

How Writing Isn't—But Should Be— Taught in American Schools

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An unsettling odyssey through the world of high school composition shows a need for a tough new approach in teaching students to write.

Once upon a time we wanted to see for ourselves if there was any connection between high school English teaching and student performance on college entrance tests.

To do it we drove a rusty Pontiac station wagon 18,000 miles in the fall and winter of 1976-77, visiting 50 schools in all major regions of the country. Though we found none of the solid evidence we were hoping for relating test scores and teaching, we discovered plenty about the way writing is taught—or isn't taught—in American schools.

We all know of the large number of new ideas and practices in the teaching of writing. For a quarter-century we have been hearing—particularly from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)—of new emphases in teaching. We've been told about the new grammars, the response-centered curricula, the free-writing composition method, and other new strategies in teaching composition, usage, and grammar.

So, early in our travels, we began asking teachers: "What new ideas are you using in your work? What authority of the last 20 years has influenced you? In other words, what has made a *difference* in the way you teach?"

Essentially the answers given to us by teachers were about the same: Nothing has significantly changed the way we teach. Intrigued, we asked similar questions of college writing teachers in 1977 and 1978. In 1979 we asked administrators of writing programs at state and national meetings. Always, in effect, the same response: "We teach pretty much as we always have."

All those studies, all that research, all the professional meetings and papers delivered, all the inservice sessions—all for nothing? So it would appear. Nothing significantly new is going on.

There are reasons, one being that the researchers who write and theorize belong to one class, while

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teachers belong to another. Usually working teachers do not theorize, write articles and books, or pay a great deal of attention to those who do. The two might as well live on different planets. The professor has the time and a vast amount of scholarship, mainly theoretical, with which to work. The teacher has very little time and almost no interest in scholarship. The teacher is more involved with how to get through the day psychologically in one piece.

Teachers and researchers fail to communicate because of an enormous difference in how they view their roles and how they must live their daily lives. The teacher is on the firing line, the professor seldom if ever hears the sound of guns. A teacher's bad idea has immediate consequences in the classroom—for the teacher. A professor's bad idea can be published and help boost him or her to a full professorship and a large salary. When the same bad idea is applied in teaching, it is the teacher, not the professor, who suffers.

The history of the so-called new grammars is an example of this. In the 1960s, articles, tracts, and textbooks on the new grammars came pouring from the universities. There were thousands of adoptions of new texts in the public schools. California went so far as to adopt the most theoretical of the new grammars, the so-called transformational, on a statewide basis for all its elementary schools.

By the time of our survey this new grammar had suffered an unprecedented setback in American schools. Students could not learn it, and teachers could not understand it well enough to teach it. Not a single school in our sample was using a new grammar textbook. Today the new grammars are dead. If any grammar is being taught in the high schools, it is more than likely of the "old" variety.

What English Teachers Don't Know

They don't know grammar very well. Even many of the experienced ones don't. To a representative sample of the teachers we met we gave a part of the ACT English Usage Test—the one that thousands of American students take to get into college. Most of the teachers claimed they taught the grammatical operations on the test, but they could not consistently answer the questions right! They often understood the nomenclature, such as "participle" and "gerund," but when it came to practical application in real sentences, they did no better than our own college English education majors.

They know much that is wrong about English style and usage. They believe that you should not start a statement with "and" or "but"; you should not end a sentence with a preposition; the most important element in the sentence is the verb; the term "predicate" is useful for reader and writer; and they are professionally bound to teach an imaginary activity called formal writing.

Nothing could be worse for the ordinary intelligent high school student than to be taught the garbage English of "formal writing." This is the language of bureaucrats, politicians, social scientists, and other linguistic incompetents. Students taught that fake language end up writing like this:

- "Perhaps the greatest diffidence should not involve the occult but the anxiety should be towards the men who allowed the occult to ravage their common sense."

- "William Bradford's writings different William Byrd's because Bradford wrote more conceited metaphors."

- "Most of the story presented a see-saw atmosphere."

- "Nearly all of Fitzgerald's characters verify a lack of virtue."

- "Her voluptuous chest, tightly squeezed in the material, hung out on all sides."

These elementary sins against common sense and common English occurred in papers from six different states, scattered over three geographical regions. Why are American students thousands of miles apart writing this kind of English? Because they are being trained to produce copy as calculatedly as one might teach one's dog to roll over and play dead. Behind the dull abstraction and the narcotic metaphor is the guiding hand of teachers who believe the worst words in the language are those that come trippingly to the tongue.

Who Is to Blame?

Time and again in television, radio, and newspaper interviews we are asked this question. We always give the same answer: Go look in the mirror. The teaching and use of American English is an American problem, and Americans share, however unequally, the blame. As Jacques Barzun has remarked: "The writing done or not done today is a result of ideas and attitudes that pervade society. It is not

chargeable solely to the school world; it is a cultural and not simply an educational failure.¹

Blame should certainly not fall solely upon English teachers. In *What's Happening to American English?* we wrote:

Teachers are not the villains of this account. That, as a group, they have not taught the language well is evident enough. But that they have persisted in trying to teach it at all—under, at times, extremely unpleasant conditions—is evidence of their patience and goodwill. Most of their sharpest critics have never been in their shoes and could not endure for two weeks what not a few of them have endured for twenty years. It is not surprising that students read and write badly; it is remarkable, all things considered, that they read and write as well as they do; and for this rather tarnished gift of culture they can thank thousands of teachers who have been doing a job that no one else has been clamoring to perform.²

What English teachers don't know is attributable partly to the nature of their work—150 students and five to six classes a day! Plus all that homework to grade! Plus a family life that often drags on them like an anchor.

If you want to blame professionals, blame those who trained teachers in college and the people who now administer their work without understanding its nature and extreme difficulty.

Can Anything Be Done?

1. Ask the college professors who train teachers to settle on firm ground. We need solid, practical college courses in grammar, usage, and composition. These should be courses in good American English, not in the bloated garbage English found in "educationese" and academic literary criticism.

2. We need new English textbooks for the public schools—the old ones aren't good enough. They don't teach English as it is actually spoken and written by effective users of the language. Put pressure on publishers to turn out better books. Perhaps they should be written by intelligent journalists rather than professors.

3. Don't fall too hard for the back-to-basics cliché, which is mainly useful as a catchy alliteration. There's nothing wrong with the basics—but why not move forward to them?

4. Encourage teachers not to be afraid of drill in important linguistic operations. Drill is basic—a legitimate use of the term—to acquiring any skill from playing quarterback to fingering the violin.

5. Encourage teachers to grade harder. The A or B grade in American schools is too often a lie.

6. Insist that teachers write. The most important part of teaching writing is writing itself. Would you

hire a teacher of automotive engine repair who never worked on engines? Most English teachers do not, cannot, write effective prose. The evidence for this is overwhelming. Perhaps the most successful part of the famous Bay Area Writing Project is the writing course for teachers that forces them to write, just as if they were first-year students, paper after paper of various kinds. Nothing helps them more.

7. Encourage your teachers to start a state association for practical composition. We started one for Illinois, and it has been the most successful organization of its kind. It is teacher-focused and teacher-controlled; its curricular and workshop materials are made entirely by working teachers. Theoreticians are banned. In the past year, we did about 15 times the amount of practical "hands-on" work as the state branch of the National Council of Teachers of English. And we take no money from the state or federal government.

8. Finally, imitate the tactics of the successful school and its English department.

We started on our odyssey-by-Pontiac believing in all the clichés of successful English teaching, only to be disillusioned time and again by what we saw. We found, for example, that the key to good English teaching is not necessarily to be found in class size, the age or experience of the teacher, teachers' salaries, or the size of the school. It does not depend on the type of neighborhood (with certain exceptions) or the sophistication, wealth, or size of the community. It is possible for a poor black child in Mississippi to get better training in the language than a doctor's child in a sparkling new school in the glamorous Southwest.

Far more important is having a strong, capable, sympathetic principal who believes in the effective use of language and who supports the efforts of the head of the English department to implement a curriculum firmly committed to that goal. *ET*

¹ Jacques Barzun, "Epigraph to Clifton Fadiman and James Howard," *Empty Pages: A Search for Writing Competence in School and Society* (Belmont, Calif.: Fearon Pitman Publishers, 1979).

² Arn M. Tibbetts and Charlene Tibbetts, *What's Happening to American English?* (New York: Scribner's, 1978), p. 33.



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