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ABSTRACT

With increasing enrollments in journalism, many journalism instructors contend that problems of spelling, grammar, usage, and punctuation are particularly acute. Some of the questions raised at recent gatherings include: Are formal rules of English grammar dying? Is proper punctuation mere pedantry? What can journalism schools do about grammar and spelling problems? This paper discusses these and related questions, not to solve the problems or resolve the issues, but to explore the nature of the problem facing journalism education. The discussion explores the importance of language in writing, looks at the opinions of prominent journalism educators, and mentions remedies that are currently in use at a number of universities. (RB)

SPELLING AND GRAMMAR

THEIR IMPORTANCE TO JOURNALISM: WHAT JOURNALISM SCHOOLS ARE DOING

By

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(Submitted to the Newspaper Division to be considered for presentation at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism, August 16-19, 1975, Ottawa, Canada. The authors are assistant professors of journalism, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.)

Fifteen years ago parents and elementary school teachers worried because Little Johnny and Little Jane couldn't read well. Now Little Johnny and Little Jane have gone off to college, and something akin to full-scale alarm is developing over their deficiency in using the English language.

More and more Johnnys and Janes have chosen journalism as a major. The national journalism school enrollment in four-year colleges rose from 15,820 in 1964 to 55,078 in 1974, an increase of 248.1%.[1] The 1974 increase over the previous year was 13.8%. That more than triples the 4% average enrollment increase reported by the nation's colleges and universities in 1974 for all academic disciplines.[2]

With this huge rise in the number of journalism students, including Johnny and Jane, many journalism educators contend that problems of spelling, grammar, usage and punctuation are particularly acute. Or as NBC news correspondent Edwin Newman puts it, "Language is in decline."[3]

Are formal rules of English grammar dying? Is proper punctuation mere pedantry? In a society that has been said to be growing more and more visual, is correct spelling all that important? What do prominent journalism professors across the nation say about these questions and about their students? If grammar and spelling are acute problems, what are journalism schools doing about them?

This paper attempts to discuss these and other questions. The purpose is not to solve the problems or resolve the issues but to shed light on the existing situation.

How Important Is a Good Command of the Language in Writing?

Discussing language niceties seems particularly appropriate today, when "ya know" appears to be the most-used expression in conversation across the land, and when "really" seems to crop up at least twice in every spoken sentence. But enough of that. For even though spoken and written language are inextricably intertwined, the subject here is writing.

A good number of English teachers and many more students contend that rules of grammar and spelling often are no more than pedantry. Advocates of this it's-not-all-that-important school argue:

> The important thing is effective and meaningful communication between people. It doesn't matter whether "occurred" has one "r" or two. The important thing is whether the word--and by extension the sentence and the whole message--is understood, and whether the information in the message is shared by sender and receiver.

True enough, for meaningful communication and information-sharing are the basic goals. But a good command of written English, and also spelling, is basic to those goals. As Will Strunk observed in The Elements of Style:

> The spelling of English words is not fixed and invariable, nor does it depend on any other authority than general agreement. . . . At any given moment. . . a relatively small number of words may be spelled more than one way. Gradually, as a rule, one of these forms comes to be generally preferred, and the less customary form comes to look obsolete and is discarded. From time to time new forms, mostly simplifications, are introduced by innovators, and either win their place or die of neglect.
>
> The practical objection to unaccepted and oversimplified spellings is the disfavor with which they are received by the reader. They distract his attention and exhaust his patience. He reads the form though automatically, without thought of its needless complexity; he reads the abbreviation tho and mentally supplies the missing letters, at the cost of a fraction of his attention. The writer has defeated his own purpose.[4]

In defeating his own purpose, the writer thwarted the basic goals of meaningful communication and information-sharing. Although it is rarely expressed in such terms by professional journalists or teachers of basic writing courses, emphasis on technical proficiency in spelling, grammar, punctuation and usage is based on what Wilbur Schramm has called the shared experience of communicators and receivers, and on what B.F. Skinner has referred to as the verbal community.[5]

Presumably in effective communication, a shared experience between message sender and receiver depends on their having a similar frame of reference. Knowledge of spelling and grammar conventions constitutes part of that frame of reference. Without such knowledge, message sender and receiver have, so to speak, a poor connection, and at least some meaning is lost. In conversation, the speaker, who usually becomes the listener at some point, and the listener thus fail to strike a mutually responsive chord.[6]

In Skinner's operant conditioning terminology, a people's language is the "reinforcing practices of verbal communities":

> When we say that also means in addition to. . . we are not referring to the verbal behavior of any one speaker of English. . . but to the conditions under which a response is characteristically reinforced (understood) by a (specific) verbal community.[7]

Without some prior agreement on word definitions and other language conventions, understanding and communication cannot occur. The more agreement, the more complete the communication. And the less likely the misunderstanding.

If it is true that more graduates are leaving the college campus with less knowledge of the English language--and this point is debatable--what are the implications for higher education?

What does a deterioration in language usage portend for the culture? After all, language is the fundamental of education. The cultural tradition,

including all the arts and sciences, cannot be perpetuated or replaced intelligently without standards for speaking and writing, especially the latter in the minds of many print-biased scholars.

Closer to home, what are the responsibilities of journalism educators, who prepare and in a sense certify the bulk of the young people who take jobs as writers and editors each year to inform the public? In the mass communications lexicon, the humanist's worry translates primarily into a dismal view of the future audiences for the mass media. Will audiences have strong-enough motivation and sufficient ability to extract from mass and specialized media the information and ideas necessary for making sound decisions? And over the long run, will audiences gain information and ideas necessary for a cultural evolution that secures rather than tramples civil liberties?

These questions, perhaps somewhat exaggerated or even alarmist, are not out of the realm of possibility if one feels there is a serious decay in use of the language. And numerous newspaper editors and publishers have warned of such a decay recently. Many cite journalism schools as the culprit.

Criticism and Praise of Journalism Schools

Some newspaper editors and publishers lay the blame for their reporters' poor writing skills squarely at the journalism school door. Ronald H. Einstoss, publisher of the Visalia (Calif.) Times-Delta, told journalism educators at a recent Western Newspaper Foundation meeting in Reno, Nev., that they weren't "doing the job of providing us with the people who have the tools that we expect of beginners." Too many journalism school graduates, Einstoss said, lack a working knowledge of the English language. Specifically, "half the aspirants who come into my office think a board of supervisors is plural. . . . Their

spelling is atrocious." He said he would not hire a reporter who could not spell, regardless of how many prizes the reporter won in college.

Einstoss's remarks were reported in Editor & Publisher on Nov. 2, 1974. In the Nov. 16 issue, nine letters to the editor responded.

Prof. John DeMott of Northern Illinois University proposed tighter accreditation standards for journalism schools. Prof. M.L. Stein of California State University at Long Beach said the charges were not new and that most journalism educators would not dispute them. But Stein challenged the journalists to join in attacking the root of the problem: poor preparation in elementary and secondary schools.

Some editors echoed Einstoss's criticisms. John F. Glenn, managing editor of the Gillette (Wyo.) News-Record, said two journalism school graduates he had hired recently were not prepared to tackle basic reporting. Benton R. Patterson, executive editor of Guideposts, said it was about time "journalism deans heard the awful truth about their graduates, their schools, their faculty and themselves."

The comments were not all critical. Several editors supported journalism education, and John C. Quinn, vice president for news in the Gannett organization, called the Einstoss charges a "bum rap." Malcolm W. Applegate, editor-publisher of the Ithaca (N.Y.)Journal, said he had no trouble finding a plentiful supply of talent coming through journalism schools.

A letter from Prof. F. Thomas Gaumer of Ohio State University appeared in Editor & Publisher on Nov. 23. Newspaper executives "should be thankful that they have schools and departments of journalism between them and the high schools, and give us credit for accomplishing what we do with the educationally stunted students," Gaumer wrote. "Professional journalists also should be

glad thay do ..ot have to rely upon the average 'liberal arts' graduates for their news staffs, because the arts college studenta may be even worse than their journalism counterparts when it comes to apelling, grammar and sentence atructure."

Editor & Publisher considered the subject important enough to give additional coversge on Dec. 21 to remarks by Prof. Donald E. Wells, chairman of the Department of Communications at Washington State. Wella said journalism graduates are not good enough: "I don't think they know enough, and I think our newspapers show it."

He blamed a number of aources: journalism education, newspapers, the student's home environment and the educational system. "The system and the society are giving us an increasing number of young people who don't read, who are visually rather than print oriented, who have no sense of the niceties of language and who don't understand why they need it. They don't analyze and can't ask qucations, they can't count and often seem not to have any sense of numbers at all, and they refuse to accept the idea that they bear any responsibility for their own learning."

Journalism professors have heard it all before. Charges of inadequacy have been leveled at journalism schools almoat aince they began. But journalism profesaors should not take umbrage. For such criticism, not ao incidentally, is tha way things should be. Professional journalists and journaliam schools, after all, have somewhat different roles to play and different perspectivea on the mass media and the educational process.

They ara different in thia aenae. Professional journalista, who are in the day-to-day world of media operation, must criticize journalism education in order to give that educational institution the benefit of their practical

experience and wisdom. Conversely, one role of journalism schools is to criticize the media constructively in the hope that such criticism will lead to increased professionalism and higher performance. Thus a degree of mutual antagonism between practitioner and educator is only natural. And in the long run, it is good, for the constructive criticism should further the broad goals shared by practitioner and educator: improved mass media, greater sharing of information and more meaningful communication.

And one goal now definitely shared by practitioner and educator is improving spelling and grammar. How bad is the situation?

What Do Prominent Journalism Educators Say About Students' Spelling and Grammar?

Twelve prominent journalism educators at rather large universities in different parts of the country were interviewed by telephone to obtain opinions of their current students' writing ability. In no sense a scientific sampling, the interviews were conducted merely to obtain examples of students' ability and to uncover any particular problems that might exist. All the interviews were made in March 1975.

The educators were unanimous in saying spelling and grammar are serious problems.

Mary Gardner, an associate professor of journalism at Michigan State University who has taught reporting and editing at the university level for more than 15 years, says spelling and grammar are very great problems--a horror: "We're getting more and more illiterate journalists. There's no doubt that the problem is worse now than it used to be. One reason is that students don't read enough, very little in fact. You learn a lot about spelling and grammar by reading a lot. It's a perceptual pattern."

Neale Copple, director of the University of Nebraska School of Journalism, agrees that the problem is serious. He places considerable blame on precollege schooling: "Our students simply have inadequate preparation in high school. We shouldn't even call it grammar school any more. Nowhere in the public schools is there any pressure on the students to learn spelling, grammar, word sense or feel for the language." But Copple thinks the problem is not a lack of reading. "Kids coming to us today are well backgrounded in literature. Many kids are reading books in junior high and high school that I didn't read until college."

At least one educator interviewed thinks the problem is no worse today than in the past. John J. Clarke, associate professor of journalism at Ohio State University, says, "Honestly, it's no worse than it ever was. I've been teaching since 1950, and the students couldn't spell then, either. It's bad now, and more attention is being given to it."

Clarke pointed an accusing finger at college English departments. "The English departments are suddenly jumping on the bandwagon and saying what terrible writers students are. They should have been doing that all along. But now they're really in trouble, and they want the whole university to share their blame. They're trying to get the chemistry department, the botany department and all the rest to stress writing. The English departments should cut down on the Chaucer, which they don't want to do, and teach more writing fundamentals. . . . What do those teaching assistants in the English department do? They certainly are not teaching basic grammar. They're teaching social revolution, which they know even less about than grammar."

Fred Fadler, assistant professor of journalism at Florida Technological University and author of the widely used textbook, Reporting for the Print

Media, says spelling and grammar have been terrible problems in his classes: "Every quarter in a class of 20 students, I get at least two or three who have to drop out or fail because of their deficiencies. It's spelling, simple grammar, sentence construction. Sometimes students turn in stories with four or five spelling errors on a page."

If these problems are so severe, what are journalism schools doing about them?

What Specific Remedies are Journalism Schools Applying?

Possible remedies include a variety of tests, renewed emphasis on spelling and grammar in existing courses, remedial courses for deficient students, new courses to emphasize writing skills before reporting courses are taken and cooperative efforts with English departments.

The West Virginia University School of Journalism recently began using a test to screen students deficient in spelling and grammar before they enter the journalism school. Dean Guy H. Stewart reports that approximately 19% of the students have failed it. "Enrollment in our basic newswriting course dropped off about 15% to 18% this semester," he says, "and that has to be in part because of the test."

The exam, developed by West Virginia journalism faculty members, emphasizes subject-verb agreement, punctuation, spelling and word definitions. "Some students are not too happy with the idea of a test," Stewart says, "but they can take it as many times as they wish. It's not a permanent barrier to getting into journalism if they work and pass the exam. We want students to have a minimum level of proficiency before they get into journalism. We're screening out only the weakest ones."

All prejournalism majors at the University of Minnesota must pass the standardized Minnesota English test before they are admitted to the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Prof. Walter Brovald says nearly half the students who take the test fail. "I wish someone along the line would do a better job of teaching students before they get to the university," Brovald says. "It seems to me that professional schools, with their limited resources, have more important things to do than teach remedial grammar and spelling."

Students who wish to enter the School of Journalism at the University of Wisconsin at Madison must first pass the school's journalism usage test. A graduation requirement until a year ago, the exam was adapted from a standardized test. Prof. Jim Hoyt says at least 25% of the students fail the first time they take it. Those who fail must enroll in an English writing lab outside the School of Journalism. They must pass this remedial course, which meets two hour a week for six weeks, before they may retake the test. And the passing score is higher for a student who takes it the second time.

Wisconsin has received a grant to develop a computerized remedial course primarily for minority students. It is available to all students, however, and can be taken at a terminal of the journalism school's computer.

Minority students complicate the situation at several schools. Minority students usually have more deficiencies in using the language than white students do. It is probably because of their poor educational backgrounds, Prof. Fedler says, "but because we want proper spelling and grammar, black students are sometimes discouraged about continuing in journalism."

One leading journalism school has had so many requests from minority students to waive its spelling-grammar requirement that the faculty has discussed dropping the requirement for all students.

Some schools, however, report that minority students recognize the importance of spelling and grammar requirements and appreciate attempts to diagnose the problems. At the University of Washington School of Communications, minority students have formed an organization called Third World People in Communications. One major activity is tutoring minority students in spelling and grammar.

The University of Washington communications school has not experienced a great deal of success with another remedy: referring students to outside remedial courses. Prof. Ken Jackson says most exercises in the remedial courses bear little resemblance to journalism.

The Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern is attempting to place renewed emphasis on spelling and grammar in regular writing courses. Prof. Jack Sissors says the school is considering an additional step--establishing a journalism course in language fundamentals. "This would show our concern," he says, "and would let the students know how important we think the problem is."

Spelling and grammar are integral parts of beginning writing courses in journalism, advertising and radio-TV at the University of Kansas, Prof. Del Brinkman reports. Students are tested on spelling and grammar just as they are tested on style. They must earn at least a C before they may continue in journalism. Transfer students who wish to waive that course requirement must pass an exam which includes spelling and grammar as well as style and reporting techniques.

The Indiana University School of Journalism also places considerable emphasis on spelling and grammar in its editorial practices course, a combination of advanced reporting and editing. Prof. David Weaver says the test is not a requirement for passing the course, but the test score is an important part of the student's course grade. The school has considered adding a new

course between the beginning reporting and the editorial practices course. A spelling-grammar test might be required there, and students who could not pass it would not be allowed to continue.

Some schools have instituted new beginning courses that emphasize writing rather than reporting. One such effort was the journalistic writing course begun at the University of Oregon in 1973. Students there use modified programmed instruction to review spelling, grammar and punctuation; the rest of the course emphasizes journalistic techniques.

Prof. Clarke says Ohio State now is using its basic reporting course as a screening device. "If they can't cut it there (spelling, grammar, expression), we'll flunk them out. The journalism school must avoid getting into a remedial education trap because it will become our job, since nobody else wants to do it."

The University of South Carolina School of Journalism has sought help from the English department. Prof. Henry Price says the English department has been asked to provide special sections for journalism students to emphasize writing fundamentals.

In addition to cracking down in its regular courses, Nebraska's journalism school is working with the English department to set up courses in basic composition which journalism students must take. "These will be hard composition courses," Prof. Copple says, "taught by instructors who know what we're after."

Copple believes, however, that journalism schools cannot avoid remedial education. "We're not going to retreat from the problem," he says, "It's not that big a job. We've been saying that we can't teach basic English and do all the other things a journalism school is supposed to do. But dammit, we may have to."

The University of North Carolina Experience

At the University of North Carolina School of Journalism, students taking their first journalism course (newswriting) must score at least 70% on a spelling-grammar-punctuation test devised by a committee of faculty members and students. At least two weeks before the exam is given, students receive a list of more than 700 commonly misspelled or misused words to study. All the spelling items on the exam are taken from the list. Students are also told to study such standard grammar references as E.L. Callihan's Grammar for Journalists and William Strunk's and E.B. White's The Elements of Style. Still, approximately half the students in the course fail the test on their first attempt. In the 1974 academic year, for example, 53% of the students passed on their first try. After the exam was given again, 69% had passed; after the third time, 80% had passed.

Both portions of the exam--spelling, and grammar-punctuation--give students approximately the same difficulty. Here are the 30 words most-often misspelled in decreasing order of difficulty.

supersede
occurrence
inoculate
principal, principle
judgment
commitment
accidentally
benefited
sparae
respondent
exhilarate
likable
liaison
canceled
weird
harass
kidnaped (using the AP Stylebook preference)
existence
sizable

Caribbean
preempt (The word is listed with no hyphen on the list of words to study.)
fiary
correspondent
naive
silhouette
credibility
desirable
forty
personnel
preceding

Several of the words (occurrence, commitment, principal and principle, weird, harass and others) have been emphasized as difficult by journalism professors for many years; such words usually appear on spelling lists in stylebooks and textbooks.

The following 10 grammar and punctuation concepts cause students the most difficulty. They are listed in decreasing order of difficulty:

1. Hyphens. Hyphens are perhaps the most confusing punctuation marks of all. Using the hyphen when two or more words come together to form one adjective causes the most errors: "He jumped over the four-foot fence."

2. Using "who" and "whom."

3. Using the verbs "lie" and "lay."

4. Using "who" and "that."

5. Gerunds and the possessive form: "The idea of his going to Chicago was discussed."

6. "Neither" and "nor" regarding subject-verb agreement: "Neither Perry nor Wallace was there" and "Neither the teacher nor the students were there."

7. Position of the word "only."

8. Conjugation of the verb "to swim."

9. Commas and titles. A large number of students tend to omit the comma at the end of the appositive, as in "John B. Adams, dean of the School of Journalism, presided."

10. "Hanged" and "hung."

Students have two opportunities each semester to take the test. If they do not pass on their second attempt, they receive a grade of incomplete in the course and have a year to retake the exam until they pass it. If they still do not pass, they receive no higher than a D as the course grade and are effectively screened from continuing in the journalism program.

The North Carolina exam was first given in fall 1973 but was not made a course requirement until fall 1974. During that period, it was refined and different versions were prepared. Originally developed because journalism professors realized the need for an exam, and because newspaper editors complained of students' deficiencies, the exam has now received considerable publicity.

Vermont C. Royster, now a Kenan professor of journalism and public affairs at North Carolina, mentioned it in his Wall Street Journal column. James Kilpatrick discussed it in his nationally syndicated column, and NBC-TV broadcast a feature on it in a newscast. Because of the publicity, complimentary letters from all parts of the country have come in. Numerous high school and college teachers have requested copies of the exam and have used it, and some newspaper editors have even requested the exam to give to their staff members.

Summing Up

Some may argue that this sudden attention to spelling and grammar is the latest example of converting mole hills into mountains. And it is possible to overemphasize any aspect of communication. In the past, we have sometimes narrowly conceived of journalism education as training in reporting and editing at the expense of a sound theoretical basis for understanding the process of communication. More recently we have begun to see the importance for our students of a knowledge of general communication theories and concepts, while frequently failing to link them to problems of reporting and editing, or even to effective use of the media by the consumer.

In recent years in teaching reporting or news writing, we have made mistakes, often being too eager to make courses "relevant" by rushing students out en masse to "do a story" on the riot, the local economy, dormitory living conditions or whatever, without first giving them adequate instruction in story organization, scene description, story telling or even interviewing technique.

As Herbert Bayard Swope once said, good journalism consists of "good getting (observation) and good writing."[8] In the technical part of good writing, many educators and journalists perceive a huge gap. In spelling-grammar-punctuation, our students are not measuring up to our expectations.

What should journalism schools do? That question will have to be answered by each school in terms of its own mission and responsibilities. The problem is not the same everywhere, and solutions will not be the same. Some dimensions and posaible solutions have been examined in this paper.

Obviously at North Carolina we think the problem is serious enough to warrant further study and remedy. For as so many educators have told us, language is the fundamental of education. As long as the possessive "its" is used interchangeably with the contraction "it's," as long as "media" is used as both singular and plural, as long as the plural possessive of "men," "women" and "children" is spelled with an "s" and then an apostrophe, and as long as the word "each" is followed by "their" by a significant number of students--not to mention writers for the New York Times--we will have a problem. A problem that more and more journalism schools are responding to.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Peterson, Paul V., "J-enrollments keep climbing: 55,000 mark surpassed," Journalism Educator, 29:3 (January 1975).

[2]Ibid.

[3]Newman, Edwin, Strictly Speaking (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), p. 1.

[4]Strunk, William Jr., and E.B. White, The Elements of Style, second ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972) p. 67.

[5]See Wilbur Schramm, "The Nature of Communication Between Humans," in Schramm and Donald F. Roberts, eds., The Process and Effects of Mass Communication (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 27-32; and B.F. Skinner, Varbal Behavior (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), p. 461.

[6]For an excellent explanation of the importance of shared environments to oral communication see Tony Schwartz, The Responsive Chord (Garden City, N.J., 1972), pp. 1-41.

[7]Skinner, Ibid.

[8]Swope, Herbert Bayard, in the preface to A Treasury of Great Reporting, edited by Louis L. Snyder and Richard B. Morris (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962) p. xxi-xxii.