

Ask Aunt Malkin

A veteran of the school wars herself, with the scars to prove it, Malkin Dare has all kinds of advice to offer. If you would like some been-there-done-that advice from Aunt Malkin, call her at 519-884-3166 or e-mail her at mdare@societyforqualityeducation.org. This month, Aunt Malkin answers George's question.

QUESTION

I'm seeing a deterioration of language skill in the workplace and in everyday communication. But how big a problem is this really? Are we just being snobs and old fuddy-duddies by complaining?

Signed, George

ANSWER

If the deterioration of language skill George is complaining about involves superficial things like the tendency to use neologisms or to turn nouns into verbs or to split infinitives, then George is being a fuddy-duddy. We all need to realize that language evolves and there will inevitably be intergenerational differences. The older generation just has to accept changes to the vernacular.

On the other hand, correct and precise language never goes out of date. If George is talking about deterioration in vocabulary, spelling and grammar, then he is right to be concerned. Many people think that the outward form of communication doesn't really matter as long as it gets the message across. However, there are three good reasons to insist on communication that follows standard rules.

First, non-standard language slows down the communication process and invites misunderstandings. It's already hard enough to say exactly what you mean using Standard English, especially in writing where you can't reinforce your message with intonation and gestures. The crossing of wires resulting from the informal e-mail messages is a well-known example of this phenomenon. The more precise and unambiguous your language is, the more likely it will be correctly interpreted.

Second, deviations from Standard English may be poorly received by your audience. For example, many employers begin the process of sorting out job applications by discarding those with spelling and grammar errors. A prospective son-in-law is unlikely to impress his intended's parents if he expresses himself poorly. Businesses run the risk of alienating some potential customers if they make mistakes in their communications. As Marshall McLuhan famously said, the medium is the message.

Third, sloppy language is incompatible with overall excellence.

According to the broken windows theory, small problems such as broken windows show that no one cares very much and so it is safe to break more windows or even break into the building. Similarly, if a company tolerates broken language, it shows that no one cares very much and so it is safe to let things slide. A company that insists on excellent communications sends an important message to its employees and to its customers about its overall high standards.

I hope I have made myself clear.