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Sue Norton

Technological University Dublin, susan.norton@tudublin.ie

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Conventional Wisdom in the Writing Classroom: A Short Defence of Grammar Instruction

Sue Norton

Dublin Institute of Technology

Abstract

This article considers whether instructors of writing in higher education ought prescriptively to involve students in the mechanics of standard written English or, rather, encourage them to prioritise ideas and content. Recognizing the reluctance of many practitioners to distract learner-writers with rules, and thereby alienate them from their creativity, it nevertheless recommends judicious delivery of lessons in conventional grammar, syntax, and punctuation. Taking standard written English as a variant that continues to hold sway in general, academic, and professional readerships, the article concludes with a selection of language components relevant to undergraduate writing and commonly addressed by readily available resource materials.

Keywords: academic writing; the writing classroom; the mechanics of writing; grammar, syntax, punctuation; third level education and writing skills.

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- <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/259>

Conventional Wisdom in the Writing Classroom: A Short Defence of Grammar Instruction

Having taught writing in various capacities in college and university settings for the better part of my career, which began in the late 1980s, I have listened with interest to the experiential accounts of other practitioners. As educators, naturally we wish to know 'what works.' Among other goals, we want our learners to feel confident, and to be competent, in expressing themselves in writing for public consumption.

Composition theory has a long history and an extensive – perhaps even dizzying -- bibliography. The quickest of internet searches will uncover millions of references related to the teaching of writing. Many university writing centre websites host select bibliographies for interested learners and teachers[i]. The National Council of Teachers of English, which was established in America more than one hundred years ago, offers a helpful entry point to the critical investigation of writing pedagogy at every level of education.[ii]

As with most academic disciplines, schools of thought diverge and overlap. One recurring talking point in discussions about expository writing instruction, here in Ireland and elsewhere, is the extent to which learners ought to be practised in the mechanics of writing, by which is meant the standard conventions of grammar, punctuation, and syntax.

The term 'standard,' of course, is somewhat contentious. What is acceptable usage in one writing culture or sub-culture may be deviant in another. Ebonics, as a case in point, has its own set of conventions, as do all other distinctive speech patterns of ethnic and socioeconomic groupings around the world. Hiberno-English, by way of further example, is highly accessible to island insiders, but less so to the wider English speaking world. Both of these and other variants of English are well documented[iii], but, arguably, only so called 'standard English' warrants instructional consideration in the writing classroom. Even within a sociolinguistically informed frame of reference, 'standard English' continues to signify the highly organized and, to a great extent, rule-bound written version of the language that occurs in formal contexts and that functions as a dominant mode of expression by consensus of ruling classes. This conventional written English, though ever evolving, benefits from a codified grammar, an efficient system of punctuation, and a rich vocabulary.[iv]

Because good teaching practice requires sound rationale, I have formed the habit of discussing with my students the reasons that I choose to prioritise grammar and syntax in my approach to writing instruction. Something clear to all of us, my undergraduate and postgraduate students alike, is that young people today are writing

far more than their parents, or, indeed, than my parents ever did before. Social media has made textual construction a commonplace activity throughout the days and nights of an entire generation. Teens and young adults make themselves well understood to each other, in writing, without much reliance on standard conventions of English grammar.

So by what lights would any teacher or lecturer, such as myself, come along and insist on the difference between a dependent clause and independent one? For what reason should college students engaged in academic writing, or aspiring to write for professional purposes, be able to identify a pronoun's referent? Or learn to start a sentence with a conjunction, for rhetorical effect?

Many experienced instructors of writing will tell us that an insistence on 'correct' grammar, spelling, and punctuation will inhibit creativity and produce anxiety, denying student writers the pleasure of the task. These writing instructors will encourage their learners to get their ideas down, to focus on structure, to attend to logical progression, and so on, advising them to 'worry about' the mechanical stuff in the later drafts when they can 'clean up' their syntax.

Having absorbed this rather latter-day conventional wisdom to 'focus on their ideas,' many writers of academic assignments in all levels of education perceive grammatical clarity as a nicety best left until the end. Such student writers may have achieved a certain satisfying confidence of expression, but not the necessary competence for effective communication. If one aim of any writing class (or of any cognate subject such as language arts) is to enable students to deploy standard conventions at will, so that they successfully convey intended meanings to target readers, they will need to be equipped with some understanding of the rules, even as the rules continue to evolve.

Certainly, the order in which any writer attends to style, structure, substance, or syntax is a matter of individual inclination. For some, these considerations may be simultaneous, and for others sequential. Either way, the most competent of writers will be able to rely on their own abilities unerringly to produce complete sentences, as expected by anonymous readers in the greater world of formal, academic, or professional writing. Readers at large -- in other words, readers who are not members of our own internet based subgroups, but strangers amidst the general public -- do continue to expect the clarity afforded by 'the sentence,' which, by definition, will include at least one subject and one predicate: a do-er of the action and a verb expressing tense.

Learner writers who have not become versed in the helpful terminology that enables recognition of the essential components of ordinary prose writing, such as the eight parts of speech that comprise phrases, clauses, and sentences, will be at a

disadvantage in analysing their own paragraphs. Their abilities to self-critique will be hampered by their *inabilities* to identify common errors of syntax and punctuation, many of which can be rather easily learned if emphasised by tutors.

The formal and informal feedback that I have received from students over the years has confirmed for me that most are relieved to be offered both a vocabulary and a tool kit for understanding and adjusting their own writing. They want to be in a position to calibrate their work for audience expectation. Nevertheless, their feedback has also indicated that grammar-at-first-glance is an overwhelming prospect. Very few post-secondary students (in Ireland, where I have taught for many years) come to their written assignments with an explicit understanding of good prose, which is not to say that they lack an *implicit* sense of it. But the basic terminology of grammar and syntax strikes them as vast, when it is merely new or, possibly, forgotten.

Fortunately, highly accessible materials for learning about conventionally acceptable expository prose writing do abound. Many of those engaged in academic writing, whether as students or practitioners, will have their mainstays. My own is the influential staple *Strunk and White's The Elements of Style*, which has been published in various editions since the 1920s. Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) is very well known, as is *Grammar Girl: Quick and Dirty Tips*. *Big Dog's Grammar: A Bare Bones Guide to English* is gaining in popularity too.^[v]

My reliance on these and other materials to promote effective grammar and syntax in college writing has come about through classroom experience over time. The close engagement I have enjoyed with the written work of students in higher education has allowed me to identify a manageable set of syllabus topics that other practitioners may wish to consider if formally incorporating the mechanics of writing into their teaching practice.

These include:

- Definitions of the eight parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, articles, conjunctions, prepositions, and pronouns.
- The crucial differences between phrases, clauses, and sentences.
- The definitions of subjects, predicates, direct objects, and indirect objects.
- The difference between transitive and intransitive sentences.
- The difference between the active and the passive voice.

- The distinctions between four broad sentence types: declarative, imperative, interrogative, exclamatory.
- The most common errors that occur in conventional sentence structure such as:
 - sentence fragments
 - run-ons sentences
 - faulty subject / verb agreement
 - faulty pronoun reference
 - misplaced modification
 - dangling modification
 - faulty parallelism
 - shifting narrative voice
 - faulty punctuation

In my experience, students in third level education are willing and sometimes eager to accept and adopt grammatical terminology, but ample visual examples, considerable classroom discussion, and constant review and repetition are necessary for deep learning.

Most students will also readily agree that clarity of expression is a desirable outcome in all writing, whether formal or informal. Yet they recognise, too, that if we were all to incorporate the conventions of standard English grammar into our social media communications, we would be misjudging our readers' expectations. Online postings would tend to be off-key, which is to say that they would fail to meet the appropriate register. The opposite, of course, is equally true: an article submitted for consideration to a scholarly journal, for instance, cannot be composed in the manner of a personal blog post. The most empowered student writers will be those who can ably judge the moment and adopt the right tone.

Likewise, we who are involved in the teaching of writing are uniquely empowered to equip our learners with long established tradecraft.^[i] When they have mastered that tradecraft, in all its mechanical precision, they will be more likely to revel in the process of composition, in the thrill of enquiry that we desire for them. And so, an approach to writing pedagogy that prioritises ideas, content, and structure over grammatical clarity may be a very sound approach. But if it fails to impress upon learners the inevitable need for grammatical and syntactical accuracy, it will deny them their best chance for robust written expression.

[i] See The University of Chicago Writing Program's 'Grammar Resources' page: <http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/grammar.htm> as well as the Bibliography and Websites page of Stanford University's Undergrad Program in Writing and Rhetoric: <https://undergrad.stanford.edu/programs/pwr/teaching/bibliography-and-websites>

[ii] Of particular interest is its section called 'NCTE Beliefs About the Teaching of Writing,' which can be found at: <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs>. The NCTE takes the position that 'conventions of finished and edited texts are important to readers and therefore to writers' and acknowledges that 'every teacher has to

resolve a tension between writing as generating and shaping ideas and writing as demonstrating expected surface conventions.’ However, it holds the view that, ‘teachers should be familiar with techniques for teaching editing and encouraging reflective knowledge about editing conventions.’

[iii] See *A Dictionary of Hiberno English* by Terence Dolan (Gill and Macmillan) <http://www.gillmacmillanbooks.ie/reference/reference/a-dictionary-of-hiberno-english1>

and The Linguistics Society of America: What is Ebonics?

<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Ebonics.pdf>

[iv] For a helpful orientation to the characteristics of standard English, see <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/SEtrudgill.htm>

[v] See respectively: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/> ; <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl> ; <http://aliscot.com/bigdog/> .

[vi] A similar point is well made by Ide O’Sullivan and Lawrence Cleary of University of Limerick’s Regional Writing Centre. In their article “Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing: The Infectious Nature of Engagement” (2014), they make clear that their peer tutors understand that “they are chosen because they are good writers: people with healthy processes who employ strategies that work on emotional, cognitive and social levels and who are highly reflective and utilise their metacognitive awareness of their writing processes to develop strategies to achieve new goals for unfamiliar writing situations. It is this resource that they draw upon in tutoring sessions. It is from this resource that tutees learn to draw out strategies for achieving their own writing goals.”

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[i] See The University of Chicago Writing Program's 'Grammar Resources' page: <http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/grammar.htm> as well as the Bibliography and Websites page of Stanford University's Undergrad Program in Writing and Rhetoric: <https://undergrad.stanford.edu/programs/pwr/teaching/bibliography-and-websites>

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