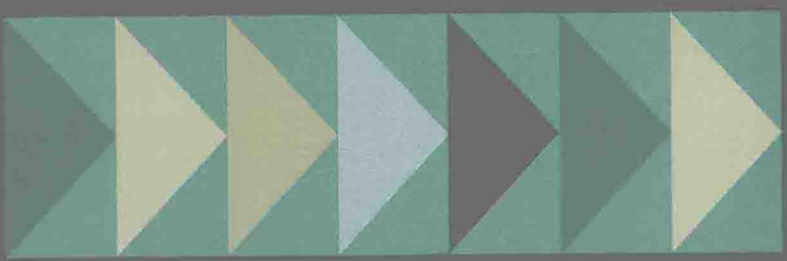
CORRECTING COMMON ERRORS IN WRITING

Third Edition



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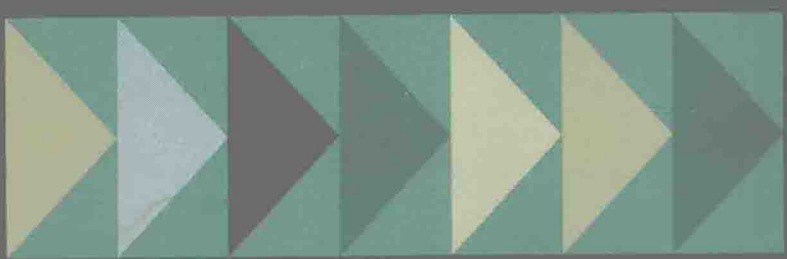

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PREFACE

What you have in your hand is not a style manual nor a grammar book, both of which deal comprehensively with the mechanics of language and writing. Instead, it is a collection of common errors made by students, along with explanations in most cases of why they ARE errors, and examples of ways to correct them.

Students often ask, with some annoyance, why they should have to learn to write formal, academic prose when their friends understand their everyday speech without effort. It's a good question, and there are a couple of answers. First, in normal, casual communication, small errors of comprehension are frequently ignored, or interlocutors (the people you are talking to) can ask for further explanation if they are confused. But in academic writing you have an obligation to be precise and to avoid causing your reader to puzzle over what you are saying. This is especially important since your reader cannot usually ask for clarification. Second, formal, academic prose, usually written in what linguists call "standard English," is what amounts to good academic manners. People rarely question the need for football players to wear a uniform, for soldiers to march in unison, or for American dinner guests to use a knife and fork. Writing in standard English is the equivalent for college students. There is nothing about standard English that makes it in any moral or intellectual way superior to any other dialect, but mastering it is part of a college student's obligation. We discuss all of this in more detail in the Introduction that follows.

We, the authors of *Correcting Common Errors in Writing*, come from different disciplines: anthropology (McKee) and English (Kennedy). We teach different kinds of courses, and our students come from a wide variety of majors. But the errors we discuss in

the following pages are those that most frequently crop up in the papers we grade. If you are having trouble with a particular problem that is not discussed here, look for help from your instructor and/or a good style manual or grammar book, or write us, Nancy McKee, <mckee@mail.wsu.edu>, or George Kennedy, <gkennedy@mail.wsu.edu>. We hope this edition will help you get a grip on some of the conventions of academic writing and of future writing in the professional workplace that may have eluded you so far.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is both a reference (for you to use when you have a question about some particular problem) and a guide (for you to use to correct errors that your instructor has noted in your writing), and it is very easy to use. It is divided into four main parts: *Grammar*, *Punctuation*, *Spelling*, and *Tying Up Loose Ends*. Within those parts, we have divided the contents further into other easily identified parts. Under the main heading *Grammar*, for instance, we have included significant sub-headings, such as *Agreement*, *Pronouns*, *Verbs*, etc. And finally, we have arranged all the errors by name alphabetically and have assigned them numbers, so that under the sub-heading *Agreement*, the question of using *fewer* vs. *less* is labeled as *G.1*, etc.

This system of alphabetizing and numbering makes it easy for you to look up some problem that is troubling you or to respond to a notation that your instructor has made pointing out an error that needs to be corrected. All you have to remember is that all major headings, sub-headings, and examples are arranged alphabetically and numbered. The rest is up to you, but we hope we have made it as easy as possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For suggestions and examples from their students' writing, we thank Margaret Reed and Diana Ames. And for editorial assistance, flexibility, and ingenuity without which this handbook would never have seen the light of day, we thank our editor, Marguerite Rose of the Washington State University Distance Degree Programs.

Nancy McKee
George Kennedy

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TYING UP LOOSE ENDS

INTRODUCTION

The Value of a Standard Dialect Or If You Know What I'm Talking About, Why Do I Have to Follow All These Rules?

People who teach writing, or who require their students to do a substantial amount of writing, almost always believe that adherence to a formal written variety of the standard dialect is important for their students. We, the authors, are no different from most of our colleagues in this, but recently we have begun to get a little nervous about the issue of a standard dialect. Partly this is the result of increasing discussion on the part of teachers and scholars on the place of the standard dialect in twenty-first century America. Partly it is the result of persistent questioning on the part of our students as to why they should have to master standard written English. As a result of our conversations with students, we have focused our nervousness into four questions.

1. What *is* a standard dialect, and what it is not?
2. What is the value of a standard dialect? Does it serve some useful purpose, or is it just a cudgel that unrealistic instructors use as a weapon against their students?
3. Is there always a "right" and "wrong"? Doesn't language change? Who gets to make the rules? And is there ever any room for opinion?
4. What, if any, are the moral and social implications of insistence on adherence to a standard dialect?

1. The Nature of a Standard Dialect

A dialect is a subset of a language that is mutually comprehensible with other dialects of that language. Dialects vary in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and they can depend on differences in geography, ethnicity, social class, occupation, and even gender. In fact, one way of thinking about languages is that they are abstractions based on the common features of the dialects that make them up. When used by linguists, the term "dialect" has no negative value associated with it.

Sometimes people say something like, "Oh, my grandmother doesn't really speak Italian; in her village they just speak a dialect." What that usually means is that the people in Grandma's village do not speak the *standard* dialect. And what is a *standard* dialect? It is simply the dialect used by people with power, wealth, and high status, mostly in big cities, especially in the capital of a country. This is true for all large, stratified societies (that is, those that have social classes or castes), and it has been true for thousands of years, ever since people quit living in small, egalitarian groups and started living in big urban centers.

People with power, wealth, and high status are usually convinced that they have those characteristics because of some natural superiority on their part, and they are often able to persuade others that this is true. Even more often they are able to enforce adherence to their notions of correct behavior, and one of the most important forms of behavior is speech. So the notion has grown up in all stratified societies that the dialect of rich, powerful aristocrats is in some aesthetic or intellectual way *superior* to other dialects. There is no objective evidence for this belief. In fact, linguists often refer to the notion of "linguistic relativity," the idea that *no* language or dialect is in any intrinsic way superior to any other, and that all languages and dialects are equally successful at meeting the needs of their native speakers.

Linguistic relativity has nothing to say about the *circumstances* in which particular languages or dialects are used. It may be that there are cultural reasons for preferring one dialect over another in a specific situation, so as to put people at their ease, for

example, to indicate membership in a particular ethnic group or social class, or to ensure the widest possible communication. But it is important to remember that when it comes to logic, beauty, or intellectual content, there is nothing that makes one dialect or language inherently superior to another. Logic, beauty, and intelligence are qualities that depend on speakers and listeners, not on languages or dialects.

In some countries a person's pronunciation or other qualities of the way he or she *speaks* (usually called an "accent") are very important features of dialect, and there may be prejudice against particular low status accents. This is true to some extent in the United States, where thirty years ago at the college McKee attended in New York City there was a class required of all students who flunked the mandatory "speech test." Most of the students who flunked the speech test had noticeable New York accents, and the required class was intended to erase this accent and replace it with standard American pronunciation, one of the features of the standard American dialect. The class rarely succeeded in its goal, mostly because in the United States, accent, though noticeable, is seldom of overwhelming social importance. In other countries, however, including Great Britain, accent is substantially more important in its effect on people's lives and success.

Pronunciation, or accent, is clearly an important element of dialect, but it is not one on which we will concentrate in this book. We will concern ourselves almost wholly with what many linguists and teachers of writing refer to as the "written standard." This will eliminate one area of difficulty and simplify our efforts.

2. The Point of Mastering a Standard Dialect

If no dialect is intrinsically superior to any other, then it is perfectly reasonable to ask why so much time and energy should be expended on teaching and learning the standard dialect. In fact, we suspect that many students have already heaved large and cynical sighs while saying to themselves (and to anyone else

who will listen), "Sure, they *say* that all dialects are equally valid, but that's just politically correct crap. They really believe that the standard is best, or they wouldn't make us learn it."

We can hardly blame students who have that opinion. It is based on years of experience with teachers at all levels who genuinely **do** believe that the standard is superior: more beautiful, more logical, and better able to express complex thoughts than any other dialect. In trying to make their students proficient in the standard, these teachers never explain what its **practical** value may be. Instead, they assume a kind of punitive moral and intellectual attitude, and browbeat their students with what is "correct"—all for the students' own, mysterious good.

Well, there *are* some practical reasons to become proficient in the standard written dialect. We discuss here the five that seem most important to us, but you may think of some others. If you do, we would be happy to hear from you. Contact Nancy McKee by e-mail at <mckee@mail.wsu.edu> or George Kennedy at <gkennedy@mail.wsu.edu>.

- First, standard written English has wide currency throughout the world. Though there are some minor differences between the British (and British influenced) standard and the American standard, they are generally recognized and are not distracting. But allowing nonstandard variation in formal writing *would* be distracting.
- Second, the use of nonstandard dialects in formal written situations may be described as something like intellectual bad manners. Suppose the New York Yankees played baseball in sleeveless sweatshirts and cutoff blue jeans. Would that harm their hitting and fielding abilities? Probably not, but the team's appearance would be distracting, and they would look incompetent. It would also look as though they did not care about their fans. One could make the same argument about the appearance of a formal written document couched in a nonstandard dialect. These conventions of the standard dialect are, of course, arbitrary, as are the conventions of all dialects. But they are almost universally recognized by English speakers, and that recognition gives them (and those who use them) power.

- Third, because of its functions, a formal written standard is often more precise and efficient than nonstandard dialects. This is not much of an issue during the kinds of casual conversations that most of us have most of the time. If we fail to make our point, someone will usually ask for an explanation, or show during the course of the conversation that a misunderstanding has arisen. But in writing these kinds of misunderstandings and ambiguities are much more difficult to clear up, so avoiding them in the first place is a more practical way to go.

  Let us look at an example of the way in which a standard dialect can offer economical precision and clarity. It comes from a radio news broadcast, and it makes use of the present subjunctive. The subjunctive, as students of such languages as French, Spanish, or German know, is a quality of verbs that is usually used to convey doubt, desire, or purpose (well, that is what our teachers told us fifty years ago). In English the subjunctive is not well understood by most speakers, though we can recognize it in such expressions as "if I were a Martian." That is an example of the past (or imperfect) subjunctive, used to indicate a contrary-to-fact condition. The present subjunctive is much rarer in English, and it is also hard to spot. That is because it looks exactly like the "regular" present (the present indicative) *except* in the third person singular (the "he," "she," or "it" form),where it has no "s" on the end.

  Here is the example: "Ashcroft insisted that the regulation *remain* on the books." If the speaker had said "Ashcroft insisted that the regulation *remains* on the books," he would have meant something completely different. Sentence #1 means that Ashcroft *wanted* the regulation to remain. Sentence #2 means that Ashcroft is certain that the regulation actually *does* remain. Explaining this has required far more time and energy than was required by the initial and thrifty sentence in standard English, using the present subjunctive.

- Fourth, as we have all noticed, the world is not a perfect place. People are frequently judged on foolish and superficial grounds, and these judgements often have profound effects.

We have already discussed the widespread but mistaken belief that the standard dialect is a sign of its user's intellectual worth. We also know that foolish snobs frequently discount a person's worth based on his or her mastery of the standard dialect. In addition, there are many professional situations in which use of the standard is universally held to be essential. No matter what linguists say about linguistic relativity, these cultural realities have tremendous power. So it makes sense to master the standard dialect and save our anger and energy for more productive struggles. If the standard dialect is not the one with which you grew up and feel comfortable, there is no reason that you should use it when you are speaking with friends and family. Think of it merely as a means to an end, and use it when it is advantageous to do so.

- Fifth, written language changes more slowly than spoken language. One of the benefits of mastering a formal written variety of standard English is that it allows us easier access to classic works of literature and scholarship. In the twenty-first century we do not write like Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, or Charles Darwin, let alone like John Milton or Francis Bacon; but even less do we speak as they wrote. These authors had something valuable to convey, and as more and more time separates us from them, it becomes more and more difficult for contemporary readers to gain access to their messages. By becoming fluent writers of a modern standard, however, we allow ourselves a better chance to decipher an earlier form of the same dialect.

3. The Rules of a Standard

All languages and dialects have rules, whether their speakers and writers are aware of them or not. As linguists put it, all languages and dialects are "rule governed." But what this means is that all adult native speakers of any language or dialect have an intuitive comprehensive grasp of how to use it. They may misspeak occasionally, as we all do, when they get excited, or their minds wander, or they are tired or drunk. But otherwise they do not make errors in their native language or dialect. They do not, for example, say things like "Gopher that my bulbs of tulip eating is."

No dialect of English permits that kind of word order. What about the native speaker of English who says "Ain't none of them gophers going to eat my tulip bulbs." Has that speaker not made several errors? (Our computer certainly thinks so, and its "grammar check" has underlined the whole sentence in green.) A linguist would answer the question about errors in the second gopher sentence by saying that the speaker has followed the rules of his/her own nonstandard dialect (probably African American) perfectly. African American English is a rule governed dialect just like any other, and words cannot just be thrown together to suit the whim of the speaker any more than they can be for any other dialect in any other situation.

There is, of course, another way of talking about rules for using language. These are the kinds of rules that we have all heard from teachers since we were five or six: your subject and verb have to agree; do not use double negatives; infinitives should not be split; and sentences must not end in prepositions. These are the kinds of prescriptive rules that often drive students crazy. Partly this is because they often know so little about the structure of language that the prescriptive rules mean very little to them. And partly students go nuts because the rules for a formal written standard vary so much from the rules for the spoken standard used by most people.

We have already gone through a defense of the standard dialect, itself, but it is probably worth talking about the flexibility of rules for writing and who makes them. The great (German born) American linguist, Edward Sapir, said "grammars leak." What he meant was that no rule works all the time, and no system, linguistic or other, is wholly predictable. Language changes through time, and writers, scholars, teachers and language nerds (the linguistic equivalent of computer nerds) sometimes disagree. One of the authors of this book (McKee) tends to be a little more conservative in her approach to language use than the other (Kennedy). That is, she is inclined to adhere to an older set of conventions than Kennedy does. But when a topic comes up about which there is frequent disagreement, either on the part of the authors or of other writers and scholars, we will try to let you know. What we want to give you is not the idea that rules for