

CHAPTER 4

Conventions of Standardized English

By **Amanda J. Godley**

Amanda J. Godley is a professor of English education and language, literacy and culture at the University of Pittsburgh and a former middle and high school English teacher. Her research focuses on grammar and dialects, writing instruction, and literature discussions in high school English classes.

Introduction

Standardized English is the variety of English most valued in academic and professional settings (Beason 2001; O'Neill 2018). Although there's some variation in the grammatical forms (such as passive voice) and levels of formality preferred in different academic disciplines and workplace settings, decades of research have shown that effective use of Standardized English is a fundamental expectation in academic and professional settings. The term *Standardized English* refers to the spoken and written language varieties that are viewed as most prestigious in the United States and that are expected in most institutional contexts, such as government and schools. The *conventions* of Standardized English are the patterns, or "rules," of grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling that are generally accepted in the present day.

However, the conventions of Standardized English aren't just about rules and "correctness." They also contribute to clear and effective communication. For instance, in Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup's well-known book on writing, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (2017),

readers are taught to put their most important ideas and “actors” in the subjects of their sentences and to vary sentence length using subordinate clauses for rhetorical effect. Having a language to talk about grammatical concepts such as these can help students become aware of the conventions of Standardized English in different disciplines and make deliberate, well-informed choices about how to use language for clear and effective written and spoken communication. Thus, understanding and controlling for the conventions of Standardized English to accomplish specific purposes and to reach intended audiences are valuable academic and professional skills that contribute to college and career readiness.

Overview of Chapter

This chapter will share the following research-based recommendations for teaching the conventions of Standardized English:

- Students benefit from exposure to clear and precise terminology when learning about the conventions of Standardized English grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.
- Instruction on conventions should begin with an understanding and appreciation of the many varieties, or dialects, of the English language that exist in addition to Standardized English.
- Students’ learning about and application of conventions don’t follow a linear trajectory.
- Effective teaching about the conventions of Standardized English must value and build on students’ home languages and dialects.
- The conventions of Standardized English should be taught as tools for clear communication and effective rhetorical choices.
- The conventions of Standardized English should be taught through authentic communicative activities.

Terminology

It’s hard to talk about language, conventions, mechanics, usage, and grammar without explaining exactly what those terms mean. As mentioned, the term *Standardized English* refers to the variety of English preferred in academic and professional settings. Other terms used for this variety of English are *Standard English*, *Mainstream American English*, and *the language of wider communication*, but this chapter uses *Standardized English* to more clearly convey the sense that what counts as “standard” or “correct” is always evolving as the opinions and judgments of editors, teachers, style guides, and the general population change across time.

Although what's considered Standardized English in spoken language may differ across geographic regions, the conventions of *written* Standardized English, particularly in academic settings, are fairly consistent. It's helpful to distinguish between spoken and written Standardized English because their conventions differ in important ways. First, there's no punctuation or spelling in spoken Standardized English. Thus, some student errors in written Standardized English, such as run-on sentences, may be caused by confusion with spoken language (Bartholomae 1980; Krauthamer 1999). Second, especially in academic writing, authors are more likely to use particular grammatical features of Standardized English, such as nominalization (noun forms of verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, such as "invasion" [from "invade"]) and embedded clauses (clauses within main clauses that add detail and information to the sentence) in order to condense and connect ideas. Such grammatical features aren't as widespread or valued in everyday spoken English (Schleppegrell 2004).

The terms *conventions*, *usage*, *grammar*, and *mechanics* are also useful to discuss when teaching about Standardized English. As mentioned, the term *conventions* refers to commonly accepted ways of using a language that can change over time. For instance, "they" is now commonly accepted as a singular nongendered pronoun even though its use as a singular pronoun was considered an error for many decades. The term *usage* is closely related to *conventions* but more specific because it describes the way that language patterns are used and accepted in a particular community or setting. Mary Schleppegrell (2004), for instance, coined the term "the language of schooling" to refer to the usage, or patterns, of language valued in academic settings and to contrast those patterns with those of everyday spoken English. Finally, *grammar* refers to the structure of a language, including the organization of words, clauses, and phrases, while *mechanics* refers to the accepted patterns, or "rules," for capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and symbols.

Terms such as *conventions*, *usage*, and *effective communication* can help teachers convey the changing nature of Standardized English more accurately than can terms such as *proper English*, *correct English*, and *rules*. *Conventions* and *usage* also reflect a descriptive view of Standardized English rather than a prescriptive one. Prescriptive views of language are based in a static view of English as having just one "correct" variety and as being governed by a prescribed set of rules—even when those rules are rarely adhered to in practice. One example of a prescriptive rule is "Don't split an infinitive"—a directive that's regularly broken in written Standardized English and whose violation is rarely viewed by readers as an error (Beason 2001). Descriptive views of language, on the other hand, acknowledge that what counts as acceptable or effective Standardized English changes over time and is determined by how real people use and respond to language patterns.

Thus, descriptive views of Standardized English seek to convey current uses of and perspectives on language conventions rather than a static and potentially outdated vision of what the conventions of Standardized English “should” be.

Varieties of English

In discussions of grammar and conventions, it’s also helpful to distinguish Standardized English from *vernacular* or *nonstandard dialects*. All languages, including English, encompass multiple varieties, or *dialects*. The term *dialect* refers to the patterns of language used by a particular group with a shared regional or social affiliation. We all speak a dialect even if we’re unaware of it. The terms *vernacular dialect* and *nonstandard dialect* help distinguish other language varieties from Standardized English, the most prestigious variety, but the use of those terms shouldn’t be taken to imply that these language varieties are less grammatical or logical than Standardized English. Some well-researched vernacular dialects in the United States include Appalachian English, African American English, and Chicano English.

Even though some people look down on vernacular dialects, it’s important to note that linguistic research demonstrates that *all* dialects follow grammatical patterns, even though the patterns may be different from those of Standardized English, and that all dialects are equally capable of conveying ideas. Vernacular dialects are used by award-winning authors such as Harper Lee, Sandra Cisneros, and Toni Morrison to express ideas, characters, and settings in vivid and effective ways.

Furthermore, as the K–12 student population in the United States grows more linguistically and culturally diverse, it’s important that educators appreciate and build on the varieties of English spoken by their students. The dialects that students use are closely tied to their cultural, familial, regional, and racial/ethnic identities and thus must be respected and valued by educators (Godley and Reaser 2018). Furthermore, distinct varieties of English are used across the world, not only in countries that are commonly viewed as English dominant (such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom) but also in countries throughout Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. These varieties of English, called *World Englishes*, develop their own conventions, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical patterns (Larsen-Freeman 2018). There are numerous varieties of World Englishes, such as Nigerian English, Singaporean English, and Jamaican English, to name just three that are widely recognized.

“As the K–12 student population in the United States grows more linguistically and culturally diverse, it’s important that educators appreciate and build on the varieties of English spoken by their students.”

The Development of Students’ Understanding of the Conventions of Standardized English

Students’ developing knowledge of and ability to apply the conventions of Standardized English rarely follow a simple, linear path. As students progress through their schooling, academic expectations increase and the language of academic texts becomes more complex. Because of this, seemingly straightforward grammatical concepts, such as *verb*, actually turn out to have multiple facets and applications that can’t all be taught at once. In elementary school, teaching about verbs might focus on developing students’ narrative writing by imparting lessons on Standardized English subject-verb agreement (*he says, they say*) and the use of verbs more descriptive than forms of “to be” (*is, are, was*). In high school, however, the concept of *verb* becomes more nuanced and difficult to apply. Students are expected to use more modal verbs (*may, could*) as they qualify their claims and explanations in documents such as lab and research reports. Conventions of subject-verb agreement also get more challenging to apply as high school students’ written sentences grow longer through the use of embedded clauses and descriptive phrases. These longer and more detailed sentences reflect the kind of elaboration expected in college writing (e.g., Purdue University College of Liberal Arts, n.d.) and in some career areas, such as science (e.g., Newell, n.d.), but the subjects and verbs in these sentences are often separated by many words and phrases. As a result, students may start making new kinds of subject-verb agreement errors. Such errors shouldn’t be seen as a lack of knowledge of conventions but rather as indicators of student development and opportunities to explain how a convention or concept is applied in more complex texts and contexts or in a particular discipline.

In general, teachers should begin by assuming that there are logical reasons behind the errors students are making. When students make an error, they may, for example, be overgeneralizing a pattern in Standardized English (such as the use of –s endings to indicate plurals) or applying patterns of spoken language, vernacular varieties of English, or languages other than English to their academic writing. David Bartholomae offers the following helpful advice:

Error analysis begins with a theory of writing, a theory of language production and language development, that allows us to see errors as evidence of choice or strategy among a range of possible choices or strategies. . . . [W]e can begin in our instruction with what a writer *does* rather than with what he fails to do. (1980, 257–58; emphasis in original)

This kind of formative assessment can help teachers explain the conventions of Standardized English in ways that build on students’

existing knowledge of language and that directly address the source of students' misunderstandings.

It can also be helpful to borrow a concept from the field of language learning and distinguish between students' *errors* and *mistakes*. Errors result from students' lack of knowledge of a grammatical or usage pattern, while mistakes result from students' imperfect application of this knowledge (Ellis 1994). Viewed this way, errors and mistakes call for different pedagogical responses. Errors are best addressed by instruction and teachers' explanations of the underlying grammatical or usage pattern, while mistakes can be addressed by directing students' attention to the mistake, developing students' awareness of why and when the mistake occurs, and teaching application strategies without unnecessarily explaining the underlying concept. For instance, many students who make apostrophe mistakes in the words *its* and *it's* understand the underlying concepts of contractions and possessives. If a teacher's formative assessment of students' knowledge demonstrates that students understand these concepts, a full explanation of contractions and possessives may not be necessary and may even waste valuable instructional time; instead, urging students to be aware of and to practice proofreading strategies aimed at helping them recognize and correct these mistakes is more likely to foster students' development as writers.

Also important to students' developing understanding of the conventions of Standardized English are explicit discussions about the circumstances in which the use of written or spoken Standardized English is to be expected. Research has shown that students aren't always aware of the classroom activities or communicative situations in which teachers, college instructors, and employers expect the use of Standardized English (Godley and Escher 2012). Students develop their ability to "read" situations for language expectations when teachers discuss directly with them why, for instance, instructors might expect them to observe the conventions of spoken Standardized English in a formal presentation but not in an inquiry-based discussion or why instructors might expect written Standardized English in literary analysis essays but not in dialogues in a fictional narrative.

Finally, there are some concepts of grammar, usage, and mechanics that should be taught to students because they're foundational to learning the conventions of Standardized English and those of other language varieties. An understanding of these concepts can support students' academic language development in all their subjects and throughout their schooling (Derewianka and Jones 2016). Concepts such as *subject*, *verb*, *phrase*, and *clause* are conceptual building blocks for learning about conventions of grammar and punctuation. For instance, understanding what a clause is relies on an understanding of subjects and verbs since a

clause is a group of words with a subject-verb relationship. Understanding types of sentences (such as simple, complex, and compound) and sentence boundaries (such as where to place periods to avoid run-ons and fragments) requires an understanding of different types of clauses and the conventions for combining them into sentences. Many punctuation rules are also built on conventions concerning how we order, distinguish, and use different kinds of clauses and phrases. Hence, it's difficult for students to understand and apply conventions of comma usage, for example, without first being able to recognize clause and phrase boundaries. Note that this chapter isn't advocating for concepts such as *subject*, *verb*, *clause*, and *phrase* to be taught in isolated grammar lessons, all at once, or without assessing students' existing knowledge of them. Rather, its aim is to illustrate the importance of a logical, research-based sequence of concepts related to grammar and other conventions that builds on students' previous knowledge and supports students' understanding and application of the conventions of Standardized English across disciplines and situations (Gebhard and Graham 2018; Jones, Myhill, and Bailey 2013; Moore and Schleppegrell 2014).

Building on Students' Home Languages and Dialects

Decades of research have shown that valuing, discussing, and building on students' home languages and dialects benefit their language and literacy learning (Heath 1983; Lee 2007). Conversely, telling students that the nonstandard varieties of language they're using are wrong or improper can hinder students' language and literacy learning. Two approaches have been found to be beneficial for building on students' home language varieties in order to teach the conventions of Standardized English: contrastive analysis and discussions of language variation, expectations, and attitudes.

CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

Contrastive analysis refers to the comparison of specific patterns in two languages or dialects. Studies have found that contrastive analysis approaches can lead to more frequent and accurate use of the conventions of Standardized English in academic writing by students who speak vernacular dialects and multiple languages (Fogel and Ehri 2000; Hudgens Henderson 2016; Sweetland and Wheeler 2014). Students might, for instance, compare verb tense markers or patterns of negatives in Appalachian English ("I don't have none") and Standardized English ("I don't have any"), inductively generating descriptions of the grammatical patterns in each dialect.

SAT Suite Connections

Rhetorically effective language use and the conventions of standard written English are important areas of emphasis on the SAT Suite Writing and Language Tests and on the optional SAT Essay.

The Writing and Language Tests on the SAT, PSAT/NMSQT, PSAT 10, and PSAT 8/9 are assessments of students' developed ability to revise and edit well-written multiparagraph passages in a range of subject areas, including history/social studies, the humanities, and science, as well as on career-related topics. The tests measure, in part, to what extent students can use language precisely and concisely, employ a consistent and effective style and tone, and combine sentences to enhance clarity and cohesion or to achieve other rhetorical aims. The tests also include numerous questions associated with a defined set of Standard English conventions concerning grammar, usage, and punctuation. Students aren't expected to demonstrate the rote recall of conventions-related "rules" or to apply conventions knowledge in context-free ways; instead, students must call on their understanding of grammar, usage, and punctuation as well as specific passage contexts in order to make decisions about how (or whether) to edit passages at particular, indicated points.

DISCUSSIONS OF LANGUAGE VARIATION, EXPECTATIONS, AND ATTITUDES

Students' understanding of how language varies by setting, audience, and purpose can also be strengthened by drawing on students' personal experiences with language variation, expectations, and attitudes. Heath's seminal book, *Ways with Words* (1983), describes how a science teacher teaching students from two communities who spoke distinct vernacular dialects exposed her students to various ways of expressing ideas about weather, soil, and plants, including the "ways with words" used by local farmers speaking vernacular dialects, the local press, and academic texts. Heath describes how the class discussed these different ways with words and the purposes and audiences motivating them. When students wrote their own scientific reports, they had a better understanding and made more deliberate use of the conventions of Standardized English that they were expected to use. Identifying the multiple language varieties that students use, read, or hear and discussing these varieties' purposes and audiences are helpful strategies for teaching the conventions of Standardized English to all students. For instance, comparing the grammar and mechanics, intended audience, and purpose of everyday texts such as text messages to those of academic texts can build students' meta-awareness of how to adjust their language in different contexts.

Lisa Delpit's pioneering article "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" (1988) also presents numerous examples of teachers talking to their students about the language varieties they use in their own communities and families and about "codes of power," the conventions of Standardized English expected in most academic and workplace settings. Delpit argues that we do a disservice to students when we don't explicitly teach about these codes of power and when and how they're used. Importantly, Delpit and other scholars emphasize that explicit discussions of language varieties and language expectations must be paired with discussions about the power structures, such as classism and racism, that have throughout history made some varieties of English more valued than others in mainstream institutions such as school. One literary example of the relationship between language varieties and power structures can be found in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* when Jem and Scout—white, upper-class children—express surprise and dismay that Calpurnia, their black housekeeper, speaks differently at their house than she does at her black church. Such moments in literature can provide rich opportunities to discuss systems of power such as racism, differing attitudes toward language, and varying expectations for language in different settings.

Analyzing "grammar rants" in the press, such as newspaper columns, can also raise students' awareness of how power helps determine acceptable usage and conventions. As Lindblom and Dunn (2006) note, "A

The SAT Essay is an optional task that requires students to produce a clear, cogent written response to a prompt. Students taking the Essay must read and analyze a provided source text in order to explain how the author builds an argument to persuade the audience. Students are evaluated, in part, on the extent to which they're able to produce a response that uses language precisely, maintains a formal style and objective tone, contains various sentence structures, and shows control of the conventions of standard written English.

The language-related skills and knowledge noted above are useful not only on the Writing and Language Tests and in crafting an Essay response but also in reading and analyzing the challenging passages that appear on the SAT Suite Reading Tests as well as the source text associated with the Essay prompt. These passages convey substantial amounts of information and ideas in ways that can be subtle or complex, such as through sophisticated sentence structures that require careful attention to follow.

grammar rant from a prominent cultural figure highlights the central point of our analysis: Whether we like it or not, powerful people make value judgments about other people’s intelligence based on language use” (72). Lindblom and Dunn suggest that students investigate the author’s views on language, intelligence, region, race/ethnicity, and class and whether the rant reflects a prescriptive or descriptive perspective on language. Such analyses, Lindblom and Dunn argue, can help develop students’ awareness of audience expectations, the subtleties of language, and current debates surrounding conventions and usage.

Some students, particularly those who speak vernacular dialects, are already aware of value judgments based on language use and may have experienced linguistic prejudice firsthand. Acknowledging such experiences and having honest conversations about commonly held expectations for language use in academic and professional settings promote students’ understanding of Standardized English and its use. Even students who haven’t experienced linguistic prejudice benefit from learning about current, real-world attitudes toward and expectations for the conventions and use of Standardized English.

Teach Conventions as Means of Clear Communication and Effective Rhetorical Choice

As we hope this chapter has made clear, instruction on the conventions of Standardized English should be focused on more than just “correctness”; it should be aimed at teaching students to become more effective communicators in academic, professional, and other settings. In fact, findings from over fifty years of research have shown that traditional methods of teaching grammar and other conventions, which focus on correctness, don’t improve students’ academic writing (Andrews et al. 2006; Hillocks 1986). Ineffective traditional methods include memorizing definitions of parts of speech and punctuation “rules”; circling parts of speech and correcting errors on worksheets; undertaking group activities such as Daily Oral Language and Daily Language Practice; and asking students what “sounds right” or “sounds better” in academic texts (Dyson and Smitherman 2009; Godley, Carpenter, and Werner 2007). These methods not only fail to improve students’ use of Standardized English conventions but also may impede students’ literacy learning by taking up valuable class time.

The alternative is to teach the conventions of Standardized English as tools for clear communication and for effective rhetorical choice (what’s sometimes called “author’s craft”). A growing number of recent studies have shown that these approaches further students’ development of academic reading and writing skills as well as their meta-awareness of

“Instruction on the conventions of Standardized English should be focused on more than just “correctness”; it should be aimed at teaching students to become more effective communicators in academic, professional, and other settings.”

how grammar and mechanics construct meaning (Gebhard and Graham 2018; Moore and Schleppegrell 2014; Williams 2004). These approaches require communicating specific learning goals to students, such as “Analyze the verbs that Harper Lee uses to contrast the characters of Atticus Finch and Sheriff Heck Tate in the scene with the rabid dog,” rather than general directives, such as “Learn about verbs.”

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Because the presentation of information in academic texts is intended to be compact and precise, clearly conveying the relationship between ideas within a single sentence or between sentences is critical. The conventions of Standardized English contribute to the clear communication of complex ideas and relationships. One key way that writers and speakers convey these relationships is through the precise use of *transitions* and *connectives* such as *however*, *then*, and *because*. “Macbeth killed the king *because* he went crazy” and “Macbeth killed the king, *and consequently* he went crazy,” for example, offer two very different interpretations of Shakespeare’s play. Studies have shown that teaching students about transitions and connectives can improve reading comprehension and academic writing by helping students understand and convey the relationship between ideas in the academic texts they read and write (Moore and Schleppegrell 2014).

However, as with other conventions, the use of transitions and connectives differs across academic disciplines and *genres*. Genres are types of communication with specific purposes and conventions. Common academic genres include lab reports, mathematical explanations, persuasive speeches, and literary analysis essays. Every academic discipline has its own set of commonly used genres, and each genre is characterized by particular grammatical patterns. In science, for example, the relationship between ideas is often expressed with connectives such as *as a result*, *however*, and *so*. In history, however, textbooks often use verbs in place of connectives to indicate relationships between ideas, which can make reading difficult. Schleppegrell (2013) shares the following textbook passage to illustrate this point: “During the 1860s and 1870s, cattle ranching boomed. The destruction of the buffalo and removal of Native Americans to reservations emptied the land for grazing cattle” (37). The cause-and-effect relationship between these two sentences (which could be expressed as “Cattle ranching boomed in the 1860s and 1870s *as a result of* the European settlers’ displacement of Native Americans and destruction of the buffalo”) must be inferred because it’s not stated explicitly. Further complicating matters is the fact that the cause-and-effect relationship portrayed is between two abstract forces (*destruction/ removal* and *ranching*) rather than between humans (*settlers* and *Native Americans*), obscuring issues of agency and power in the text’s portrayal

of this historical period. Noticing grammatical patterns in the ways relationships between ideas are represented in a particular academic discipline, such as history, can help students analyze the implicit and explicit relationships valued in that discipline. It can also help students compose and edit their own discipline-specific writing, such as historical research papers, making it more likely that their ideas are clearly conveyed to the reader and that their use of conventions of Standardized English follows the expectations of that discipline. (For a deeper examination of the topic of disciplinary literacy, see chapter 5.)

Additionally, a number of studies have demonstrated how professional and academic readers perceive writers when they make errors involving the conventions of Standardized English grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Beason (2001) and others have found that particular errors of written Standardized English cause academic and professional readers to view the writer as hasty, careless, or unskilled while other errors are ignored or viewed as insignificant. Features of vernacular dialects, particularly ones associated with verb patterns, are judged the most harshly, reflecting widespread negative attitudes toward such dialects. Faulty sentence structures that interfere with clear communication, particularly fused sentences, also cause academic and professional readers to form negative opinions about writers. Other errors that are viewed by professionals and instructors as most bothersome include tense switching, lack of parallel structure, and missing commas when these three types of errors interfere with readability or clarity of communication (Gray and Heuser 2003).

This body of research has implications for both teachers and students. For teachers, the results suggest that editing academic writing for the conventions of Standardized English is an important skill for students to learn, as it enables them to convey to their audiences that they're careful, considerate, well-informed writers. Successful editing, however, can be difficult to teach. The same studies described above found that college instructors are quite inconsistent in the errors they notice and respond to in students' writing. This can give students mixed signals about which conventions of Standardized English they should focus on while editing. The studies recommend that teachers decide on a system for providing consistent written feedback on students' errors that is both developmentally appropriate (see "The Development of Students' Understanding of the Conventions of Standardized English," above) and not overwhelming for students. For instance, teachers might identify and provide explanations pertaining to only the two most serious or frequent errors in each piece of writing. Students can then keep track of these errors in their own "conventions log" and be expected to adhere to those conventions of Standardized English in their next draft or next paper (Ferris 2011).

Whatever system a teacher chooses, it should be clearly communicated to students and should include formative assessment that distinguishes between errors and mistakes. If a deviation from written Standardized English reflects the student's lack of knowledge of the underlying convention of grammar, usage, or mechanics, marking the error won't be sufficient; the teacher must also provide explicit instruction on that convention. On the other hand, if the deviation is simply a mistake, the student will likely benefit from explicit instruction in editing and proofreading strategies, such as awareness of one's own frequent mistakes, reading a paper from end to beginning, and asking a skilled writer for help. One way that teachers can differentiate errors and mistakes is by highlighting all inaccuracies in written Standardized English conventions on students' drafts and asking students to self-correct everything that they can. Features that are successfully self-corrected are likely mistakes, while those that aren't corrected properly are likely errors and require teacher explanations.

These studies also suggest that students be made aware that the purpose of editing and proofreading extends beyond being "correct" to building a productive relationship with the reader. Students benefit from discussions of the kinds of errors that are bothersome to academic and professional readers and the reasons behind readers' negative reactions, whether those reasons involve impaired readability, assumptions about the author's knowledge or attention to detail, or stereotypical language attitudes. Since research demonstrates that features of vernacular dialects are judged most harshly by academic and professional readers (even though, as we've noted, such dialects follow their own grammatical patterns), we return to Lisa Delpit's (1988) point that educators must explicitly teach Standardized English "codes of power" while also conveying to students that negative judgments of vernacular dialects are rooted in historical power structures such as classism and racism and that all varieties of English should be respected and valued.

RHETORICAL CHOICES

Students can also be taught the conventions of Standardized English through examining the rhetorical choices that authors make. For example, the concept of parallel structure can be taught as a tool to analyze Mark Antony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. This legendary speech begins, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him" (3.2.82–83). The elements "friends," "Romans," and "countrymen" exemplify parallel structure, the repetition of a grammatical construction (here, a series of nouns). As part of a lesson on the speech, students can be told that parallel structure conveys the sense that each idea in the series carries equal importance. Armed with that knowledge, students could be asked to analyze why Shakespeare might have begun Antony's speech with

College and Career Readiness

Evidence from the College Board's 2019 National Curriculum Survey Report provides strong indications of the importance of rhetorically effective language use and command of the conventions of standard written English to high school students' college and career readiness. The sample of 1,377 postsecondary faculty in English, social science, and science gave a grand mean importance rating of 3.01 (on a four-point scale, with 4 being "very important") to a subset of skill/knowledge survey items associated closely with the conventions of standard written English grammar, usage, and punctuation. This sample also gave high ratings to a number of survey items related to rhetorically effective language use: 3.40 to using language precisely, 3.21 to using language concisely (i.e., avoiding/correcting wordiness and redundancy), 3.13 to establishing and maintaining style and tone, and 2.75 to using various sentence structures to achieve particular rhetorical purposes, such as placing emphasis on the main rather than a secondary point.

For more information on the College Board's 2019 National Curriculum Survey Report and its results, see the general introduction to this collection.

such a construction. More complicated examples of parallel structure and even common errors of parallelism can be included in such a lesson, but the main focus of instruction should be on the rhetorical effect of parallelism. The instructional approach illustrated here emphasizes the connection between grammar and meaning and presents a convention such as parallel structure as a stylistic choice made by a skilled author to make a point.

Students can also expand their own stylistic range by learning to vary sentence structure for rhetorical effect (Williams and Bizup 2017). Sentence-combining activities, which teach students to meld simple sentences into more complex ones, have been shown to improve students' command of sentence structure as well as overall writing performance (Saddler and Graham 2005). Sentence-combining activities merge the teaching of rhetorical choice and conventions by demonstrating how various grammatical constructions and forms of punctuation can be used to convey different meanings. In sentence-combining activities, students are presented with model sentences and then practice writing sophisticated sentences of their own that make use of various transitions and connectives (such as *but*, *therefore*, and *since*), clauses (such as embedded clauses), sentence structures (such as compound and complex sentences), and punctuation marks (such as dashes, commas, and semicolons) in order to condense information and convey subtleties of meaning. Sentence-expanding activities, a variation of sentence combining, ask students to add detail to their sentences by adding specific grammatical constructions such as prepositional phrases and relative clauses. These instructional approaches have been shown to improve students' control of conventions, expand their stylistic repertoires, and enhance their academic writing (Evans et al. 1988; Graham and Perin 2007).

Similarly, lessons on the conventions of grammar and punctuation can guide students to consider the rhetorical effect of long and short sentences and to practice varying sentence length in their own writing. Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* provides rich examples of short sentences that convey surprise and action as well as longer sentences that convey rich description. To take one example:

This looking business is risky. Once I stood on a humped rock on nearby Purgatory Mountain, watching through binoculars the great autumn hawk migration below, until I discovered that I was in danger of joining the hawks on a vertical migration of my own. I was used to binoculars, but not, apparently, to balancing on humped rocks while looking through them. I staggered. (1974, 23)

The passage above begins with a sentence of five words, moves to one of thirty-nine, and ends with one of two. After discussing how the length and structure of Dillard's sentences affect them as readers, students could

use Dillard’s writing as a model for revising the sentences in their own essays for greater impact.

Rhetorical perspectives on conventions of Standardized English such as the ones discussed above can help students understand when it’s effective to “break the rules” of prescriptive grammar (for instance, by starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction such as *and*) and why skilled authors strategically flout such rules. However, Adam Lefstein (2009) cautions that students must also be taught the purposes for using particular grammatical features in particular disciplines or texts; if they’re taught simply to vary their grammar and language to keep their writing “interesting,” they may actually become more confused about how to make effective language choices. In other words, as they learn to make a broader range of rhetorical and grammatical choices in their writing and speaking, students also need to consider purpose and context. Long sentences with complicated grammatical relationships and embedded clauses might be effective for explaining the results of an experiment in a written report, but in a speech on the same topic such choices would likely confuse the audience. The concept of *genres* can be used to address the potential confusion Lefstein cautions us about. Knowing the genres that are specific to each discipline and the conventions of these genres can help students recognize language expectations and patterns within specific academic disciplines and texts and make language choices that are purposeful and effective (Derewianka and Jones 2016).

Teaching Conventions through Authentic Communicative Activities

Authentic communicative activities include reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks that focus on conveying a message to a real audience for a specific purpose. Literacy research has found that students are more engaged, motivated, and aware of their language choices when tasks include audiences other than their teachers and classmates and when the goals of the tasks are personally meaningful to students. Authentic communicative activities also provide effective and engaging opportunities to teach about the conventions of Standardized English and to develop students’ meta-awareness of language choices.

In their recent study of the positive effects of contextualized grammar instruction, Susan Jones, Debra Myhill, and Trevor Bailey emphasize that a contextualized approach to grammar builds on authentic communication through writing, an understanding that grammar is part of that communication, and students’ literacy experiences:

Firstly, *writing is a communicative act* supporting writers in understanding the social purposes and audiences of texts and how language creates meanings and effects; secondly, *grammar is a*

meaning-making resource: supporting writers in making appropriate linguistic choices which help them to shape and craft text to satisfy their rhetorical intentions; and finally, *connectivity*, supporting writers in making connections between their various language experiences as readers, writers and speakers, and in making connections between what they write and how they write it. (2013, 1245; emphasis in original)

Building on this perspective, Jones, Myhill, and Bailey studied the effect of contextualized, embedded grammar instruction on the writing development of approximately 750 high school students from 25 schools who either received grammar instruction embedded in writing instruction or additional reading and writing instruction rather than grammar instruction. The contextualized grammar instruction included lessons such as how to use short sentences and fragments for emphasis in narrative writing and how to use modal verbs to convey degrees of certainty in argument writing. The students who received contextualized grammar instruction as part of their writing instruction demonstrated significantly more growth in their academic writing than those who didn't. Jones, Myhill, and Bailey's study provides strong support for teaching grammatical patterns and conventions as tools for communication.

One effective instructional sequence for teaching the conventions of Standardized English through authentic communicative activities is known as the teaching-learning cycle (Derewianka and Jones 2016). In this sequence, students learn about grammatical patterns in a specific genre by (1) building background knowledge of the genre, its audience, and its purpose; (2) engaging in collaborative, student-centered investigations of language patterns in authentic texts; (3) constructing model texts in the genre in collaboration with peers and the teacher in order to practice applying key patterns of grammar and mechanics to academic writing; and (4) independently composing texts in that genre. Gebhard and Graham (2018) demonstrate how this teaching-learning cycle helped middle schoolers, both native speakers of English and English learners, develop disciplinary literacy and critical awareness of language conventions in science writing and persuasive letters. In an environmental studies unit that focused on the decline of the local bat population, these students analyzed the cohesive devices, verbs, and subjects of clauses in documents written by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Later, students applied the patterns they'd observed to their own letters to local government officials about the local bat population. Analyses of student writing and peer review comments demonstrated students' awareness of the language patterns that would make these letters stronger: using clear referents for readability and cohesion, eliminating personal pronouns in order to sound more objective, and using logical connectives (such as *because*, *although*, and *if . . . then*) to build a persuasive argument. Students in the study used the knowledge they'd gained about usage and conventions in these science texts to

comprehend challenging scientific explanations, write cogent letters to government officials, and reflect critically on the tone and purpose of the official letters they received in response.

Both of the examples above demonstrate how lessons on the conventions of Standardized English can be integrated into authentic communicative tasks and into teachers' regular instruction. By analyzing the patterns of grammar and mechanics typical to a specific academic genre, developing a meta-language to talk about these patterns, and applying these patterns to their own writing or speaking, students develop an understanding of Standardized English that supports their disciplinary learning and communication skills.

Final Thoughts

Teachers as well as students benefit from viewing the conventions of Standardized English as tools for clear and effective communication in academic and professional settings rather than simply as rules. This descriptive, communicative perspective on Standardized English changes the teacher's role from being a judge of whether prescriptive rules of grammar have been followed to being a co-investigator of patterns of conventions and usage in different academic subjects and genres. It also provides teachers with a more productive answer to the student question "Why do we have to know this?"

Because effective instruction in the conventions of Standardized English requires clear explanations of grammatical concepts, teachers' background knowledge of grammar, conventions, and usage is important. However, since much of our knowledge of these aspects of language use is unconscious, particularly for native speakers of English, few teachers or professors can articulate every rule, pattern, or concept. Teachers should consult a variety of usage guides and online resources in order to obtain multiple perspectives on issues of conventions and to choose the explanations of grammar and mechanics that are best for their students and most closely aligned with teachers' learning goals for reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Developing students' awareness and command of the conventions of Standardized English is beneficial to their future academic and professional pursuits and, as this chapter has shown, this work can be undertaken in creative, engaging ways. By teaching conventions of Standardized English as meaningful and useful, we can empower students to succeed in college, the workplace, and beyond.

References

Andrews, Richard, Carole Torgerson, Sue Beverton, Allison Freeman, Terry Locke, Graham Low, Alison Robinson, and Die Zhu. 2006. "The Effect of Grammar Teaching on Writing Development." *British Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (February): 39–55.

Bartholomae, David. 1980. "The Study of Error." *College Composition and Communication* 31, no. 3 (October): 253–69.

Beason, Larry. 2001. "Ethos and Error: How Business People React to Errors." *College Composition and Communication* 53, no. 1 (September): 33–64.

Delpit, Lisa D. 1988. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (August): 280–98.

Derewianka, Beverly, and Pauline Jones. 2016. *Teaching Language in Context*, 2nd ed. South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.

Dillard, Annie. 1974. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper's Magazine Press.

Dyson, Anne Haas, and Geneva Smitherman. 2009. "The Right (Write) Start: African American Language and the Discourse of Sounding Right." *Teachers College Record* 111, no. 4 (April): 973–98.

Ellis, Rod. 1994. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Evans, Ron, Robin Venetozzi, Mike Bundrick, and Edna McWilliams. 1988. "The Effects of Sentence-Combining Instructions on Writing and on Standardized Test Scores." *Journal of Educational Research* 82, no. 1 (September-October): 53–57.

Ferris, Dana R. 2011. *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing*, 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Fogel, Howard, and Linnea C. Ehri. 2000. "Teaching Elementary Students Who Speak Black English Vernacular to Write in Standard English: Effects of Dialect Transformation Practice." *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, no. 2 (April): 212–35.

Gebhard, Meg, and Holly Graham. 2018. "Bats and Grammar: Developing Critical Language Awareness in the Context of School Reform." *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 17, no. 4: 281–97.

Godley, Amanda J., Brian D. Carpenter, and Cynthia A. Werner. 2007. "'I'll Speak in Proper Slang': Language Ideologies in a Daily Editing Activity." *Reading Research Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (January-March): 100–131. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.42.1.4>.

Godley, Amanda, and Allison Escher. 2012. "Bidialectal African American Adolescents' Beliefs about Spoken Language Expectations in English Classrooms." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 55, no. 8 (May): 704–13.

Godley, Amanda J., and Jeffrey Reaser. 2018. *Critical Language Pedagogy: Interrogating Language, Dialects, and Power in Teacher Education*. New York: Peter Lang.

Graham, Steve, and Dolores Perin. 2007. "What We Know, What We Still Need to Know: Teaching Adolescents to Write." *Scientific Studies of Reading* 11, no. 4: 313–35.

Gray, Loretta S., and Paula Heuser. 2003. "Nonacademic Professionals' Perception of Usage Errors." *Journal of Basic Writing* 22, no. 1 (Spring): 50–70.

Heath, Shirley Brice. 1983. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hillocks Jr., George. 1986. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Hudgens Henderson, Mary. 2016. "Sociolinguistics for Kids: A Curriculum for Bilingual Students." PhD diss., University of New Mexico. https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/span_etds/23/.

Jones, Susan, Debra Myhill, and Trevor Bailey. 2013. "Grammar for Writing? An Investigation of the Effects of Contextualised Grammar Teaching on Students' Writing." *Reading and Writing* 26, no. 8 (September): 1241–63.

Krauthamer, Helene Seltzer. 1999. *Spoken Language Interference Patterns in Written English*. New York: Peter Lang.

Larsen-Freeman, Diane. 2018. "Second Language Acquisition, WE, and Language as a Complex Adaptive System (CAS)." *World Englishes* 37, no. 1 (March): 80–92.

Lee, Carol D. 2007. *Culture, Literacy, and Learning: Taking Bloom in the Midst of the Whirlwind*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lefstein, Adam. 2009. "Rhetorical Grammar and the Grammar of Schooling: Teaching 'Powerful Verbs' in the English National Literacy Strategy." *Linguistics and Education* 20, no. 4 (December): 378–400.

Lindblom, Kenneth, and Patricia A. Dunn. 2006. "Analyzing Grammar Rants: An Alternative to Traditional Grammar Instruction." *English Journal* 95, no. 5 (May): 71–77.

Moore, Jason, and Mary Schleppegrell. 2014. "Using a Functional Linguistics Metalanguage to Support Academic Language Development in the English Language Arts." *Linguistics and Education* 26, no. 1 (June): 92–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2014.01.002>.

Newell, Casi. n.d. "Editing Tip: Sentence Length." AJE Scholar. Accessed April 9, 2019. <https://www.aje.com/arc/editing-tip-sentence-length/>.

O'Neill, Kathryn S. 2018. "Applying the Pareto Principle to the Analysis of Students' Errors in Grammar, Mechanics and Style." *Research in Higher Education Journal* 34 (May).

Purdue University College of Liberal Arts. n.d. "For Short, Choppy Sentences." Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). Accessed April 3, 2019. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/sentence_variety/for_short_choppy_sentences.html.

Saddler, Bruce, and Steve Graham. 2005. "The Effects of Peer-Assisted Sentence-Combining Instruction on the Writing Performance of More and Less Skilled Young Writers." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 97, no. 1 (February): 43–54.

Schleppegrell, Mary J. 2004. *The Language of Schooling: A Functional Linguistics Perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Schleppegrell, Mary J. 2013. "Exploring Language and Meaning in Complex Texts." *Perspectives on Language and Literacy* 39, no. 3 (Summer): 37–40.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2011.

Sweetland, Julie, and Rebecca Wheeler. 2014. "Addressing Dialect Variation in U.S. K–12 Schools." In *The Routledge Handbook of Educational Linguistics*, edited by Martha Bigelow and Johanna Enns-Kananen, 446–58. New York: Routledge.

Williams, Geoff. 2004. "Ontogenesis and Grammaticals: Functions of Metalanguage in Pedagogical Discourse." In *The Development of Language: Functional Perspectives on Species and Individuals*, edited by Geoff Williams and Annabelle Lukin, 241–67. London: Continuum.

Williams, Joseph M., and Joseph Bizup. 2017. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 12th ed. New York: Pearson.