

Sentence Analysis

Let's analyse a sentence taken from a Netflix documentary about natural disasters called "Earthstorm" (Episode 4 – "Hurricane"). It was spoken during an interview with the mayor of New Orleans (Latoya Cantrell) talking about Hurricane Katrina, that hit the USA in 2005. This is the sentence:

"My worst fears for the city was not wanting to lose life." (13:05)

Grammatical Analysis

1. The word "fears" is plural, but she only mentioned one fear. So the sentence should be:

Original: "My worst **fears** for the city was not wanting to lose life."
Correction: "My worst **fear** for the city was not wanting to lose life."

2. She used the word "life" (singular), but she was clearly talking about people's "lives":

Original: "My worst fears for the city was not wanting to lose **life**."
Correction: "My worst fears for the city was not wanting to lose **lives**."

Putting the 2 corrections together, the sentence would be:

"My worst fear for the city was not wanting to lose lives."

Sense & Meaning

Now that the sentence has been grammatically analysed, let's analyse the sense.

1. The lady said that she had a "fear" of "not wanting something". Why would you have a fear of the absence of a desire? What she probably wanted to say was that she had a fear of "people losing lives":

Original (corrected): "My worst fear for the city was **not wanting to lose** lives."
Suggestion: "My worst fear for the city was **losing** lives."

2. By using the verb "want", she intended to show a desire for something. However, she negated the first verb "want", which shows an absence of desire. But she was clearly emotional in the documentary, so maybe it would have been better to negate the second verb "lose".

Original (corrected): "My worst fear for the city was **not wanting not to lose** lives."
Suggestion: "My worst fear for the city was **wanting not to lose** lives."

Even this suggestion is a little strange – why would you have a fear of a desire? So maybe using the verb "want" was not appropriate, although she clearly "didn't want to lose lives". Perhaps the best way to express her idea would have been:

"My worst fear for the city was losing lives."

or

"I didn't want to lose lives, this was my worst fear for the city."

This document is not a criticism of the lady, in fact, people should not be criticized for making mistakes. We all make mistakes, every day. Native speakers frequently make mistakes, so learners of English should not be afraid of also making mistakes. As they say: "**to err is human**". The important thing about language is "getting your meaning across", and this the mayor certainly did.