

THERE IS ONE CORRECT WAY OF WRITING AND SPEAKING

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People consistently lament that kids today can't speak properly or that people coming to this country need to learn to write correctly. These lamentations are based on the notion that there is a single correct way of speaking and writing. Currently, the general sentiment is that people should just learn to speak and write proper English. This understanding of writing is rooted called *current traditional rhetoric*, which focuses on a prescriptive and formulaic way of teaching writing that assumes there is only one way to write (or speak) something for it to be correct. However, over the past several decades, scholars in writing studies have examined the ways in which writing has a close dialectical relationship with identity, style genre, and culture. In other words, the rules for writing shift with the people and the community involved as well as the purpose and type of writing.

Most people implicitly understand that the way they communicate changes with different groups of people, from bosses to work colleagues to peers to relatives. They understand that conversations that may be appropriate over a private dinner may not be appropriate at the workplace. These conversational shifts might be subtle, but they are distinct. While most people accept and understand these nuances exist and will adapt to these unspoken rules—and while we have all committed a social faux pas when we didn't understand these unspoken rules—we do not often afford this same benefit of the doubt to people who are new to our communities or who are learning our unspoken rules.

While the idea of arguing whether there is one correct way of communicating or whether writing is culturally situated might seem to be a pedantic exercise, the reality is that espousing the

ideology that there is one correct way to speak and write disenfranchises many populations who are already denigrated by society. The writing most valued in this binary is a type of writing that is situated in middle-class white culture. In adhering to so-called correct language, we are devaluing the non-standard dialects, cultures, and therefore identities of people and their communicative situations that do not fit a highly limited mold.

The way in which correctness in language devalues people is already troubling, but it becomes exacerbated by the current trends in education. Please refer to the literary crisis chapter to learn more about the changing dynamics in education. Given this shift and the way that Standard Written English is deeply rooted in white upper/middle-class culture, we see more and more students from diverse backgrounds gaining access to college who are facing barriers due to their linguistic backgrounds.

This means that while minority students and lower class students are ostensibly being given greater access to education, careers, and other facets of society they had been previously barred from, they are still facing serious barriers that their upper-class white counterparts do not, particularly in terms of culture, language, and literacy. J. Elspeth Stuckey argues that literacy, rather than enfranchising students, is a means of oppression and that it does little to help the economic futures of minority students because of how literacy teaches a particular set of values—ways of communicating and identity. In the context of educational settings, the cultures and identities of academia are valued more than those of the students, which sends the message that how they, their family, and members in their community speak and act are wrong by comparison. In essence, it sends the message starting at a very young age that who they are and where they come from is somehow lesser.

In this sense, education, while well intentioned, serves to further the marginalization of certain identities and cultures that do not fit. This is particularly evident in Latino, African American, and English as Second Language communities. In the book *Paying for the Party*, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton note that colleges like the school they studied for five years, which they call Midwestern University, do not help facilitate social mobility. Frequently, the students who entered college best prepared were those who were already middle or upper class, meaning the opportunities the working- and lower-class students received were more limited. When you look at this alongside what Gloria Ladson-Billings

calls the *educational debt*, or the compounded impact of educational deficits that grow across generations of poor minority students, literacy efforts as they are currently framed paint a bleak picture for poor, minority students.

The issue is not just one of unequal access to opportunities. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Carmen Kynard illustrate how attitudes toward students as writers are interwoven with attitudes toward them as people. Language cannot be disassociated from people, which has important consequences for those who grow up speaking different dialects. By continuing to propagate the notion of correct and incorrect ways of speaking, we effectively devalue the intelligence and character of students, employees, and colleagues, who, for whatever reasons, don't speak or write what in historical terms has been called the King's English (among other names). We use the perception of improper communication as evidence of others' lesser character or ability, despite recognizing that this country was united (if only in name) after declaring independence from that King.

This perception becomes all the more problematic because it is not just about devaluing individuals, but about the widespread practice of devaluing the literate practices of those who are already marginalized. David Gold highlights the marginalization of women, working class, rural, and African American literacy in our understanding of writing. Gold writes about how the literacy practices of African Americans in universities laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement. Indeed, the schools he studied were decades ahead of the larger national conversation on how literacy, identity, and power were interrelated. In her work examining how literacy and identity formation were key for African American women and for social change, Jacqueline Jones Royster discusses the importance of understanding these cultural, identity, and social movements, echoing the impact marginalized scholars had in academia. Both demonstrate the detrimental impact of sidelining groups of people and their literate practices by devaluing their languages and their experiences, not just for those who are marginalized but for our larger understanding of how we as a society write.

The notion of one correct way of writing is also troubling because it operates under the assumption that linguistic differences are the result of error. The reality is that, for many speakers, what we might perceive as a mistake is actually a system of difference. One notable example of a different dialect of English is Ebonics, which has different patterns of speech rooted in the

ancestral heritage of its speakers. Similarly, immigrant groups will frequently speak and write English in a way that mirrors the linguistic heritage of their mother tongue.

The way that we conceptualize language is not just detrimental to minorities; it also devalues the identities that working- and lower-class people bring to communicative situations, including the classroom. Lynn Z. Bloom writes that “Freshman Composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise.” She argues that one of the reasons composition is required for all students is because it promulgates middle-class values and ways of thinking. These values in the writing classroom are embodied in everything from the notion of property, which undergirds the way that plagiarism and intellectual property are treated, to formality of language and rhetorical choices that are encouraged in papers. Indeed, the way many instructors teach writing, plagiarism, citation, and word choice in papers is not in and of itself good but rather is the socially accepted way of interacting with text as defined by the middle class. Mike Rose and Irvin Peckham write about the tension of middle-class values on working-class students and the cognitive dissonance and struggles with identity that come with imposing such values in writing under the guise of correctness. The idea that there is one correct way of writing devalues the writing, thoughts, intelligence, and identities of people from lower-class backgrounds.

Pragmatically, many argue that standard English should be dominant in the binary between academic English and all other dialects in order for speakers and writers to communicate with credibility in their communities. This argument has been used to justify the continued attention to correctness at the expense of authors’ voices, but we can teach people to adapt while also valuing their identities. We can talk about writing as something that they can employ to their benefit rather than a hegemonic standard that supersedes their backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

In order to value the diversity of communication and identities that exist in the U.S., we need to start teaching and envisioning writing as a cultural and social activity. We need a more nuanced view of writing in society that encourages everyone to adapt to their audiences and contexts rather than placing an undue burden on those who do not fit the mold of standard English. One strategy for teaching academic English without devaluing a writer’s identity is code-switching, a concept already taught in schools with significant minority populations as a way of empowering young people. While instruction in code-switching is valuable because it teaches

students that they can adopt different linguistic choices to appeal to different audiences, it is deeply problematic that the impetus is still placed on minority students with non-standard dialects to adapt. While code-switching is meant to empower people, it is still rooted in the mentality that there is one correct way of writing, because even as code-switching teaches an incredibly nuanced way of thinking about writing, it is still being taught in the context of preparing writers to deal with a society that will use errors in speaking as evidence that they are lesser. As a result, it is a less-than-ideal solution because it plays into—rather than undermines—the racism of academic English.

By perpetuating the myth of one correct way of writing, we are effectively marginalizing substantial swaths of the population linguistically and culturally. The first step in combating this is as easy as recognizing how correctness reinforces inequality and affects our own perceptions of people and questioning our assumptions about communication, and a second step is valuing code-switching in a wide swath of communicative situations.

Further Reading

While the notion of what constitutes academic English has remained relatively static in popular culture, the reality of writing in the university has broadened to include many other types of writing. Patricia Bizzell, Helen Fox, and Christopher Shroeder compile arguments for addressing these other types of communication in *Alt Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. In *College Writing and Beyond*, Anne Beaufort provides a framework in which to understand how writing is dynamic. In her article “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise,” Lynn Z. Bloom articulates the ways in which the cultural values of the middle class are being taught in the writing classroom as objectively good or true and the impact of this mentality. Additionally, Asao Inoue compiles a collection of articles in *Race and Writing Assessment* that provides frameworks for considering race in assessment practices.

In 1974, the Conference for College Composition and Communication passed the resolution *Students’ Right to Their Own Language*. In this time since it passed, there has been a great deal of discussion around the wisdom of that resolution. Editors Austin Jackson, David E. Kirkland, and Staci Perryman-Clark compile short articles for and against the resolution called “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.”

Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur write about how the increasing number of English speakers in the world is increasing linguistic diversity in “Opinion: Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach.” Additionally, Irvin Peckham writes extensively with a focus on working class students in the classroom and the impact of college and academic writing as a middle-class enterprise in “The Stories We Tell.” For more on the history and cultural development of African American Vernacular English, consider *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice* by John Baugh.

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