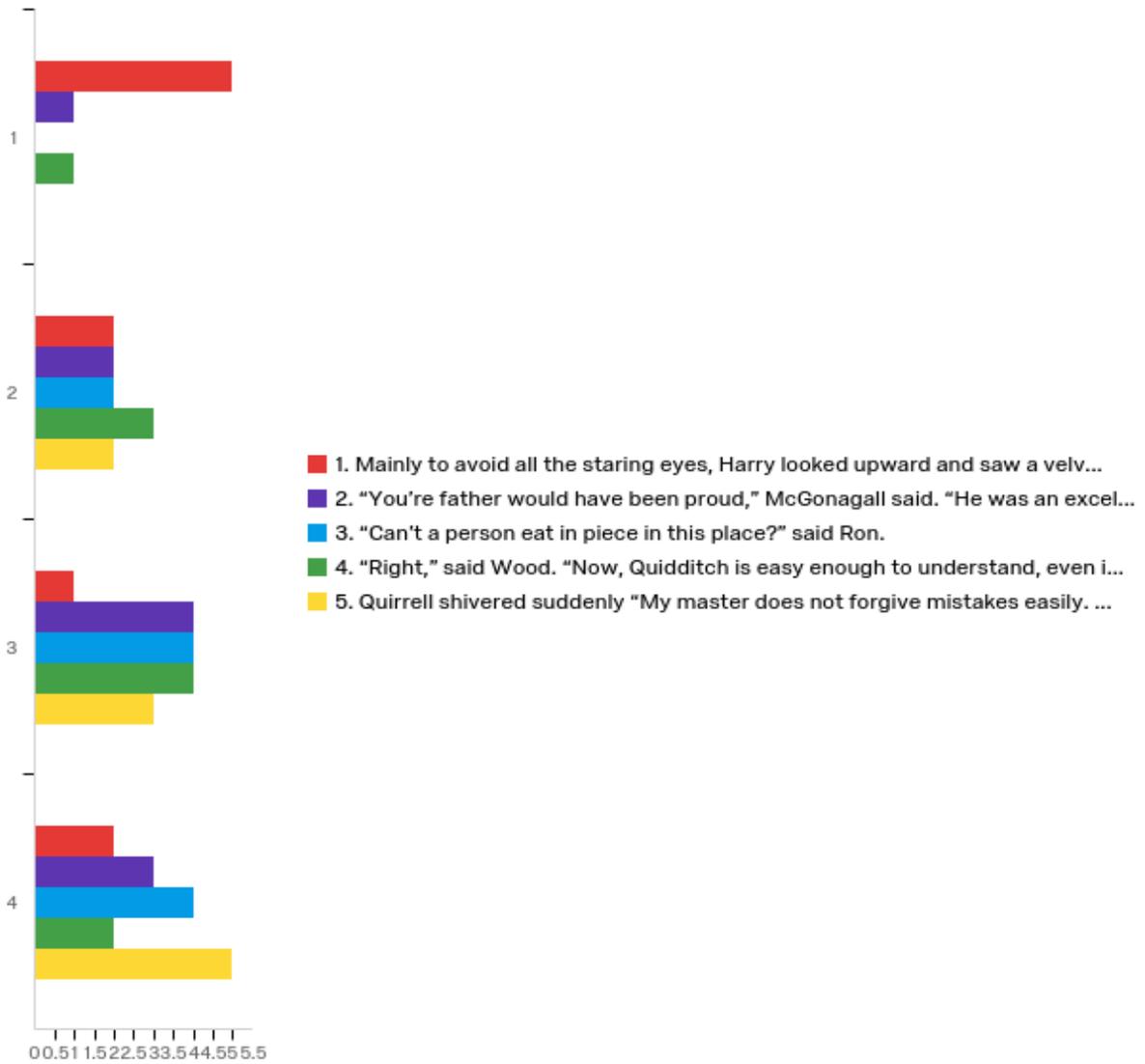
Question #5 Data: Punctuation Errors



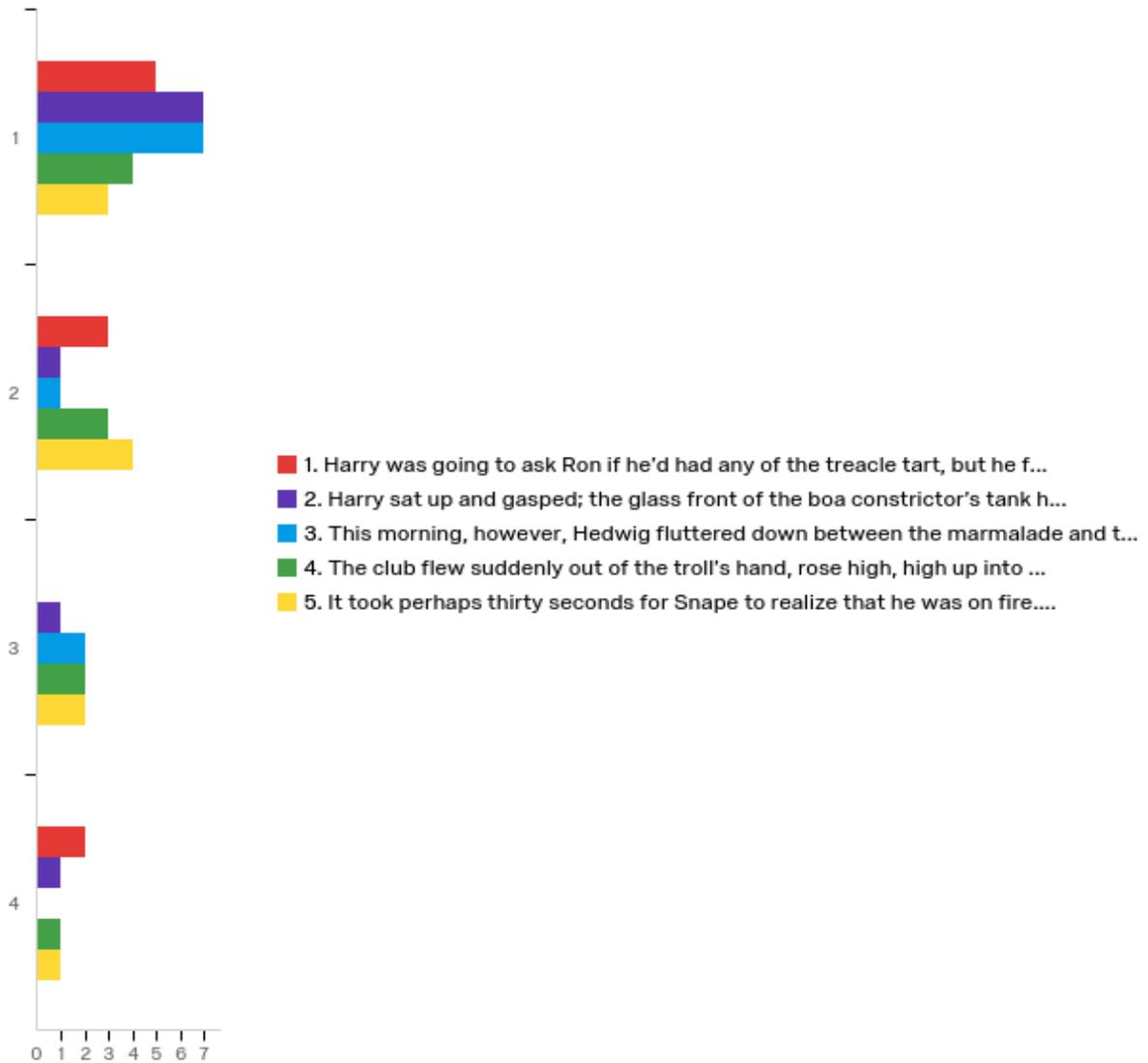
Question #6 Data: Sentence Fragments



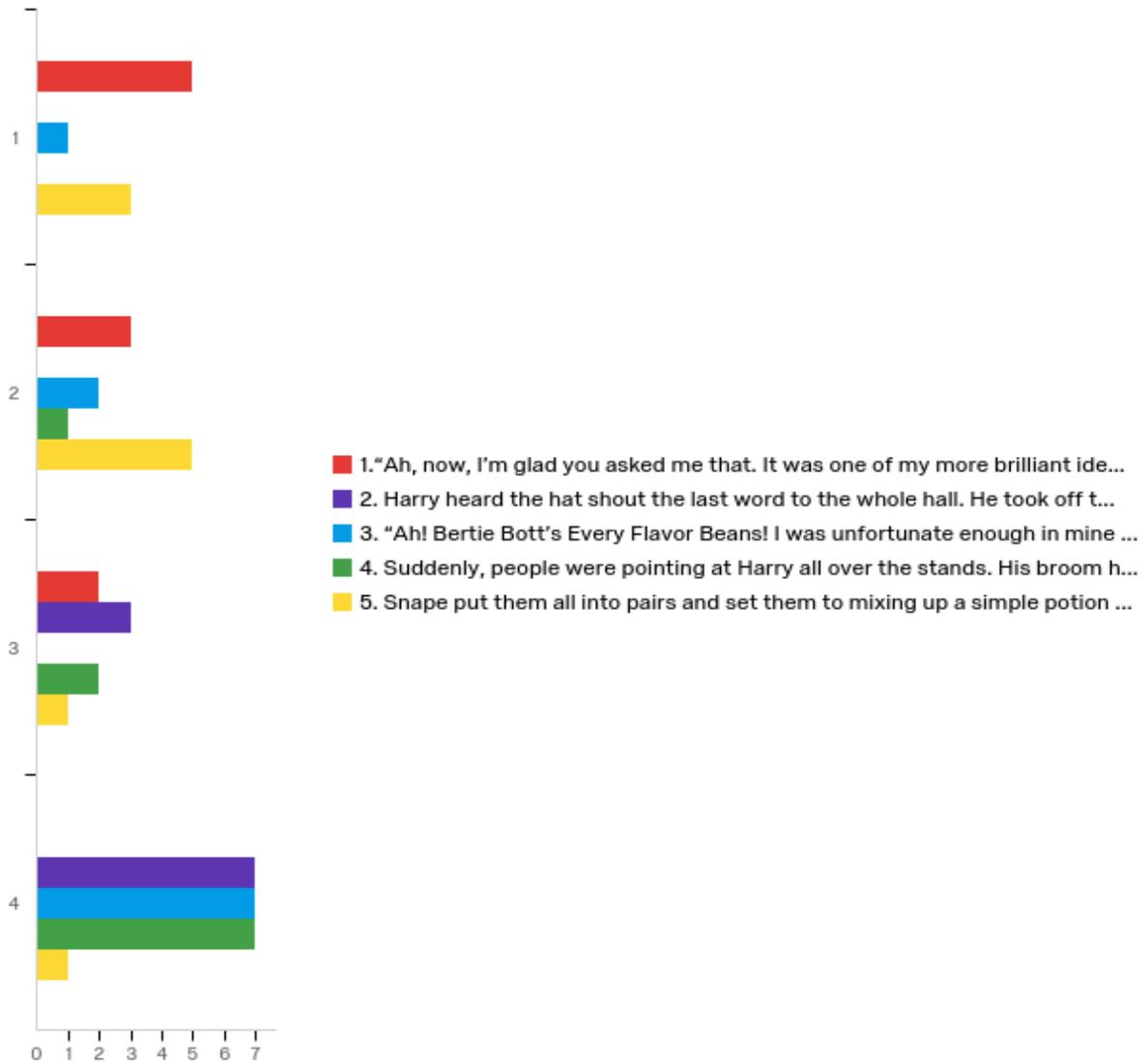
Question #7 Data: Misspelled and Misused Words



Question #8 Data: Ambiguous Pronouns



Question #9 Data: Mismatched Pronoun Cases



References

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