Research on Writing Conventions

U R What U Write

Who knew that a hunk of metal hurled into space would have created such a stir within the realm of grammar? The launch of Sputnik in 1957 was the seed that eventually sprouted into the Internet (Zakon, 2005). Its blossoms have been the growing number of writing opportunities—e-mail, instant messaging, and blogs—that have been brilliant but a bit prickly. The Internet has changed the way we communicate with each other; it has set into motion a new phase of evolution for our language. A blend of speech and writing, this new hybrid has escaped the standard conventions of English. Called "Netspeak," it has flaunted creativity with language and taken many shortcuts (Boyd, 2005). The problem has remained in its popularity, and everywhere now we have seen the fruits of grammatical ignorance and indifference (Truss, 2003).

Afraid that students would not write if forced to follow the rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, proponents of the writing process movement in the 1970s and 1980s decided to diminish the standing of standard conventions and focus instead on what students wanted to say (Smith, 2000). They emphasized editing and revision only at the end of the process and conveyed the message that, by simply taking the time to improve upon drafts, anyone could compose a lucid written product (Sams, 2003). In their favor, though, they embarked on a quest for better ways to make writing work for students. They refined procedures, incorporated other ideas, and tried new methods (Schweiker-Marra, Broglie, & Plumer, 1997). But direct grammar instruction had to go. They determined that students just needed practice in writing, that one's innate knowledge of grammar would shine through eventually (Bloodgood, 2002).

However, what they failed to realize was that students *were* practicing. They were writing with their friends daily, creating and concretizing a new form of communication (Blase, 2000; Boyd, 2005). Now, without the necessary background knowledge of their language, students have been expected to switch gears between social writing and academic writing and know when and how to apply the conventions, let alone apply them to both writing situations (Hagemann, 2003).

It is a sad fact that many contemporary students do not write as articulately or as eloquently as students a generation ago (Stone, 1991). Since 1874, universities have complained about the dismal display of first-year writers (Gammill, 2004). According to the 1999 *Nation's Report Card on Writing* issued by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, most students scored at the basic level of writing achievement. Approximately one-quarter of those tested reached the proficient level, while a measly 1% of students performed at the level labeled advanced (Boss, 2002).

In 2003 the results of an ACT National Curriculum Survey revealed that half of college freshmen had to take at least one remedial course in college, and of those students more than 4 in 10 took a remedial writing course. What the survey said was that the importance of grammar was a mottled mess. Among six general writing skills that also included sentence structure, writing strategy, organization, punctuation, and style, grammar and usage ranked highest for college instructors and lowest for high school teachers, with only 69% of those high school teachers covering it in class (ACT Newsroom, 2003). This seems odd since state standards have agreed to foster students' knowledge of and ease in using standard written English, which is the language of wider communication (ACT Educational Services, 2003).

To relate writing on the Internet to the writing process found still so often in classrooms, the inherent issues float quickly to the surface. First, e-mail is not just text; it is a hybrid of text and conversation. In that context, it becomes equated with the notes, drafts, and false starts of the prewriting stage—only published (Marcus, 1995). Second, e-mail, blogs, and especially IM do not lend themselves to multiple drafts. The revising and editing stages are not typically found on the Internet (Mahoney, 2002). Sometimes, the first shot is the only shot one gets.

In 2001 a Pew Internet and American Life Project poll found that approximately 17 million people ages 12 through 17 used the Internet. That number equaled 73% of U.S. teenagers in that age group. Of the top five online activities for teens, e-mail and instant messaging (IM) were two (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001). In the beginning of 2002, another national survey indicated that the numbers had already grown and confirmed that the Internet had become the primary communication tool for teens. Instead of replacing the telephone, however, teens simply wanted cell phones with e-mail and/or IM capabilities (Pastore, 2002). Of course, most teens have accessed the Internet from home. According to research from Nielsen-Netratings, in July 2002, 1 out of 5 U.S. kids and teens between the ages of 2 and 17 logged online from home, totaling 20 million users. Currently, about 67% of the entire U.S. population has used the Internet, which has marked a growth of usage between 2000 and 2005 of 110% (North America Internet Usage and Population).

In 2001, however, a survey carried out for MSN found that people under the age of 25 nevertheless displayed no manners in their e-mails. With a growing reliance on this online medium, few people seemed to understand the importance of how they say what

they say. Two-thirds of the respondents did not fret over such trivialities as punctuation, grammar, or style even though 56% of those questioned became maddened by over-familiarity, lack of a proper greeting, and spelling and grammatical errors (Ward, 2001).

Netspeak notwithstanding, young people need to learn how to write in Standard English. It may be as simple as learning the concept of dressing to fit the occasion (Dean, 2000), but if students want even a chance to succeed in today's society, they must learn either to easily switch between "home talk," "school talk," and "workplace talk" (Hagemann, 2003) or to apply the conventions in some degree to all situations. An educated person should be able to communicate successfully—both in speaking and in writing—in all arenas (Kemmery & Cook, 2002).

Should we fight for the right to write well? Lynne Truss (2003), convinced we should and should start now, acknowledged that we have a language full of ambiguities and, as far as punctuation goes, a system of dots and squiggles that has been able to create absolute clarity if used correctly. She has contended against the onslaught of irregular punctuation in Netspeak (smileys and emoticons), fearful that writers will forget the real uses of semi-colons, dashes, and parentheses (besides all the other punctuation marks). Sophisticated, mature writers see content, form, and conventions as inseparable (Thomas, 2000), but practice is the key. Graves (1994) asserted that the only way for writing to become a practical medium for thinking and self-expression was to exercise it at least four days a week (citied in Bloodgood, 2002), which is less time than what students today are spending.

The purpose of this quantitative study is to determine how secondary students use conventions in classroom composition assignments compared to the Internet writing

outlets of e-mail, instant messaging, and blogs. Considering that this field of research is so new and will most likely follow in the fast-paced footsteps of the Internet itself, this study has arrived at the perfect time. The question is: What do we do when two worlds collide? Do we assume that they will blend together beautifully, or do we suppose that they will coexist, side by side and separate? Writing is currently in a state of evolution; the rules have not yet been rooted. With the fertile soils of the Internet widening the landscape, now is the time to plant the seeds of good writing, and that means not leaving grammar and the other conventions out of the watering pot.

METHODOLOGY

This study took place at two public Midwestern high schools. The first had approximately 2,100 students, where a quarter of the students received free or reduced meals. The most recent demographic information had covered the academic years 2000 through 2004, during which time the school had a mean average percent correct of 76.1 in district English assessments. In district high school writing, the mean cumulative percentage of students in this school who had met or exceeded proficiency totaled 14.5 Grade 9, 31.0 Grade 10, 38.3 Grade 11, and 48.2 Grade 12. The numbers in this category, for the most part, steadily climbed over the four academic years, and it was evident that they also increased as the students progressed through the grades.

In AP Exams, student participation had grown in the English-Language/ Composition category; however, the percentage of those who actually passed the test dropped over the four academic years with a mean of only 59.3%. In English-Literature/Composition, the number of students taking the exam stayed low at a mean of 26.3, but the percentage passing rose from 59% to 81%. On national assessments, this

school's scores in English/Language were lower than any other category. However, its students faired barely better when compared to the state or nation on the ACT and the SAT 10.

The second school had 149 students, grades 7 through 12, and almost one-third of the student population was eligible for free or reduced meals. The most recent demographic information regarding test scores for this school covered the academic years 2002 through 2005, during which time the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standards of the Grade 10 reading test slipped from 95% to 88%. However, the state average in 2005 was only 82%. Moreover, the 8th graders had steadily improved on the reading test over the years with only a minor setback in 2004. In 2002, 91% passed the test; in 2003, 92%; in 2004, 84%; and in 2005, 93%. The state average in 2005 was 85%. In consideration of the Grade 10 writing exam, which was required to graduate from high school, 100% of the students passed in all years except 2003 when only 97% passed. But once again, the school beat the state's average of 91% in 2005.

Out of the population of all these students, two convenience samples were created to total 32 Grade 9 students. In this way, the samples targeted not only the most struggling student writers but also those who could be deeply involved in online communication. Interestingly, the sample was further broken down on its own into two evenly numbered categories—those who wrote online and those who didn't—making it even easier for the researcher to correlate classroom samples between the two groups.

The main instrument involved in this study was the 6+1 Trait™ Writing method rubric, which has enjoyed long-standing use over the past two decades in classrooms of all kinds around the world. Its link to instruction has become so valid and significant that

teachers of all levels utilize and refine the model year after year. The people at NWREL (2001) have continued to update the scoring criteria, develop new instructional materials, and attend to staffing development needs. The six basic traits of effective writing have been identified as ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Presentation has been added to that list to form the 6+1 Traits of Writing (Smith, 2003).

The rubric featured a scoring continuum from 1 to 5 with the descriptors Not Yet, Emerging, Developing, Effective, and Strong. At the top, there was a special category of Wow! to indicate a writer had exceeded expectations. Each trait had its own definition of what constituted a 1, 3, or 5.

All participants had to provide classroom samples, but they were instructed to provide Internet samples based on their participation. For example, if a student did not use the Internet for writing e-mails, IM conversations, or blogs, then he or she was to provide only samples of classroom writing. Since participants were expected to provide copies of each sample, basic instructions helped those inexperienced with printing their Internet writings. The printing instructions would also make it clear that removing or marking out names, e-mail addresses, web sites, etc. from their samples would be perfectly acceptable in order to maintain confidentiality. However, the researcher preferred that that be the extent of any censorship or editing. The point of the study was to gather actual, real, true-to-self writing samples.

Furthermore, instructions on what to include as their classroom and online writing samples helped them submit artifacts worthy of study. To ensure enough meat on the bones to gather reliable data from each sample, minimum word counts had to be met:

Each e-mail needed to have at least 35 words; each blog entry, at least 75 words; each instant message conversation, at least 35 words from the participant in any variety of English; and each classroom writing assignment, at least 35 words. Since each participant would have a unique way of using the Internet for writing (if at all), it was difficult to apply strict guidelines and requirements for sample submissions. Therefore, participants were allowed to gather Internet and classroom samples in an à la carte fashion with the end result totaling 3 artifacts with at least 150 words per category. For example, a participant could submit 3 e-mails of 50 words each along with 3 classroom assignments of 50 words each. Or she could submit a 40-word IM conversation, a 50-word e-mail, a 75-word blog, a 35-word classroom assignment, a 70-word classroom assignment, and a 45-word classroom assignment. Or she could simply provide 3 classroom compositions with a net count of at least 150 words.

Using the 6+1 Trait™ Writing method rubric, the researcher assessed the use of conventions in the participants' writing, both in class and online, and compared the writing in those two contexts. Although the other five plus one traits were interesting, consideration was given only to the area encompassing grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The researcher used the handy numbers (1-5) imbedded in the rubric to complete the statistical data on each participant.

FINDINGS

Due to the nature of the rubric, both groups had the same median: 3. However, that was truly the only similarity between them. Group A, which provided only classroom samples, had an overall mode of 4 and mean (*M*) of 3.40. Its standard deviation (*SD*) equaled 1.27.

Group B, which provided both classroom samples and Internet samples, had different averages. Its overall mode for classroom samples totaled 3; whereas, for Internet samples, it fell below the median and came in at only 2. Moreover, Group B's classroom samples ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.06$) yielded higher scores than its Internet samples ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.94$).

So, did the participants adhere to standard conventions when writing in either situation? Figure 1 has illustrated how often all participants made particular scores on their classroom samples, indicating their use of conventions at school.

Figure 1 *Frequency Polygon of All Classroom Sample Scores*
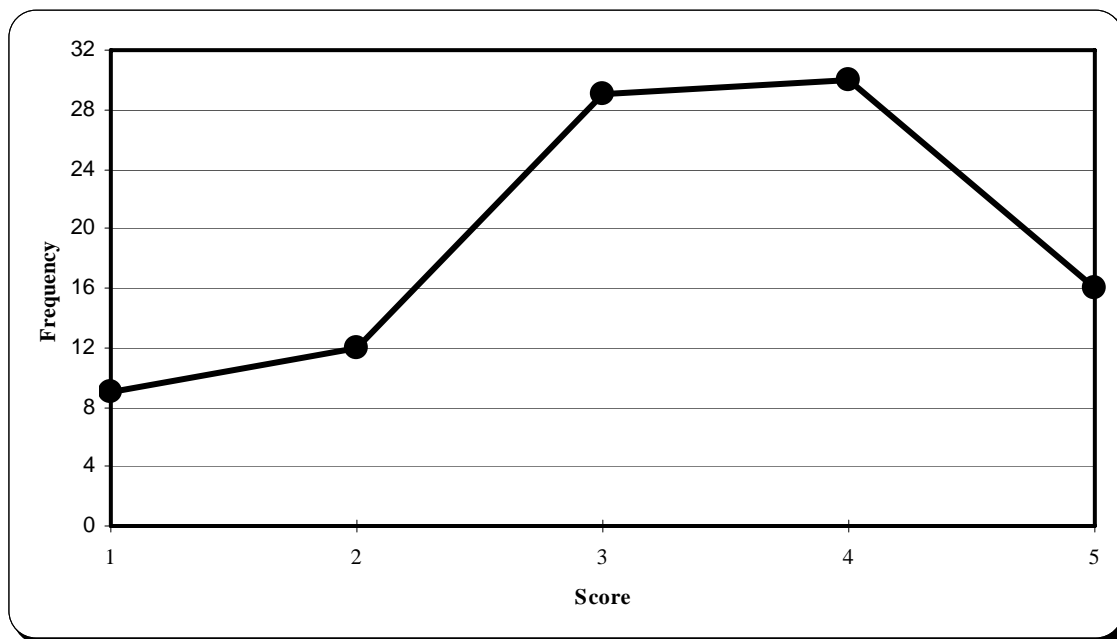
With 32 participants yielding three samples each, there were 96 total classroom submissions. Of those 96, only nine received the lowest possible score of 1, and only 12 received a score of 2, meaning that the vast majority of classroom composition samples did in fact show at least a "reasonable control over a limited range of standard writing conventions" (NWREL, 2001, p. 7). However, a mediocre score of 3 was exactly where

29 of the samples fell, indicating that 30% of the classroom samples were only half-way there. On a more positive note, 30 of the samples reached a score of 4, showing that their strengths outweighed their weaknesses, and 16 of them attained the highest score of 5, which was more than the number of 1-scores and 2-scores separately but not combined. Overall, 61% of the classroom composition samples produced a score of 3 or 4, and 17% bore a score of 5, which was not bad.

Commonalities of the classroom compositions included a lackadaisical use of capitals, run-on sentences, fragments, and a general sense of not knowing where to put inside punctuation. Spelling varied from participant to participant without many reoccurring themes, although several students did use *too* instead of *to*. What was more fascinating was found in the teachers' marks on the samples that had been graded.

The researcher's process in scoring each sample was to use copyeditor symbols and make any necessary changes to the composition in order to get it ready for publication. Some samples eluded correction due to the complete incoherency of the writing, but most were reasonably written in a way that the researcher could comprehend meaning or at least intent. Then, scoring was based on how many marks were made or how many corrections would be needed in order to consider the text print-worthy. When looking at samples that previously had been graded, the researcher used what marks were already there, but there were so many mistakes not caught or marked by the teachers. It could be a sense of apathy or, worse yet, an ignorance of standard conventions; nevertheless, the students were not receiving thorough feedback on their writing.

One must wonder then if it would be even possible for students to use good grammar, spelling, and punctuation online. Figure 2 has revealed that the answer is "No."

**Figure 2** *Internet Sample Mean Scores by Category*
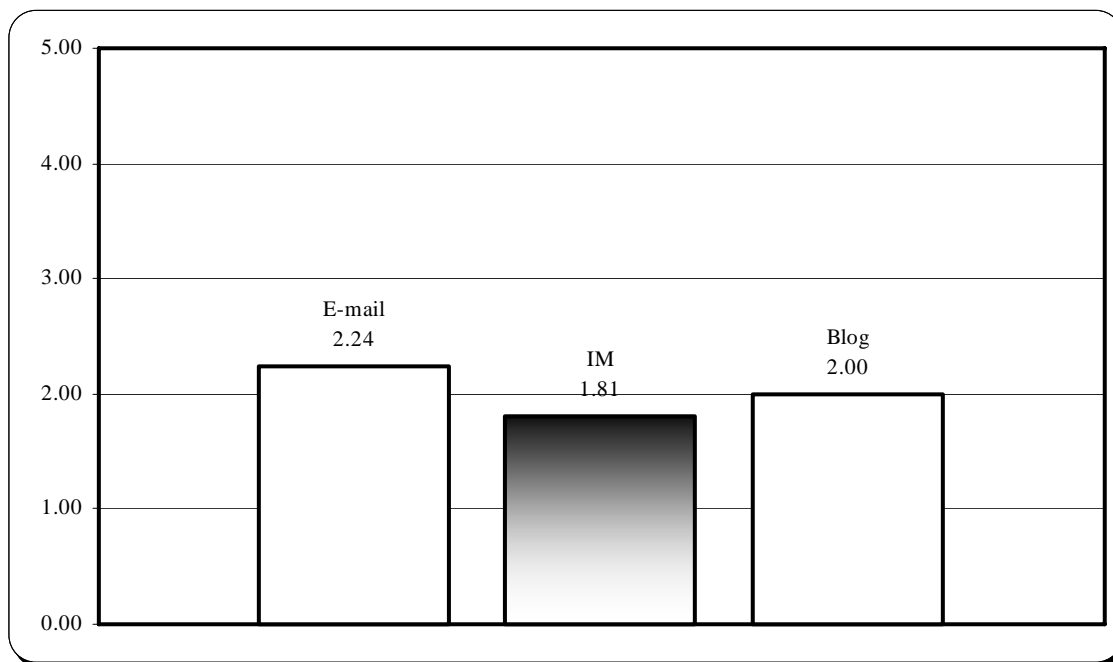
Group B provided the online samples and flopped when it came to using

conventions on the Internet, especially when compared to its classroom samples ($M =$

3.27, $SD = 1.06$). Blogs were supposed to be the most likely candidate for good writing,

granting students the opportunity to develop their written communication skills (Blood,

2000). That was not the case, though, in this study. Blogs did fair better than IM when

conventions were concerned, but only barely and not as well as e-mail. Apparently, these

bloggers were unaware that the rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation still apply

when journaling online (Zuiker, 2004).

The difference could lie in the media's popularity. Fifty-two percent of the

individual Internet samples provided were e-mails, 33% were IM conversations, and only

15% were blogs. E-mail, with 25 samples, was the most prevalent source ($M = 2.24$, $SD =$

1.07). Instant messages came in second with 16 samples ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 0.39$), and blogs

trailed in popularity ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.20$). Considering the information on blogs, of

which there were only seven samples, it could be discounted. But looking at these scores'

frequencies could provide more interesting information, as in Figure 3.

Figure 3 *Frequency Polygon of Internet Sample Scores by Category*
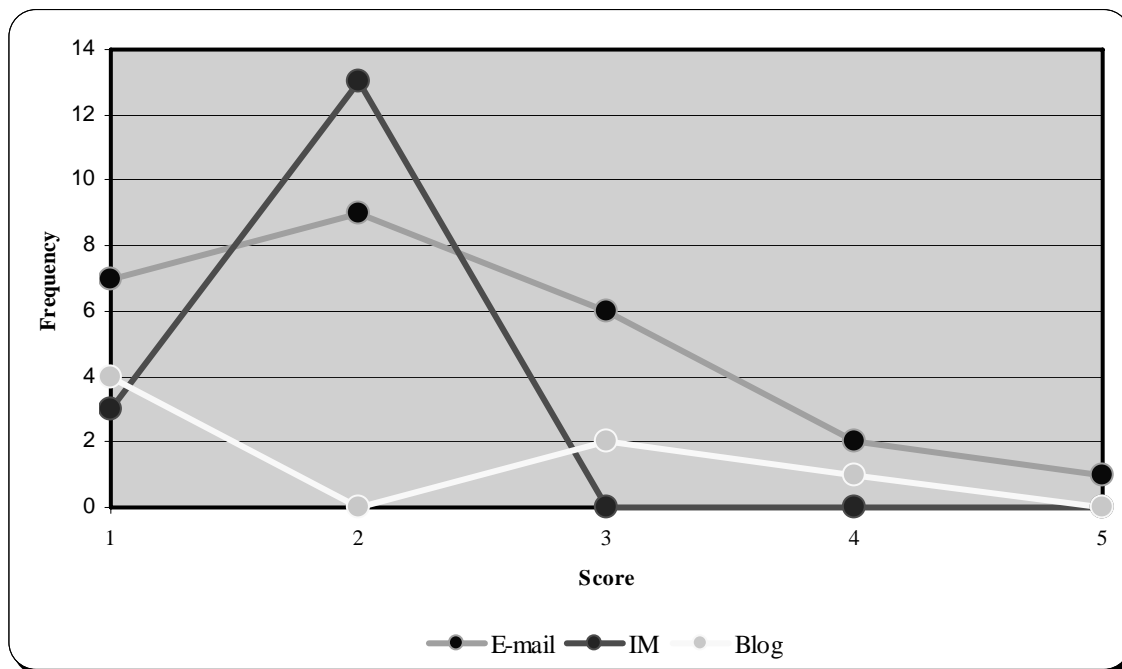

Since e-mail was by far the most common online source of composition, its users

may have been more apt to consider using good grammar, spelling, and punctuation. On

the other hand, seven e-mails scored a 1, which was 28% of all e-mail samples. Only

19% of IM conversations scored that low. Of the 48 online samples submitted, only one

scored a 5, only three scored a 4, and only eight scored a 3, leaving 75% of its samples to

score at or below the "emerging" score of 2. If good thinking is reflected in good writing

(Marcus, 1995), then our students have proven highly unlikely to produce high-quality

thoughts online. Some would argue that conventions are unnecessary on the Internet, that

the inherent blend of speech and text in Netspeak does not require attention to such pesky

details (Marcus, 1995). Then again, writing has required a clarity and sense of

organization that speaking has not (Davis, 1995), and whether they like it or not, students who communicate online have indeed engaged in the act of writing.

The e-mails, IM conversations, and blogs provided as samples were chock full of grammatical mistakes, littered with misspellings, and mostly void of proper punctuation. Some of the more peculiar practices included using *their* instead of any other homonym of the word; using a lower-case *i* to the extent that would horrify even e. e. cummings; using *ne ways* instead of *anyways*, which in itself was grammatically incorrect; and using an ellipsis for all other kinds of punctuation except the question mark. Moreover, even in the realm of Netspeak, there was such an overuse of *omg* (oh my God) and *lol* (laugh out loud) that the acronyms pushed the intended phrases to the point of meaninglessness. It would seem they had become the new *Umm* or even a form of nervous laughter.

Overall, writing on the Internet has demonstrated a need for much improvement in the conventions department. With mean scores below what has been considered developing but with a growing popularity among today's youth, online communication has proven to be an area worth watching, especially if its bad habits have seeped into school. Does writing on the Internet affect writing in class, and if so, are students who go online to communicate better off than the ones who don't? Figures 4, 5, and 6 have examined this issue.

**Figure 4** *Comparison of Classroom Sample Mean Scores by Group*
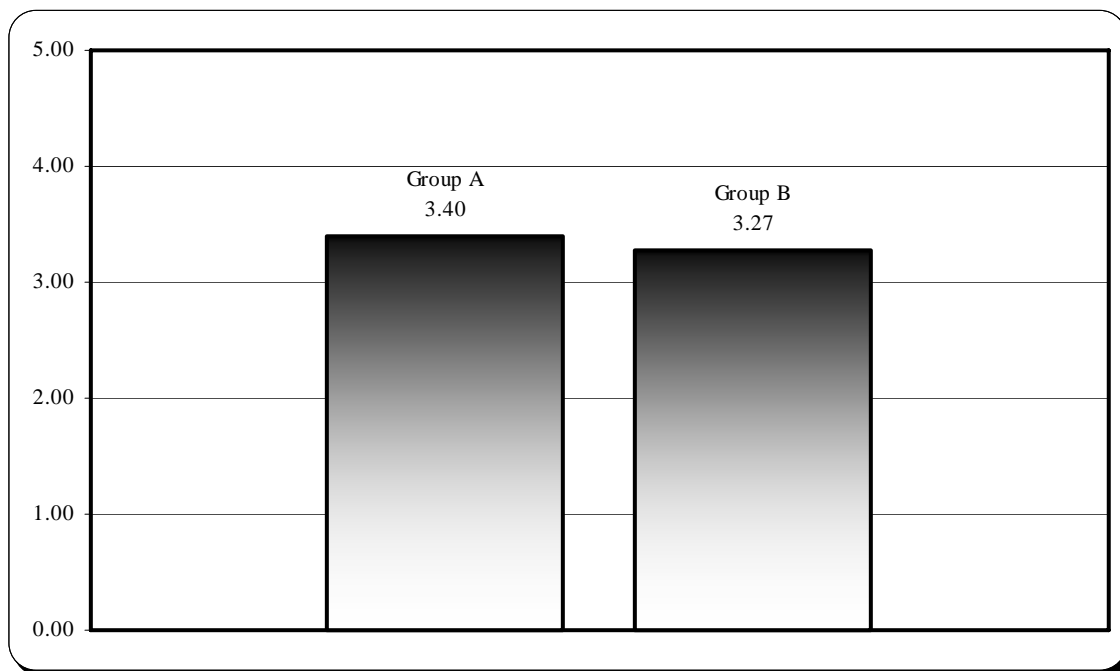
By simple comparison, it would seem obvious that Group A—the group that did not participate in online writing—faired better than Group B when it came to using good grammar, spelling, and punctuation in school. The mean scores for the classroom samples have drawn that conclusion even though they were rather close; however, this unpretentious bar graph has not been able to paint the full picture. Figure 5 has depicted more detail.

Figure 5 *Frequency Polygon of Classroom Sample Scores by Group*
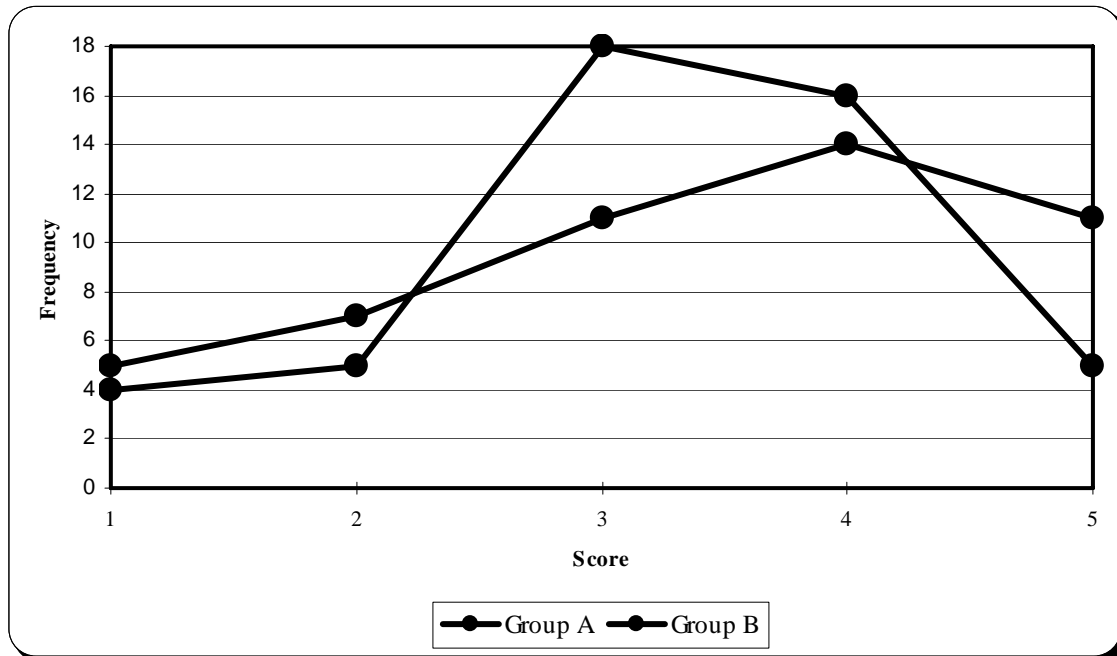
In Figure 5, the frequency of scores has illustrated that Group A was more than twice as likely to score a 5 than Group B and that Group B was almost twice as likely to score a 3 than Group A. The frequency polygon has made it clear that those participants who utilize the Internet for communication are at much greater risk than their counterparts for being genuinely mediocre writers in school. Yet, an interesting point was that Group A scored a 1 or 2 more often than Group B. This has helped draw the conclusion that if students do not know where to put their commas or how to capitalize words or why subjects and verbs need to agree, then writing anywhere alone is not going to teach them.

Figure 6 *Correlation between Group A and Group B in Classroom Sample Scores*
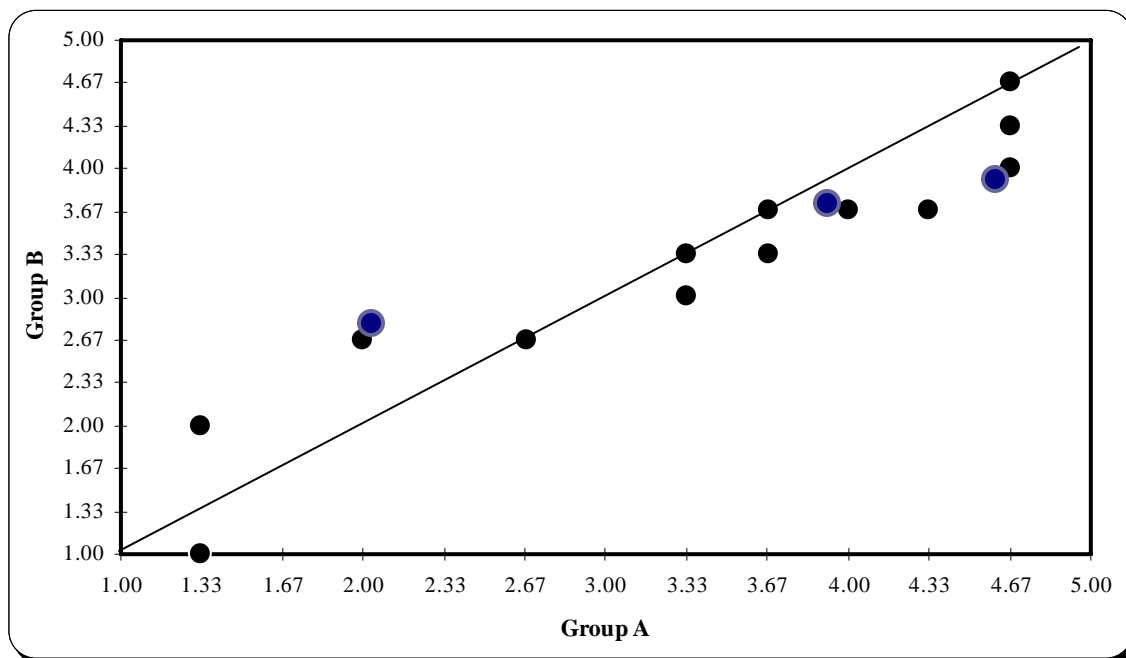
   This positive scatterplot with a Pearson product-moment coefficient (*r*) of 0.94

yielded a *t* test for *r* (t_r) of 3.6. Ranked by mean scores, the two groups have

demonstrated that the majority of participants in Group A outperformed in classroom

compositions their corresponding participant in Group B. The dots below the diagonal

line have indicated this majority of 56%. Four pairs of participants ranked neck and neck

with each other, which meant that 25% of each group used conventions in the classroom

equally well. On the other hand, 19% of participants fell outside the box. They were all

remarkably in the below-average range of scores. While it looks like the forgetfulness to

use good grammar, spelling, and punctuation in online communication had led students in

Group B to further forget to use them at school, the case may actually be that writing on

the Internet has helped them become more aware of conventions but more lax in applying

them.

But has Group B been equally lax? The final question has remained, "Do students switch gears?" Figures 7 and 8 have drawn in no uncertain terms the answer "Sort of."

Figure 7 *Frequency Polygon of Group B Sample Scores by General Category*
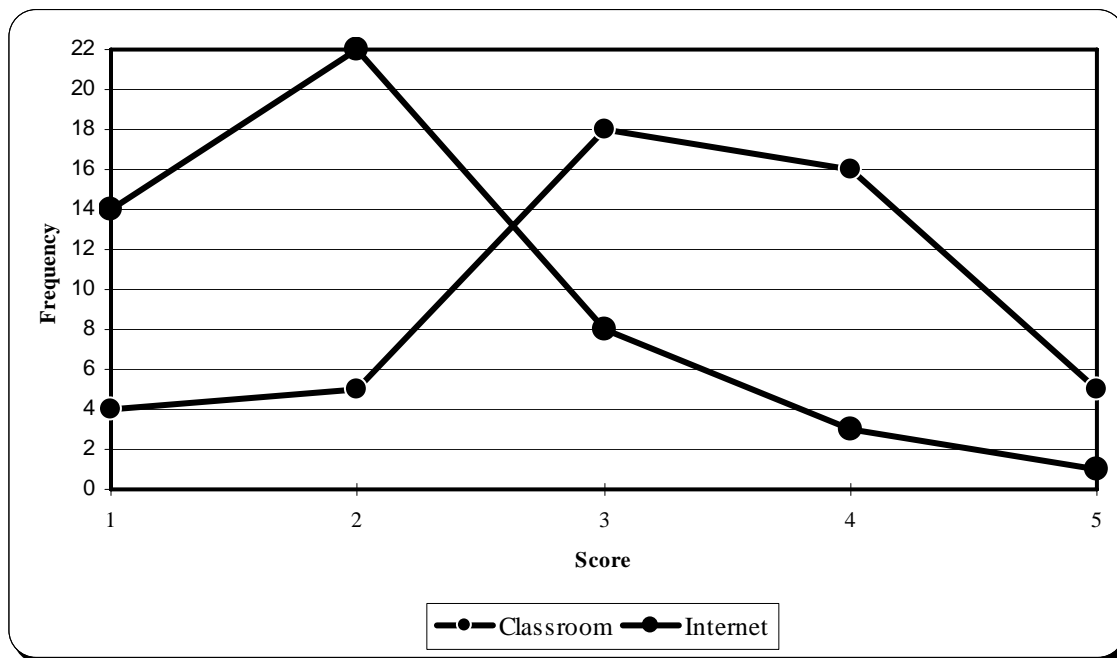
Compared to their usage of conventions in classroom compositions, participants in Group B were less than half as likely to be run of the mill online writers. Unfortunately, they were much more likely to score below average and rarely scored above average when writing e-mails, IM conversations, or blogs. But, this has established, as Hagemann (2003) deemed necessary, that students did in fact switch between "school talk" and "home talk." Or did they? Figure 9's scatterplot has pointed out this relationship not by score but by student.

Figure 8 *Correlation between the Classroom and Internet Sample Scores of Group B*
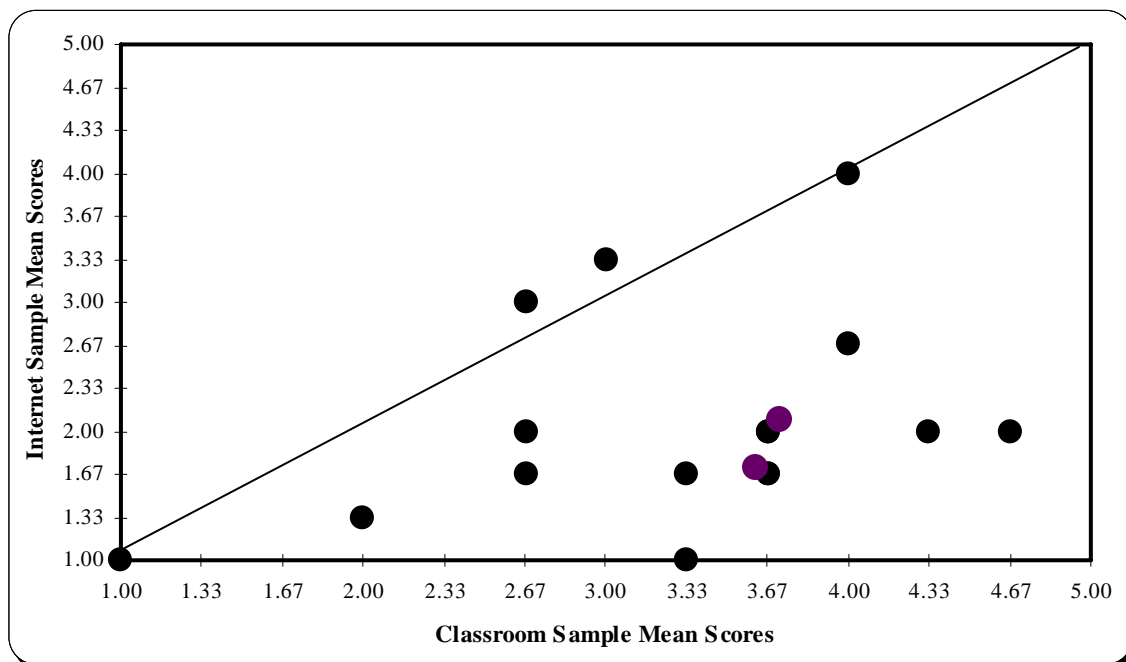
This positive scatterplot indicating the correlation between students' use of conventions in school and on the Internet had an *r* of 0.35 ($t_r = 1.4$). Fifty-six percent of Group B showed a dramatic difference in its application of standard conventions by arena; 19% exhibited a moderate difference. Of the remaining 25%, half applied the conventions equally well, and half actually wrote convention-ally better on the Internet than in the classroom (but only barely).

CONCLUSIONS

What's the point in using good grammar, spelling, and punctuation? Put simply and quite undeniably, they have contributed to meaning and aided in communication (Hagemann, 2003). They are a link between writers and readers, and without them, readers would be lost. To revisit the various metaphors for conventions and envision a world without them, writers everywhere—since everywhere is where we can reach via the Internet—will spread malice, strip down our language, stick out their feet to trip

unwary readers, and otherwise prove to be boorish and bad-mannered people. Obviously, things are not that bad yet, but it does seem to be the direction we are heading. Our current crop of writers parades a sloppy understanding of standard conventions, especially when the Internet comes into play.

1. Students do adhere in some fashion to standard conventions in both classroom compositions and online writing; however, the former endures inconsistent application, and the latter suffers a downright shoddy performance.

2. Students who write via e-mail, IM, and/or blogs show worse usage of standard conventions than those students who do not write online except when it comes to thoroughly poor users of conventions. Then, online communicators demonstrate a slightly better command of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

3. Students, for the most part, do switch gears when writing in different situations.

We all need to read and write, if for no other reason than "to communicate, to be delighted, to laugh" (Calkins cited in Stone, 1991, p. 106). Some of us may wish to imagine a world without the Internet, a world in which we talk to our mothers, break up with our boyfriends, and generally waste gobs of time chit-chatting on the phone. But those times are past; the Internet is our present. Now, instead, we e-mail our moms (maybe even send e-greeting cards for Mother's Day). We dissolve relationships over IM, complete with tearful faces to show just how awful we feel :'(. And we spend oodles of time pouring over other people's blogs or writing our own journal just to make plans for the weekend.

When we speak, we have listeners; when we write, we have readers. Each situation requires different components of language. When we speak, we have the

opportunity to express ourselves through body language, vocal variations, and physical gestures. When we write, however, we have to face an unforgiving, black-and-white, two-dimensional space. The writing process can help conquer that arena with multiple revisions and help from teachers and peer editors, but those have become luxuries most writers cannot afford. We need now to know how to write well the first time and to see content, form, and conventions as inseparable.

To sum up, standard conventions help us communicate better, but we are being taught to ignore them. By not learning about our own language in school and by practicing bad writing habits online, we have fostered an ignorance that will not easily be undone. We cannot stop writing, since written communication has become such a staple in our ever-connected digital world, but we do need to stop writing badly. Granted, what constitutes "badly" is, to some degree, up for grabs. The rules of writing wear different masks of correctness to fit the occasions of real life. So, when writing in school and on the Internet, we must ask ourselves two simple questions: Will my reader(s) understand what I'm trying to communicate, and is my writing reflecting my best thinking? Conventions can help us do that.

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