

Writing Spaces

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Non-standardized Grammar Assignment

Cheyenne Franklin

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Overview

“... dont nobody’s language, dialect, or style make them ‘vulnerable to prejudice.’ It’s ATTITUDES” (Young 110).

Vershawn Ashanti Young, along with Asao Inoue, Geneva Smitherman, and more recently April Baker-Bell, have long fought against oppressive language standards in education. It is not enough, they have jointly argued, to accept non-standardized Englishes as “other” varieties, allowed in informal situations but not academics. This style shifting, or code switching, suggests that these Englishes, and the speakers of such Englishes, cannot exist in professional arenas, thus preserving dominant White English’s place of power. To uphold students’ rights to their own language, educators need to center, not other, these languages. This chapter presents a writing assignment that legitimizes non-standardized systems of communication, including regional and cultural Englishes, and invites students to interrogate their attitudes toward language diversity.

The Non-Standardized Grammar Assignment is reminiscent of the literacy narrative, except with a more intentional turn toward grammar and linguistic racism. It is best suited for a first-year writing class, although with some adjustments, it can accommodate more advanced courses.

Time Commitment

2-3 weeks

Materials

This assignment requires no special materials.

Assignment Process

To begin, students learn about discourse communities from Dan Melzer's essay "Understanding Discourse Communities." The term discourse communities, equips students to study communication as plural systems, where standardized English grammar makes up only one such system. By reimagining communication as plural, teachers can combat the expectation that legitimate English, the kind studied in college composition, should consist only of standardized English. Furthermore, the term community in the phrase discourse community gestures to the social nature of language. Melzer's essay invites students to explore how different groups in history and in their personal lives have orchestrated changes to the English language. These discussions open the opportunity to have students consider regional and cultural Englishes as legitimate and rhetorical communication systems. While discussing these systems, teachers can incorporate information on linguistic racism, including John Baugh's evidence of linguistic profiling and the seminal *King v. Ann Arbor* court case.

The short story "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease" builds on this concept of plural communication systems by recognizing the rhetorical value of non-standardized systems. In this story, author Jonathan Foer defines what he calls "familial punctuation marks," a set of marks he uses to convey the silent communication he and his family share over the genetic heart disease that haunts them. In addition to being an artfully constructed story, this essay opens conversations about rhetorical grammar and non-standardized communication. It demonstrates that grammar systems are arbitrary inventions that should, and do, evolve to serve changing societies and occasions.

In the class meetings accompanying this assignment, teachers can introduce topics such as linguistic racism, heritage languages and their importance to familial relations, what makes a grammar legitimate,

how non-linguistic communication follows systematic rules (aka grammar), and the rhetorical power of non-standardized grammar systems. Teachers can bring examples of new words, symbols, or conventions to show how language evolves with society.

Students then write their own “primers” for one or more communicative devices (e.g., words/phrases, non-standardized syntax, emojis, body language, or gestures) unique to a community they are a member of. This community may be their family, friend group, sports team, etc.

- Students will read Dan Melzer’s “Understanding Discourse Communities.”
- Students will then choose a discourse community they belong to and use Melzer’s questions to begin brainstorming.
- Students will read “A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease.”
- Using Foer’s story as a model, students will write their own narratives about the communication used in their chosen communities. Students should select one or more scenes to describe and reflect on in their narratives. Students should shape their descriptions and reflections in such a way that the scene(s) deliver an argument related to one or more of the topics discussed in class. Students should aim for their narratives to be 4-5 pages.

The second week can be used to workshop and revise their narratives. For more advanced classes, consider assigning some of the readings listed under “Further Reading.” To discuss these readings thoroughly, spend 1-2 more class meetings.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of the rhetorical uses of nonstandardized Englishes, including regional and cultural language
- Think critically about the controversies surrounding language standardization in the U.S.
- Build a definition of grammar that does not legitimize one system over another
- Gain awareness for the ways a community's needs and culture influence its language

Learning Accommodations

- Accompany lectures with handouts or slide decks to accommodate visual learners.
- During the brainstorming step, students can note their thoughts in paragraph form, bullet points, sketches, or other outline styles and may choose to work alone or in pairs to accommodate different writing process styles.

Works Cited

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- Young, Vershawn A. "Should Writers Use They Own Language?" *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2010, pp. 110-118.

Further Reading

“Ask the Expert: Understanding Linguistic Racism.” *MSUToday*, 6 Jan. 2021, Accessed 25 Aug. 2021.

Baker-Bell, April. *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2020.

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Inoue, Asao. “How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy?” 2019 CCCC Chair’s Address. National Council of Teachers of English, 2019.

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