

A Titanic Problem

Students' poor composition skills are just the tip of the iceberg.

By Malkin Dare

These days, it's fairly easy to shrug off a student's written mistakes. After all, some people are just bad spellers — plus Internet messaging mangles text as a matter of course.

Many people distinguish between good spelling, grammar, and punctuation on the one hand, and the content of the writing on the other — with the content being considered much more important. But this is a false dichotomy.

The flaw in this kind of thinking is that the vast majority of people with poor spelling, grammar, and punctuation also write badly. By this, I mean that their writing tends to be poorly organized and impressionistic, and they have trouble writing a coherent narrative or making a convincing case.

At their faculties of education, most prospective teachers are taught that they risk stifling their students' creativity by insisting on correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Consequently, certified teachers often tell their students to concentrate on the content of their drafts — and then go back over their work later on and correct mistakes.

It is true that it is very difficult to write creatively when part of your mental desk space is taken up by mechanical concerns, and so it is important to clear your desk, so to speak. Unfortunately, however, space is *not* freed up by permission to make mistakes.

It turns out that people with poor mechanical skills are not able to totally ignore questions about things like spelling. Even when they don't really care if they get the correct spelling, they still have to devote some attention to it.

This becomes obvious when you notice that poor spellers often spell the same word several different ways on the same page. If they weren't thinking about spelling, they would always spell (or misspell) a given word the same way.

Because they can't just ignore spelling, poor spellers need to be able to spell so well, so automatically, that spelling takes up no mental desk space at all, leaving the authors free to devote their full attention to content.

I believe that students should not be asked to write compositions until they have mastered simple spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Early assignments should be of modest size and scope, carefully structured, and thoroughly corrected.

Of course, children should be writing sentences and then paragraphs in the early stages of learning to read and write, but only as part of formal, structured lessons.

Increasingly, cognitive science is telling us that, far from being the result of a lightbulb suddenly flashing in some genius's brain, creativity is actually the result of years and years of deliberate practice. It is only when someone has completely mastered a particular field that he becomes able to move beyond the boundaries of the already-known.

Parents who want to help their older children write good compositions should begin by teaching the basics of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. It is only when these skills are rock solid that students will be able to get much benefit from instruction on composition.

Unfortunately, space does not permit a full description of how to teach these skills. There have been a number of articles in previous newsletters on each topic, and I would be glad to provide them on request.

Spelling

Very briefly, spelling improvement is a long-term project. The first step is to ensure that students have a solid foundation in the letter-sound correspondences, including a good command of all the ways each sound can be represented.

Once this is in place, the student should receive both systematic teaching (there are several inexpensive workbook series that can be used) and prompt feedback on spelling mistakes in his daily work.

Grammar

In addition to the obvious importance of teaching correct grammar (for example, try to avoid "I would of knew"), it is also beneficial to teach students about the parts of speech and how to analyze sentences. It appears that the older students get, the harder it is for them to learn these things.

Students must have an understanding of the structure of our language if they are to write proper sentences. It is impossible, for example, to help students to avoid run-on sentences or misplaced antecedents if they don't understand the concepts. Furthermore, students who have a firm grasp of basic sentence and paragraph structure can transcend the rules and enrich their writing.

Punctuation

Punctuation is used in writing as a substitute for the pauses, stresses, and phrasing that we use only in speech — and for the "stage directions" that accompany the script of a play.

Punctuation is relatively easy to teach but, like spelling and grammar, it requires practice and feedback.

When I see a student who has problems with organizing his thoughts in writing, on further investigation I usually find a student with a very shaky grasp of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Students' problems with composition are typically just the easily-visible part of the iceberg.

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