

Writing grammatically and writing well

Ottawa *Citizen*, under the headline “Good writing is about more than just grammar,”
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“‘Accommodate’ has two ems,” I write in the margin of my student’s paper. Am I right about that?

Well, two ems is the convention, isn’t it? But conventions change, and the two-em spelling of “accommodate” appears very much to be on the way out. Not even hotel managers bother with it. Why should I want my student to swim against the current?

With her single em, though, she is swimming against the current, the current of academic writing, at least in the discipline of philosophy. Maybe so, but that by itself doesn’t mean anything. In no walk of life is “that’s how it’s done around here” a good reason for doing it that way. (That’s the central theme of every introductory ethics course taught in the English-speaking world.)

The University of Waterloo, in Southern Ontario, requires prospective students to pass an easy exam on English spelling and grammar before being admitted. The director of the exam said recently that thirty percent of applicants the university would otherwise happily admit fail the test the first time they take it. And that’s up from twenty-five percent just five years ago.

Newspaper reports of the Waterloo results were followed by letters to the editor and opinion columns bemoaning this sad state of affairs and asking what can be done to correct it. Those letters and columns were then followed by letters and columns insisting that, since language has always been changing, the state of affairs isn’t actually sad at all.

Now I agree that grammar, usage, and spelling are constantly in flux, and I insist that the idea that one can make mistakes in grammar, usage, or spelling itself involves a fairly gross mistake—the mistake of assimilating nonconformity to error. Yet I fill my students’ essays with pointed remarks on grammar, usage, and spelling. How can I take my prescriptions to have weight when I deny that there are standards within language itself?

The answer is that my comments add up to advice about writing. They are not corrections regarding language.

I assume (sometimes pretend) that my students want to express their thoughts clearly and elegantly. My comments, then, are pieces of advice regarding how to express those thoughts even more clearly or elegantly.

One thing a writer wants is to keep her reader focused on the issue at hand. She wants nothing to come between what she says and her readers’ understanding of what she’s saying. That’s why she doesn’t use green ink or an italic font. And that’s why she

spells conventionally. She has something to say about accommodation, and she wants what she has to say to be heard; she doesn't want her readers distracted by how she spelt "accommodation."

Advice to follow conventional grammar can often be justified in the same way, but grammar also has to do with style and voice. Students who are readers understand this. They love to hear about split infinitives, parallel constructions, and sentences beginning with "hopefully" because they are looking for the choices that will help them to forge their voice.

But if a student isn't a reader and doesn't care to be a writer, advice won't matter; nor should it.

There's little connection between communication and the remnant of spelling and grammar that doesn't concern clarity or elegance. A person with something to say will say it clearly whether she writes grammatically or not.

I remember in a second-year theory of knowledge course a student who had recently arrived from Vietnam. She made every grammatical mistake possible. She was very intelligent, though, and a serious student. Her papers discussed difficult ideas and contained long arguments, and yet, despite the lack of verb agreement and the misplaced apostrophes, one never had a moment's trouble figuring out what she meant.

Certainly there's a problem with student writing at universities (though just as certainly there are many students who write well), but that problem doesn't have to do with grammar or spelling. Or, at least, grammar and spelling are mere symptoms. Clear up the symptoms, the disease will remain. The real problem is that many students have nothing interesting to say.

When student writing is bad, it's bad because it's superficial, rambling, and poorly reasoned. Writing Centre exercises on tenses won't help, or not much. I conjecture that the problem is reading. Students who don't write well don't read well, or not well enough to have developed the ability to think deeply or rigorously.

Instead of an easy grammar test, then, Waterloo and other universities serious about the quality of the students they accept should institute an easy reading test. Give the prospective student help, of course, but don't admit her until she has demonstrated she can read with understanding.