


# We Must Help Students Master Standard English

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For years, many academics have questioned the importance — even the justice — of requiring college students to master standard English. The discussion 20 or 30 years ago was about a student's right to his or her own language — the implication being that the rest of us have no right to impose "our" language on those who are not native or proficient speakers. More recently we've heard claims that the English language is itself discriminatory, even racist.

I understand the reasoning and sympathize to a degree — but ultimately reject those arguments. My experience as a college writing instructor for 32 years, and as a writer, editor, and consultant for nearly 20 years, suggests that one of the best things we can do for students is to help them master standard English.

Before I defend that assertion, let me explain what I mean by "standard English," just as I explain it to my students at the beginning of every semester. Actually, I should have added the

word "American" to that phrase — "standard American English," or SAE, because, of course, British English is a little different, and I've taught many students from places like Jamaica and South Africa, where the queen's English dominates.

The word "standard" here is not prescriptive. It does not refer to a flag we must all salute. Rather, it simply describes accepted norms — in this case, accepted in the workplace by college-educated professionals. Language is constantly evolving, and today's norms are not the norms of 1850, or even 1950. Nevertheless, norms do exist, and educated people must generally abide by them if they are to communicate effectively.

That's why we have a standardized language in the first place. People grow up in different parts of the country, in different families and communities, speaking different versions or dialects of English — or not speaking English at all. The only purpose of language is to communicate, and if the language or dialect you use in a particular situation allows you to do so, then it is effective.

As I tell my students, English teachers are fond of using words like "wrong" and "error," but those words have meaning only in a classroom context. In students' personal lives — as they converse, text, or email with friends and family — there is no "wrong" language.

The problem is that, in their work lives, they will be sharing documents or exchanging emails with people from other families, other parts of the country, and other walks of life. Assuming that everyone will understand your dialect only leads to confusion, misunderstanding, and false impressions — all of which are bad for business. Standard American English is no better or worse than any other language or dialect, but it is the one by which educated Americans (and, increasingly, people in other parts of the world) communicate in the workplace.

Like any other language, English can be used to express bigotry or hatred, and certain words may have offensive roots or connotations (like "uppity" and "hysteria"). But no language is inherently discriminatory. Language itself is merely a tool — one that students must learn to use well if they are to be successful in their chosen professions. (To the extent that there are discriminatory words and phrases in English, the solution is to teach students more about the language, not less.)

Students, then, have a vested interest in mastering SAE: It literally pays off for them, as those who are more proficient tend to be more easily hired and more successful on the job. Think of the retired professional athletes who go into television: Many of them were indifferent students and perhaps left college early. Now they sound as if they'd earned master's degrees. Clearly, they have figured this out.

So, I've observed, have many of my students, especially those who are not native speakers. For several years I taught on the Clarkston campus of Georgia State University's Perimeter College, located in one of the most ethnically diverse ZIP codes in the nation. In one class, my 24 students spoke 17 languages. I can tell you from experience that those students were eager to master standard American English — once I explained to them what it is (and isn't) and how it could benefit them. They saw it as a key that could unlock the world of higher-paying

employment.

And so it is — not just for immigrants, but also for native speakers who grew up using various local or regional dialects. Their ability to master our standard dialect — which may differ greatly or only slightly from their own — will largely determine their level of achievement in college and beyond.

To be clear, mastery of standard American English alone does not guarantee professional success. But lack of proficiency can turn into a major obstacle. It's not just a matter of facilitating commerce via a shared dialect. In American professional life, people tend to judge us based on how well we use standard English.

In the workplace, we're communicating with people we don't know personally or even have never met. All they know about us is what they can infer from reading an email or a report we wrote. And on that basis, they will make inferences — about our competence, our intelligence, our level of education. Such judgments might not be fair or accurate, but they are a fact of life.

A good friend of mine grew up in a very small town in the Deep South. He's a sharp guy — smart, well-educated, accomplished — with an impressive résumé. Unfortunately for him, he used to have a thick Southern drawl. All too often, other educated professionals assumed that he must be a stupid redneck, simply because he sounded like their idea of a stupid redneck. His accent became such a professional handicap that he actually went back to college and took elocution classes in the drama department to mitigate it (which helped, by the way).

The people who judged him harshly because of the way he spoke were wrong. But that didn't stop them from doing it.

The same thing happens in the workplace when people write or speak using a nonstandard dialect. That term doesn't apply just to the dialects of rural America or large cities. Teenagers communicate on social media via their own dialect — one that is often inappropriate on the job.

A prime example: Several years ago, as interest rates fell, I began thinking about refinancing my home. So I went to a popular website that shares information with lenders, entered my data, and waited for banks to contact me. By the following day, I'd heard from four, offering different rates and terms. I picked the one that looked best and asked for more information. Later that day I received a reply from a young bank employee offering further details. Actually, I have no idea if she was young — I just assumed she was because her long e-mail was full of emoticons and text-messaging abbreviations — including, I kid you not, "LOL."

You can probably imagine what I was thinking at that point: "Why did I get the 14-year-old loan officer? Can I have one of the 35-year-olds, please?"

I confess that I judged her rather harshly because of the way she communicated — her use of language. That might not have been fair or accurate. For all I know, she might have been 42 years old. Or she might have just graduated summa cum laude from Stanford. But I couldn't help being put off. (I didn't do business with that bank.)

Experiences like that are why it's folly for colleges and universities not to require students to master SAE as a minimum requirement for earning a degree. Allowing students to substitute "their own language" — or worse, teaching them that our common language is somehow evil — merely sets them up for failure.

What's more, we further erode public confidence in our ability to produce job-ready graduates. (In many surveys over the past 10 years, employers consistently identify poor communication skills as one of their chief complaints about new hires.)

The responsibility for helping students learn to use standard American English effectively, and insisting that they do so, cannot fall solely on the English department. The purpose of first-year composition courses should be to introduce students to the basics of good professional communication — grammar, sentence structure, organization, paragraph development. If subsequent courses do not build upon and reinforce those fundamentals, then students will conclude that such skills must be not all that important. That appears to be the case, if those employer surveys are any indication.

As academics, we rose to positions of privilege and authority based in large part on our ability to "speak the language." It seems to me the height of arrogance and hypocrisy, if not outright discrimination, to deny students access to those same opportunities, whether we do so intentionally or simply through neglect. Our objective as educators ought to be to help them attain what we have attained, if not more — and language proficiency is a necessary prerequisite.

In short, standard American English is not inherently racist. It is not merely a "tool of the patriarchy." It is a tool for anyone who wishes to use it, and who is willing to put the time and effort into mastering it, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, cultural background, or socioeconomic status.

Nor will students — once they leave our cushy campuses and enter the professional world — be able to talk and write any way they choose, any more than they will be able to dress or behave any way they want. Preparing them adequately for life beyond college is arguably our greatest responsibility — and up to this point, perhaps our biggest failure.