



## English Instruction: Where? When? Who Says?

I recently came across some notes that I had taken during English class my senior year at Ypsilanti High School. People often ask how I became so so knowledgeable; so capable; so well-educated...in contrast to so many teachers in today's schools. Well, long ago, when I was a student in public schools, traditional teachers actually taught traditional subjects, issues, topics, and skills! They also taught almost everyone to read and to turn to books for information and enjoyment. The teachers I had taught lessons like the following:



### Miss Wagstaff's English class, September 13, 1965 - History of English lesson

English - Indo-European Family; single words same in all languages

Second family - Hellenic -> Classical Greek and Italic (Romance Languages)-Latin, Spanish, Portuguese

Third family - Celtic (Welch, Scotch, Irish)

Cattle-raising nomads - reason Indo-European family [of languages] spread; possibly family first lived in Czechoslovakia, but could have been anywhere in the general area

### Theories of Origin of language:

"Bow Wow Theory" - imitation of sounds of nature

"Ding Dong Theory" - mystical correlation bet/sound & meaning

"Pooh Pooh Theory" - words came from expressions of emotion, fear, anger, pain, pleasure, surprise, etc.

"Ta-Ta Theory" - idea - words imitation of bodily movement

### Formal vs. Informal English

Formal English - complicated sentence structure; extensive vocab, no slang

Informal English - more personal; more acceptable in personal writing; use of contractions; simple vocab

Non-Standard English -

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Substandard - "I knowed."

Double negatives - "I don't want no more."

Pronoun "I" used inappropriately

Adjective "good" used for adverb "well"

Overuse of slang - "lousy, swell" (Now add "Ya know")

Dese and dem for these and them

"Athletics" mispronounced as "ath-e-le-tics"

"Genuine" mispronounced as "gen-u-ine" (rhyming with wine)



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Ex: Formal:- *apparel*; informal – *clothes*; substandard – duds

Should readers want to hear additional examples of substandard English, just watch television and listen carefully to the speakers. Viewers' ears are awash with errors, slang, dialect ("my bad"), even during news programs. News people surely grow frustrated with the emails I sent to them: 1) Subject: "Grammar. Mr. There's-Several. Subject-verb agreement. "There **are** several." 2) Subject: "Grammar. Miss I've-Got. Never use the word 'got' unless you have no other choice. Remember that got = have, and have = have, so when you say, 'I've got news for you,' you are actually saying, 'I have have news for you.'"

It is well (yet maybe too bad) that I remember the days when radio and television reporters, MCs, actors and actresses, and more were trained to speak clear, precise, error-free English. Why would America want its children to hear and learn grammatical errors? Actually, parents, teachers, citizens did not want children to hear such inexcusable trashing of the English language — **then**. Unfortunately, in today's world, few people even notice, let alone seem bothered by, these errors. Why do parents now tolerate it? They tolerate it because real English instruction went missing-in-action before the parents' generations were taught to hear the differences. Standard English is being lost while SubStandard English is blending into a messy, unspellable patois.

When I asked one of my university students how he could possibly have earned A's in high school English — with his stunted vocabulary; his extreme dialect; his appalling sentence structures; his atrocious spelling, and his missing skills, he told me, "Mz. Taylor, so few students ever did their homework that if we turned in *anything at all* we received an 'A'. Just for doing it. We had no criteria to meet." That was the same semester that my department head informed me that the university's policy was to *not* teach grammar. The students not only miss English lessons in K-12, but they miss them at the university level, too.

When college graduates fail to develop the skills needed for clear and accurate communication, they embarrass themselves. Several years ago, I needed my son's orthodontist to write a letter for my insurance company. A few days after I made my request, a letter arrived. It was poorly constructed; badly written. I immediately called the office and explained that I needed a letter written **by the doctor**, not by some clerk. The lady paused then said, "Doctor DID write the letter." His communication skills were weak, to say the least. He had graduated from the University of Michigan. I cringed.

Miss Wagstaff's English lesson on November 9, 1965 - Communication:

Words with precise or tangible meanings/references are concrete

Words with less precise, and less tangible references are abstract

- 1) It is your own experience which determines what an abstract word means to you.
- 2) If you are to clearly communicate, you must make your meaning clear.
- 3) The wider your experience, the better your ability to understand what others mean when they use abstractions.
- 4) Men who are free, well-born, well-bred, and conversant in honest companies have naturally an instinct and spur which prompts them into virtuous actions and withdraws them from vice. (quote of forgotten origin)

Notice how this English teacher used her lessons, not only to teach English, but to teach students how to think. The clarion call in too many of today's schools and universities is that students need to write more; need to write in teams and groups (in hopes of covering up the skills of the weakest members by



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letting the strongest writer(s) in any group do most of the work). I ask, “Of what shall they write?” Without minds filled with facts, experiences (both real and fiction-based); with problems considered and solved; with an eagerness to express personal opinions and research to others... “Students need to write more!” fails to teach writing skills! To become a skilled writer, one needs do just as Miss Wagstaff taught us to do — develop a wide and varied knowledge base from which to think logically, and a large vocabulary base from which to choose words that express thoughts with precision.

## Miss Wagstaff’s English lesson of January 5th, 1966 - Direction & Order in Composition

Deductive movement - making a general statement and then supporting it with a number of particulars. Also moving from:

- 1) effects to causes;
- 2) opinions to reasons;
- 3) wholes to parts

## Uses for Deductive Movement -

- 1) Reader gets main idea at once.
- 2) Easier to see how details illustrate a given generality than to see relation between a lot of details while unifying principle not revealed until the end.
- 3) Readers can glance back or forward to get a comprehensive view of the principle ideas of a long piece of writing.

Inductive movement - beginning with particulars then ending with a generalization. Why?

- 1) Immediate advantage of concreteness
  - 2) If particulars have dramatic or story quality, you can gain more exciting effect by putting the generalization first.
  - 3) Moves more quickly
- Put concrete fact first then facts explaining it.

## Move from:

- 1) causes to effects
- 2) problems to solutions
- 3) reasons to opinions
- 4) negative to affirmative
- 5) parts to whole
- 6) sequences



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Some may think it odd that I have kept these stacks of notes, from several classes, and hauled them around for over forty years. Some may be surprised to learn that I have used my notes repeatedly during my long teaching career. Since my first year of teaching, in 1972, I have repeatedly taught many of the lessons that were taught to me. If the lessons worked once, chances are that they will work again. Sadly, it appears as though most teachers of today were 1st) never taught to hear, speak, and use English properly, and 2nd) if they were, they must have tossed their notes with their graduation hats.

To Ypsilanti High School, Ypsilanti, Michigan — I send my thank you's and my deepest appreciation. My memories have always kept the wonderful staff, and the grand old building, close to my heart. The Ypsilanti Public Schools, as a whole, gave me the skills, vocabulary base, and knowledge breadth that I needed to be successful in life, in learning, in teaching, and in writing. I do hope that your standards have remained true to those during the years 1963-1966.

**Linda Schrock Taylor**, a retired special education teacher, is running for Governor of Michigan with the U.S. Taxpayers Party of Michigan, a division of The Constitution Party. Linda describes herself as “A Problem Solver, not a politician.” She is strongly for “Liberty, Literacy, and Limited Government.”



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