

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 190

TE 002 769

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TITLE Misspelling in Grades 9-12.
PUB DATE 71
NOTE 8p.
JOURNAL CIT English Record; v22 n1 p46-53 Fall 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Composition (Literary); Data Analysis; *Error
Patterns; *High School Students; *Spelling;
*Structural Analysis; *Word Lists
IDENTIFIERS United States

ABSTRACT

This document is a report on a study of errors in spelling which high school students in 48 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada have made in their writing, with special reference to the words most frequently misspelled, their relative frequency, and the kinds of spelling errors which the student made. An analysis of the different words misspelled and the number of times each word was misspelled shows that most of the words were misspelled only rarely, while a comparatively few words were misspelled much more frequently. Five major groups of errors were noted: (1) misspelling of endings of words, (2) misspelling of vowels, (3) misspelling of homonyms or near homonyms, (4) misspelling of consonants, and (5) misspelling of prefixes and combining forms. An outline of the kinds of spelling errors made in grades 9-12 is included for reference. (CK)

English Record
Vol. 22, No. 1,
Fall 1971

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MISSPELLING IN GRADES 9-12

Thomas Clark Pollock

This is a report on a study of errors in spelling which high school students in forty-eight states, the District of Columbia, and Canada have made in their writing, with special reference to the words most frequently misspelled, their relative frequency, and the kinds of spelling errors which the students made.

The raw data for this study were collected by 1,706 teachers in 846 high schools who responded to a request I made through the medium of the *Teachers Service Bulletin in English* of the Macmillan Company to send me the next fifty misspelled words which they met in the writing of one of their high-school classes. Some of the teachers sent fifty words, some fewer; but altogether they sent me a total of well over 50,000 words misspelled in grades 9-12. I winnowed the total list by setting aside spellings of unusual names; spellings such as *judgement* and *useable* which, although not the preferred American spellings, are regarded as acceptable by some American dictionaries; and a number of other words which, although presumably misspelled as the students wrote them, were spelled correctly in the transcriptions the teachers sent me. After this winnowing, the raw data consisted of 49,259 misspelled words.

Further analysis showed that these were 49,259 misspellings of 6,556 different words and that they contained 54,173 spelling errors, 20% of the misspellings came from grade 9, 27% from grade 10, 27% from grade 11, and 26% from grade 12.

Section I which follows concerns the words most frequently misspelled and their relative frequency. Section II presents an analysis of the kinds of spelling errors the student writers made.

I

An analysis of the different words misspelled and the number of times each word was misspelled shows that most of the words were misspelled only rarely, while a comparatively few words were misspelled much more frequently. More specifically:

- 2,511 words or 38% of the total, were misspelled only once.
- 1,048 words, or 16% of the total, were misspelled only twice.
- 572 words, or 9% of the total, were misspelled only three times.
- 394 words, or 6% of the total, were misspelled only four times.
- Hence 4,525 different words, or nearly 70% of the total, were misspelled fewer than five times; and these different words account for only about 9% of the misspellings.

On the other hand:

- The 100 words which were misspelled most frequently, from 70 to 658 times each, account for 13,551 misspellings or nearly 28% of the

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total. That is, 1.5% of the different words account for nearly 28% of the misspellings.

— The 388 words which were misspelled most frequently—each one at least 25 times—account for 25,254 of the misspelled words, or 51% of the total. This is, 6% of the different words account for 51% of the misspellings.

It is evident from this as well as from other studies¹ that, whether or not it is pedagogically wise to speak of "spelling demons," a comparatively few words do account for a large percentage of misspellings in high school. It would seem clear that these words deserve special attention in any teaching of spelling in secondary schools.

The list of 388 words which occasioned more than half of the misspellings in grades 9-12 is given below. The letters in each word which caused most of the spelling errors are *italicized*. The words are arranged in order of decreasing frequency of misspelling. (Note that the "words" listed here include a few word-groups or elisions which frequently occasion misspellings, such as *all right*, *it's*, and *you're*, as well as words with alternate endings, such as "interest(ing)" and "description(ive)."

| | <i>Times Misspelled</i> | | <i>Times Misspelled</i> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. <i>their</i> | — 658 | 31. <i>to</i> | — 131 |
| 2. <i>too</i> | — 578 | 32. <i>truly</i> | — 129 |
| 3. <i>receive</i> | — 450 | 33. <i>does</i> | — 128 |
| 4. <i>there</i> | — 314 | 34. <i>stopped(ing)</i> | — 127 |
| 5. <i>all right</i> | — 309 | 35. <i>recommend</i> | — 125 |
| 6. <i>separate</i> | — 307 | 36. <i>embarrass</i> | — 124 |
| 7. <i>believe</i> | — 299 | 37. <i>lose</i> | — 124 |
| 8. <i>until</i> | — 287 | 38. <i>necessary</i> | — 124 |
| 9. <i>coming</i> | — 236 | 39. <i>woman</i> | — 123 |
| 10. <i>whether</i> | — 221 | 40. <i>different(cc)</i> | — 120 |
| 11. <i>interest(ing)</i> | — 219 | 41. <i>probably</i> | — 120 |
| 12. <i>writing</i> | — 218 | 42. <i>than</i> | — 115 |
| 13. <i>tried(s)</i> | — 206 | 43. <i>where</i> | — 115 |
| 14. <i>privilege</i> | — 200 | 44. <i>its</i> | — 114 |
| 15. <i>decide(d)</i> | — 197 | 45. <i>clothes</i> | — 113 |
| 16. <i>finally</i> | — 192 | 46. <i>convenient(cc)</i> | — 109 |
| 17. <i>beginning</i> | — 189 | 47. <i>occurred(ing)</i> | — 107 |
| 18. <i>character</i> | — 188 | 48. <i>similar</i> | — 107 |
| 19. <i>surprise</i> | — 178 | 49. <i>tragedy</i> | — 107 |
| 20. <i>humor(ous)</i> | — 171 | 50. <i>acquaint</i> | — 106 |
| 21. <i>business</i> | — 166 | 51. <i>among</i> | — 104 |
| 22. <i>grammar</i> | — 161 | 52. <i>experience</i> | — 104 |
| 23. <i>definite</i> | — 158 | 53. <i>pleasant</i> | — 101 |
| 24. <i>disappoint</i> | — 151 | 54. <i>thought</i> | — 101 |
| 25. <i>description(ive)</i> | — 147 | 55. <i>conscious</i> | — 98 |
| 26. <i>studying</i> | — 143 | 56. <i>government</i> | — 98 |
| 27. <i>friend</i> | — 136 | 57. <i>always</i> | — 97 |
| 28. <i>college</i> | — 135 | 58. <i>describe</i> | — 96 |
| 29. <i>quiet</i> | — 133 | 59. <i>immediately</i> | — 96 |
| 30. <i>occasion</i> | — 132 | 60. <i>rhythm</i> | — 96 |

¹ For a summary of comparable findings in other studies, see the excellent analysis by J. Stephen "Sherwin" in Chapter 2, Eggs, Egges, Eyrén: *The Problem of Spelling*, in his *Four Problems in Teaching English: a Critique of Research*, published for the National Council of Teachers of English by International Textbook Co., Scranton, Pa. 1960.

| | <i>Times Misspelled</i> | | <i>Times Misspelled</i> | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----|---|---|----|
| 61. athletic | — | 93 | 121. author | — | 64 |
| 62. disappear | — | 92 | 122. foreign | — | 64 |
| 63. sophomore | — | 92 | 123. soldier | — | 64 |
| 64. sincerely | — | 90 | 124. suppose | — | 64 |
| 65. piece | — | 89 | 125. exaggerate | — | 63 |
| 66. because | — | 88 | 126. excitement | — | 63 |
| 67. across | — | 87 | 127. perform | — | 63 |
| 68. appearance | — | 86 | 128. since | — | 63 |
| 69. it's | — | 86 | 129. laboratory | — | 62 |
| 70. restaurant | — | 86 | 130. meant | — | 62 |
| 71. success | — | 86 | 131. escape | — | 61 |
| 72. principal | — | 84 | 132. remember | — | 61 |
| 73. then | — | 84 | 133. argument | — | 60 |
| 74. course | — | 83 | 134. profession | — | 60 |
| 75. planned(ing) | — | 81 | 135. professor | — | 60 |
| 76. possess(ed, ion, ive) | — | 81 | 136. scene(s) | — | 60 |
| 77. usual | — | 81 | 137. beauty | — | 59 |
| 78. which | — | 81 | 138. before | — | 59 |
| 79. sense | — | 80 | 139. library | — | 59 |
| 80. together | — | 80 | 140. suspense | — | 59 |
| 81. criticism | — | 79 | 141. independient(ence) | — | 57 |
| 82. minute(s) | — | 79 | 142. prejudice | — | 57 |
| 83. whose | — | 79 | 143. accommodate | — | 56 |
| 84. paid | — | 78 | 144. benefit | — | 56 |
| 85. fascinate | — | 77 | 145. niece | — | 56 |
| 86. forty | — | 76 | 146. parliament | — | 56 |
| 87. opportunity | — | 76 | 147. chose(n) | — | 55 |
| 88. writer | — | 76 | 148. know | — | 55 |
| 89. accept | — | 75 | 149. written | — | 55 |
| 90. appreciate(ion) | — | 75 | 150. and | — | 54 |
| 91. especially | — | 75 | 151. dropped(ing) | — | 54 |
| 92. recognize | — | 75 | 152. enough | — | 54 |
| 93. shining | — | 75 | 153. two | — | 54 |
| 94. speech | — | 75 | 154. doctor | — | 53 |
| 95. existence | — | 74 | 155. everybody (day, one, thing, where) | — | 53 |
| 96. during | — | 72 | 156. equipment | — | 53 |
| 97. excellent(ce) | — | 72 | 157. magazine | — | 53 |
| 98. really | — | 72 | 158. ninety(een) | — | 52 |
| 99. village | — | 72 | 159. against | — | 51 |
| 100. opinion | — | 70 | 160. commit | — | 51 |
| 101. accidentally | — | 69 | 161. February | — | 51 |
| 102. quite | — | 69 | 162. safety(ly) | — | 51 |
| 103. you're | — | 69 | 163. equipped | — | 50 |
| 104. certain | — | 68 | 164. forearm (cast, fathers, going, head, man, most, noon, saw, see, seen, shadow, sight, tell) -- | — | 50 |
| 105. imagine | — | 68 | 165. hungry | — | 50 |
| 106. mischievous | — | 68 | 166. jealous | — | 50 |
| 107. realize | — | 68 | 167. marriage | — | 50 |
| 108. secretary | — | 68 | 168. prison | — | 50 |
| 109. villain | — | 68 | 169. sentence | — | 50 |
| 110. cemetery | — | 67 | 170. carrying | — | 49 |
| 111. succeed | — | 67 | 171. first | — | 49 |
| 112. thorough(ly) | — | 67 | 172. prairie | — | 49 |
| 113. through | — | 67 | 173. descend(t) | — | 48 |
| 114. weather | — | 67 | 174. familiar | — | 48 |
| 115. were | — | 67 | 175. governor | — | 48 |
| 116. article | — | 66 | 176. laid | — | 48 |
| 117. environment | — | 66 | | | |
| 118. literature | — | 66 | | | |
| 119. stories | — | 66 | | | |
| 120. captain | — | 65 | | | |

| | <i>Times Misspelled</i> | | | <i>Times Misspelled</i> | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----|-----------------------|-----------------------------|----|
| 177. parallel | — | 48 | 237. apology | — | 37 |
| 178. possible | — | 48 | 238. appear(ed) | — | 37 |
| 179. already | — | 47 | 239. lonely | — | 37 |
| 180. intelligent(ce) | — | 47 | 240. very | — | 37 |
| 181. leisure | — | 47 | 241. Britain | — | 36 |
| 182. principle | — | 47 | 242. conscience | — | 36 |
| 183. usually | — | 47 | 243. immediate | — | 36 |
| 184. almost | — | 46 | 244. lightning | — | 36 |
| 185. amateur | — | 46 | 245. peculiar | — | 36 |
| 186. disease | — | 46 | 246. practically | — | 36 |
| 187. knew | — | 46 | 247. running | — | 36 |
| 188. chief(s) | — | 45 | 248. trouble | — | 36 |
| 189. diner(ing) | — | 46 | 249. afraid | — | 35 |
| 190. month(s) | — | 45 | 250. control | — | 35 |
| 191. Saturday | — | 45 | 251. criticize | — | 35 |
| 192. they | — | 45 | 252. fourth | — | 35 |
| 193. happier (est, ly, ness) | — | 44 | 253. innocent | — | 35 |
| 194. proceed | — | 44 | 254. prophecy | — | 35 |
| 195. servant | — | 44 | 255. repetition | — | 35 |
| 196. they're | — | 44 | 256. search | — | 35 |
| 197. athlete | — | 43 | 257. committee | — | 34 |
| 198. deceit (ve, ved) | — | 43 | 258. completely | — | 34 |
| 199. grateful | — | 43 | 259. courageous | — | 34 |
| 200. guard | — | 43 | 260. field | — | 34 |
| 201. occur(s) | — | 43 | 261. hospital | — | 34 |
| 202. weird | — | 43 | 262. knowledge | — | 34 |
| 203. career | — | 42 | 263. mountain | — | 34 |
| 204. decision | — | 42 | 264. pronunciation | — | 34 |
| 205. group | — | 42 | 265. wonder | — | 34 |
| 206. misspell | — | 42 | 266. women | — | 34 |
| 207. no | — | 42 | 267. challenge | — | 33 |
| 208. occurrence | — | 42 | 268. cried(s) | — | 33 |
| 209. off | — | 42 | 269. discuss(ed, ion) | — | 33 |
| 210. pastime | — | 42 | 270. families | — | 33 |
| 211. acquire | — | 41 | 271. fictitious | — | 33 |
| 212. affect | — | 41 | 272. forest | — | 33 |
| 213. approach | — | 41 | 273. grabbed | — | 33 |
| 214. easily(er, est) | — | 41 | 274. modern | — | 33 |
| 215. height | — | 41 | 275. precede | — | 33 |
| 216. later | — | 41 | 276. shepherd | — | 33 |
| 217. quantity | — | 41 | 277. stretch | — | 33 |
| 218. squirrel | — | 41 | 278. buy | — | 32 |
| 219. summary(ize) | — | 41 | 279. choose | — | 32 |
| 220. incident | — | 40 | 280. courteous | — | 32 |
| 221. narrative(ion) | — | 40 | 281. curiosity | — | 32 |
| 222. particular | — | 40 | 282. enemy | — | 32 |
| 223. pilot | — | 40 | 283. led | — | 32 |
| 224. schedule(s) | — | 40 | 284. sponsor | — | 32 |
| 225. excited(ing) | — | 39 | 285. swimming | — | 32 |
| 226. family | — | 39 | 286. Tomorrow | — | 32 |
| 227. referred(ing) | — | 39 | 287. wreck | — | 32 |
| 228. religion(ous) | — | 39 | 288. again | — | 31 |
| 229. went | — | 39 | 289. bicycle | — | 31 |
| 230. children | — | 38 | 290. calendar | — | 31 |
| 231. didn't | — | 38 | 291. conscientious | — | 31 |
| 232. effect | — | 38 | 292. extremely | — | 31 |
| 233. hoping | — | 38 | 293. guarantee | — | 31 |
| 234. passed | — | 38 | 294. identify(ty) | — | 31 |
| 235. seize | — | 38 | 295. loose(n, r) | — | 31 |
| 236. straight | — | 38 | 296. many | — | 31 |

| | <i>Times Misspelled</i> | | <i>Times Misspelled</i> |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 297. maybe | — 31 | 343. strengthen | — 27 |
| 298. our | — 31 | 344. themselves | — 27 |
| 299. relief(ve) | — 31 | 345. wonderful | — 27 |
| 300. sergeant | — 31 | 346. accuse(d) | — 26 |
| 301. something | — 31 | 347. achieve | — 26 |
| 302. brilliant(ce) | — 30 | 348. arctic | — 26 |
| 303. Christian | — 30 | 349. associate | — 26 |
| 304. definitely | — 30 | 350. concentrate | — 26 |
| 305. etc. | — 30 | 351. dissatisfy | — 26 |
| 306. front | — 30 | 352. entertain | — 26 |
| 307. hear | — 30 | 353. experiment | — 26 |
| 308. medicine(s) | — 30 | 354. horse | — 26 |
| 309. noticeable | — 30 | 355. night | — 26 |
| 310. procedure | — 30 | 356. omitted | — 26 |
| 311. reference | — 30 | 357. persuade | — 26 |
| 312. studied(s) | — 30 | 358. physical | — 26 |
| 313. those | — 30 | 359. preparation | — 26 |
| 314. beautiful | — 29 | 360. psychology(ical, ist) | — 26 |
| 315. complete | — 29 | 361. secret | — 26 |
| 316. countries | — 29 | 362. wait | — 26 |
| 317. favorite | — 29 | 363. address | — 26 |
| 318. further | — 29 | 364. aggression (ive, or) | — 25 |
| 319. getting | — 29 | 365. attendant (ce) | — 25 |
| 320. heroes | — 29 | 366. attitude | — 25 |
| 321. receipt | — 29 | 367. continue(ous) | — 25 |
| 322. speak | — 29 | 368. destroy | — 25 |
| 323. stepped(ing) | — 29 | 369. difficult | — 25 |
| 324. think | — 29 | 370. formerly | — 25 |
| 325. around | — 28 | 371. hurrying | — 25 |
| 326. awful | — 28 | 372. immensely | — 25 |
| 327. climb(ed, ing) | — 28 | 373. miniature | — 25 |
| 328. discipline | — 28 | 374. model | — 25 |
| 329. Henry | — 28 | 375. neighbor | — 25 |
| 330. instead | — 28 | 376. nervous | — 25 |
| 331. interpret | — 28 | 377. now | — 25 |
| 332. opposite | — 28 | 378. obstacle | — 25 |
| 333. pamphlet | — 28 | 379. other | — 25 |
| 334. poison | — 28 | 380. parents | — 25 |
| 335. pretty | — 28 | 381. period | — 25 |
| 336. answer | — 27 | 382. permanent | — 25 |
| 337. break | — 27 | 383. poem(s) | — 25 |
| 338. corner | — 27 | 384. pursue(it) | — 25 |
| 339. happen | — 27 | 385. suspicion | — 25 |
| 340. interrupt | — 27 | 386. temperament | — 25 |
| 341. motor | — 27 | 387. thief | — 25 |
| 342. relative | — 27 | 388. write | — 25 |

II

In addition to finding what different words were misspelled by students in grades 9-12 and the frequency of the misspellings of different words, the study analyzed the misspellings to find the kinds of spelling errors which the students had made in their writing and the frequency of different kinds of errors.

54,173 spellings errors were found in the 49,259 misspellings of 6,556 different words. Note that the number of spelling errors is higher than the number of misspellings. The reason, is, of course, that

one misspelled word may include two or more spelling errors. For example, the word *immediately* was misspelled "imedeat ly" by one student—three spelling errors in one misspelled word.

The largest group of spelling errors, 21,029 or 38.8% of the total, was made in the endings of words. This group of errors can be classified into three sub-groups.

—(1) 4,438 or 8.2% of the errors were made in the spelling of a suffix. For example, one student wrote the suffix *-ance* in *appearance* as "appearence."

—(2) 8,295 or 15.3% of the errors were made not in the spelling of the suffix itself, but in adding the suffix to the base word or root. For example, one student, in adding the suffix *-ly* to *true*, wrote "true-ly." Frequently this error consisted in incorrectly doubling or not doubling a consonant before a suffix, as in "comming," stoped," and witting."

—(3) 8,296 or 15.3% of the errors were made in the spelling of a word-ending in which no suffix was involved. Examples are the misspellings "grammer" for *grammar*, "artical" for *article*, and "similiar" for *similar*.

The second largest group of errors, 10,742 or 20%, was made in the misspelling of vowels, that is vowel sounds plus the number 10,742, is in addition to any misspellings of vowels which were incidental to the misspellings of suffixes, prefixes, combining forms, homonyms, and near homonyms. This group of errors also can be classified into three sub-groups.

—(1) 2,653 or 5% of the errors were made in the spelling of standard two-letter vowel graphemes, such as *ai* and *ea*. Examples are "afriad" for *afraid*, "jelous" for *jealous*, and "speach" for *speech*.

—(2) Confusion between *ei* and *ie* led to 2,023 or 4% of the errors, as in "beleive" for *believe*, "recieve" for *receive*, and "theif" for *thief*. It may be worth noting that an unusually large proportion of these *ie-ei* errors (77% of the total) came in the 388 words which were misspelled 25 times or more.

---(3) An additional 6,066 or 11% of the errors arose from more varied difficulties with the spelling of vowels, as in "seperate" for *separate*, "piolet for *pilot*, and "magizine" for *magazine*.

The third largest group of errors, 7,331 or 13.5%, was made in the misspelling of homonyms or near homonyms, such as *to-too-two* and *weather-whether*.

The fourth largest group of errors, 6,503 or 12%, came in the misspelling of consonants. These errors may be classified into four sub-groups.

—(1) 1,096 or 2% came in the misspelling of two-letter consonant graphemes, such as *gh* and *sc*. Examples are "enough" for *enough*, "conciuous" for *conscious*, and "profecy" for *prophecy*.

—(2) 1,761 or 3.3% came from problems of doubling or not doubling consonants, as in "embarass" for *embarrass*, and "posess" for *possess*.

—(3) 819 or 1.5% of the errors came from the omission of a silent letter, as in "climed" for *climbed*, "morgage" for *mortgage*, and "rythm" for *rhythm*.

—(4) 2,827 or 5.2% were other kinds of errors in spelling individual consonant sounds. Examples are "deside" for *decide* and "tradgedy" for *tragedy*. A number of these errors, such as "inenity" for *identity*, "libary" for *library*, and "reconize", for *recognize* are presumably related to mistaken pronunciation or hearing of the word.

The fifth largest group of errors, 5,024 or 9%, came from the misspelling of prefixes and combining forms, as in "biblography" for *bibliography*, "discribe" for *describe*, and "preform" for *perform*.

In addition to the five major groups of errors indicated above, there was a miscellany of 3,544 or 6.5% of the errors which did not fall into any of these groups. Examples of these, many of which consist of the omission of syllables, are "opion" for *opinion*, "peroid" for *period*, and "rember" for *remember*.

The classifications above are not, of course, logically mutually exclusive. The spelling of suffixes or homonyms, for example, inevitably involves the spelling of vowels and consonants. The classifications have been made, however, in the effort to reflect what apparently were the general sources of the spelling errors. For example, "recieve" for *receive* was classified with the *ei-ie* errors, for obvious reasons; but "there" for *their* was classified with the homonym errors; and errors made in spelling *stories* were classified with the errors made in attaching a suffix to a base (*story - stories*). In doubtful cases, a careful examination of the actual misspellings of the word usually gave the clue. The misspellings of *receive*, for example, tended to be "recieve"; but the misspellings of *stories* tended to be, not "storeis," but "storys" or "story's."

The following outline of the kinds of spelling errors made in grades 9-12 may be useful for reference.

| | Number | Per cent |
|--|--------|----------|
| <i>Kinds of Spelling Errors in Grades 9-12</i> | | |
| I. Endings of Words | | |
| Errors in <i>spelling</i> suffix | 4,438 | 8.2% |
| Errors in <i>adding</i> suffix | 8,295 | 15.3% |
| Errors in non-suffix endings | 8,296 | 15.5% |
| <i>Sub-Total</i> | 21,029 | 38.8% |
| II. Vowel Sounds | | |
| Errors in two-letter graphemes (<i>ai-ea</i> , etc.) | 2,653 | 5 % |
| <i>ie-ei</i> errors | 2,023 | 4 % |
| Other errors in spelling vowels | 6,066 | 11 % |
| <i>Sub-Total</i> | 10,742 | 20 % |
| III. Homonyms and Near Homonyms | 7,331 | 13.5% |

| | | |
|---|---------------|--------------|
| IV. <i>Consonant Sounds</i> | | |
| Errors in two-letter graphemes (<i>gh. sc, etc.</i>) | 1,096 | 2 % |
| Errors in doubling or not doubling letters | 1,761 | 3.3% |
| Errors in silent letters | 819 | 1.5% |
| Other errors in spelling consonants | 2,827 | 5.2% |
| <i>Sub-Total</i> | 6,503 | 12 % |
| V. <i>Prefixes and Combining Forms</i> | 5,024 | 9 % |
| VI. <i>Miscellany</i> | 3,544 | 6.5% |
| Total | 54,173 | 99.8% |

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