

Dennis Baron: The Myths of Teaching English¹

*You taught me language; and my
profit on't is, I know how to curse.*
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

The study of the English language is an essential and unquestioned part of every level of our educational system. We actually take it for granted that without formal instruction, the language we so carefully guard and cultivate would languish or worse yet, that it would deteriorate into unrecognizable grunts and scrawls. While most of the students we teach English to already know how to speak it quite well before they are of school age, we assume that their English is either not very good to begin with, or if in some few cases it is good, then we try to make it better. But we are wrong to view the situation of language so bleakly.

Despite its present position in the curriculum, the centrality of English is a recent phenomenon in the history of education. Although English grammar and spelling were frequently taught in the eighteenth century, English language and literature did not become a universal subject until well into the nineteenth century in the United States (and even later in England), and it is clear from the complaints lodged against our schools, and from the uninterrupted string of diatribes against the misuse of English that have appeared over the past two centuries, that the spread of English education has reinforced rather than stemmed our fear of linguistic barbarism.

One reason why language instruction is felt to be central, yet perceived to be inefficient, is an educational philosophy which characterizes the teacher as an expert imparting knowledge to the student-novice, combined with an educational practice that effectively limits how much teachers may learn about the language they must teach. This may not be the most appropriate model for English language instruction, and it puts teachers in an unfair position. In learning to speak their language before coming to school, students have already become experts, mastering a much more complex form of verbal behavior than that required by any reading or writing task we are likely to set before them. Moreover, though students are skilled in oral communication (their writing is something else again), English teachers do not generally qualify as experts in the English language for, although the curriculum emphasizes the importance of their literary training, it does not prepare teachers in language as a subject.

The focus of English language instruction, particularly at the upper levels, is on writing, but teachers are not encouraged to become writers themselves (few of them have the time to indulge the urge to write), nor are they provided with adequate training in writing instruction. As a result of this curricular inadequacy, there is a great deal of myth and misinformation associated with the teaching of the English language, and often no more than a smidgin of what might count as good linguistic or pedagogical theory. Specifically, we find confusion about the notion of Standard English, ambivalence over the linguistic expertise of English teachers, and a failure to understand the writing process and the cyclic nature of writing competence.

Standard English

While much of our grammatical terminology dates back to the earliest grammars of the classical languages, the now-pervasive phrase *Standard English*, referring to the prestige literary dialect of spoken or written English, is fairly new. The word *standard* as a measurement of correctness or perfection first appears in the fifteenth century, but it is not connected with language until the eighteenth, when it is applied to Greek and French, languages whose reputed superiority was frequently held up for users of English to envy.

Standard is not joined to English until the late nineteenth century. It appears in the title of T. L. Kington Oliphant's historical study, *The Sources of Standard English*, in 1873. Such expressions as *the King's English*, *the King's language*, and *received English* do occur before

¹ Dennis Baron. 1989. *Declining Grammar and Other Essays on the English Vocabulary*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

that, giving evidence for our early and ongoing concern with correct, good, or approved English. However, the association of the term standard with precisely defined and regulated weights and measures, as well as with monetary systems, creates the illusion that Standard English has scientific validity, that it can be defined and copied, like the standard meter or kilogram, and that it has the same currency for everyone.

We commonly suppose, for one thing, that a standard of usage exists which we all agree upon, a standard which may be described with some precision, reduced to a few simple rules, and imposed on the entire nation, if not the whole English-speaking world. As a concession to the varieties of English used in such diverse areas as Australia, Britain, Canada, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Nigeria, and the United States, we commonly – though sometimes reluctantly – acknowledge the existence of regional or national spoken and written standards. But whether we are dealing with standards or Standard, we are invariably thwarted by the problem of definition.

Try as we do, we have yet to achieve anything even closely approximating an exhaustive description of the varieties of English, or to arrive at an understanding of the complex nature of language standards and the degree of variability permissible within what we broadly term acceptable English. Put simply, our grammars and dictionaries are all open-ended. No matter how many correct ways of saying things we manage to collect, there are many we have missed, and more still that have yet to be invented.

Nor can we agree on how such acceptable language use is to be enforced. What we mean by Standard English, beyond our identification of it with a vague prestige norm, is never entirely clear. Instead, it is generally easier for us to say what is not standard, for example, errors in subject-verb agreement (*they was*) or in the concord of pronouns with their referents (*everyone . . . their*). We further assume that students of English, native speakers as well as second language learners, will make such errors given half a chance, and that these errors may be avoided by offering models of good usage to be imitated, or sentences containing errors for correction.

Such assumptions will not profit us: the listing of standard deviations, even in combination with a catalogue of the supposed rules of correctness, is not an efficient way of getting at good English, for as the linguist and usage critic Bergen Evans maintains in *Comfortable Words* (1961, 8), "There is no simple rule about English that does not have so many exceptions that it would be folly to rely on it." It is impossible to deny the existence of acceptable variation in English even in so apparently standard an area as subject-verb agreement. In British English, collective nouns like government and corporation are treated as plurals, while Americans employ them in the singular. Even within America there is disagreement over the status of *data*, scrupulously construed as a plural by number-crunching researchers unwilling to seem ignorant of Latin, but more freely treated as a singular among the general population.

Variation in pronoun concord is permitted as well. To illustrate, Evans contrasts our unquestioning faith in the agreement of pronoun and referent with the unquestionably binding, if grammatically discordant, language of the federal Constitution: "Each House shall keep a journal of *its* proceedings, and from time to time publish the same, excepting such parts as may in *their* judgment require secrecy" (Article 1, sec. 5, subsec. 3; emphasis added). *Their* is no slip of the federalist quill. Rather it is clear evidence – one of countless examples cited by the chroniclers of English – of the perfectly standard process of meaning controlling form.

As we shall see in chapter 10, even so stigmatized a word as *ain't* has its defenders, and its place in informal, standard speech. In fact, complaints against variant pronunciation, morphology, syntax, or diction frequently signal that the offending form is either threatening to become standard, or has already become so.

The Standard English Teacher

While Standard English may not exist as a body of discrete linguistic facts, it certainly does exist as a widespread and powerful concept affecting our attitudes toward language variation and change. *Standard* may fail as a technical term because, despite its pretense at scientific exactness, it is as subjective and shifting as our notions of good or bad English have always been. Nonetheless, it has become a force for shaping the destiny of our language because of its

exclusionary power. Despite our inability to pin it down, we all know what Standard English is, and what it isn't, though our lists of errors may not always agree.

We further assume that language errors are the result of ignorance, or even worse, of memory lapse, for we have a notion that the rules of English are something most of us learned in school but have since forgotten. Such an idea is unthinkable. As Bergen Evans points out, "If one forgets the significant facts about one's native language, one becomes unintelligible and will probably be locked up." (1961, 5).

True, what we know about our language and what we learn about it in school are often at variance, and it may do us no harm to forget our formal schooling in English now and then. Before the English teachers who read this slam shut their books let me assure you that I am not slurring the knowledge of English teachers – I am one myself. Nor am I undervaluing our ability to do a most difficult and under-rewarding job. Rather I wish to debunk a pernicious myth that stereotypes and handicaps those of us who profess English to students who may or may not want to learn about their language.

Our English teachers are well-trained in literature and pedagogy, not in the history and structure of our tongue, standard or otherwise. They are not generally required to take more than one or two language courses out of the forty that make up a B.A. Yet the driving need of Americans to be correct in matters of language has forced English teachers to function as experts in the English language as well.

English teachers are generally set up as arbiters of linguistic correctness and taste by the usage-anxious public. We are expected to authorize pronunciation, a throwback to the days when prospective teachers were excluded from the profession if their speech revealed the barest trace of ethnic origin, and those who made it to the classroom were forced to speak in an accent natural to no one but the teaching cadre itself.

English teachers are asked time and again where to put commas, and what plurals are correct. We are expected by society to become language guardians, protecting English from external invasion or internal rot. Reluctance to judge such matters is seen by the public not as a concession to linguistic sophistication but as an admission of ignorance, and that in turn may have a disastrous effect on our employment status.

Ironically, teachers who accept the role of English monitors develop a reputation for unwarranted interference with other people's language and are shunned. Announcing to someone I have just met that I teach English draws one of two responses: fear or a collusive sort of camaraderie. I'm either told, "English was my worst subject, I'd better watch my grammar," which severely limits further conversation, or I'm asked to agree with my interlocutor that English is certainly in a bad way, a position which contradicts all that scholars know about language use and change.

Occasionally I am required to proscribe a phrase whose legitimacy has stood the test of time, but which my idiosyncratic new acquaintance finds objectionable. Once I was prodded to condemn what seemed to me to be the perfectly innocuous phrasing of "Keep off the grass." Another importunate individual asked me to confirm his suspicion that *surpluses* was an illegitimate form of a word that actually had no plural. In neither case did I oblige, and in neither case, I am almost sure, was I believed, for although people claim they wish to adhere to the standards of language, they are strangely unwilling to accept the facts of English that they seek to master.

The Writing Cycle

Society treats its English teachers paradoxically, blaming them for doing exactly what it expects them to do, as far as language goes, and blaming them as well for failure. We have heard in the past decades about the reading crisis which forces college textbooks to be written at junior high school reading levels. It is common now to read as well that the schools do not teach our children how to write. This writing crisis forms part of our general worrying over literacy, but its solution, make people write more, is both too simple and too hard.

We may value good writing, but we frequently take a dim view of writing instruction. Mention the debased state of the writing done by otherwise well-educated Americans, and heads will shake their sad assent. But try to get something done, for example more writing in more

subjects in high school and college, and there is no general stampede of volunteers from either side of the desk, for the teaching of writing has become firmly associated with the drudgery both of composing and of grading papers on trivial subjects, and even more with painfully negative evaluation. As Jo McMurtry writes in her study, *English Language, English Literature* (1985), "Neither students nor teachers . . . are drawn to a pursuit in which the chief activity seems to be finding out how wrong one is, or . . . how much more effective one might become if only one did this or that." (122)

While writing instruction often seems a no-win situation to teachers and students alike, instead of banding together to defend themselves, teachers frequently blame one another for what they perceive to be the failure of their common educational mission. As a result, at each stage of writing instruction from elementary through graduate school and beyond we find ourselves bemoaning the inadequacy of the stage before. High school English teachers claim their students learned nothing about writing – in some cases not even penmanship – in the early grades. College rhetoric instructors commonly tell their first-year students to forget everything they were told about writing in high school. Upper-level college professors complain that the freshman writing teachers haven't done their job. Graduate faculties lament the inability of each new crop of graduate students to write coherently. And all editors know how difficult it is to rid newly-graduated writers of the rhetorical baggage they picked up from generations of well-meaning but misdirected English teachers.

Complaints about the ineffectiveness of earlier stages of language education do not necessarily mean that our teachers or our students are failing. Rather, the cyclical nature of such complaints signals that each stage has its own criteria for success, and that each time we enter a new part of the education cycle we become beginners who need to learn the ropes and master the conventions before we make the grade.

The cognitive psychologist James Voss and his colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh (1983) have shown that beginners behave quite differently from experts when it comes to problem solving in the social sciences. And the linguist Joseph Williams of the University of Chicago (1985) adds that if we take out the notion of social science, these authors seem to be describing the difference between basic and accomplished writers.

For example, Voss and Williams show that novices attacking social science problems rely heavily on the phrasing of the problem and proceed directly to simplistic solutions, failing to consider related problems, alternative strategies, or complications that might arise. Most significantly, novices do not support their point of view with appropriate arguments. In contrast, experts are not confined by the way in which the problem is stated. They go beyond the words to the underlying conceptual relations, weigh a variety of answers, and examine the implications of solutions, preferring general approaches that will solve a number of subproblems. Unlike novices, experts spend much of their time in argumentation. They recognize that answers are not simple, and that others may disagree with their approach. Experts tend to be more aware of their audience than do novices, and consequently they recognize the need to defend their choice of solutions, heading off objections, explaining counterexamples, illustrating strengths and admitting weaknesses in their positions. (Voss et al. 1983, *passim*).

As with social science problem solving, we know that successful, or expert, writing depends upon mastery both of subject matter and of the conventional context of writing. The late Mina Shaughnessy of the City College of New York (1972) has shown that basic writers are stymied by their unfamiliarity with the process of putting words down on paper. Since writing is something that few people do voluntarily, even those who are comfortable with the notion of Standard or edited written English find writing an unusual and unnatural act.

Beginning writers are further hampered by their ignorance of factual and theoretical material, and by their unfamiliarity with the subject-specific conventions that exist for manipulating this material. Novice writers are tied to the surface structure of their writing problem, usually an essay question or assigned topic. All too often they begin an answer by rephrasing the question or restating the topic. Some of us, opting for a mechanistic approach to writing, actually teach writers to do this. The organization of their writing is similarly limited by their lack of knowledge. Novices forget to argue their positions, fail to make connections, take too much or too little for granted, and produce essays that are halting, uneven, and ineffective. Even their sentence structure suffers. They cannot foreground or de-emphasize effectively, nor can they coordinate

or subordinate their clauses well, if they do not understand the relationships that pertain among the ideas in a new field. And they cannot free themselves from dependence upon the style handbook, real or imagined, which accompanies each field, so their writing is forced rather than natural.

Expert writers approach their task differently from beginners. Their analysis of problems is more acute, their writing less choppy. They are able to identify their audience and address it at an appropriate level, to sort out significant details from insignificant ones, to focus and generalize appropriately, and to argue with conviction. They are comfortable breaking the handbook rules which so distract the novices; in fact they seldom think of the rules they break.

However, as Voss and his coauthors show, and as writing teachers have always known, we can only be expert in one area at a time. Expert chemists show no more skill in solving social science problems than do novice social scientists. Similarly, expert writers are only expert when they are at home with their subject. What makes things hard, however, is that fact that when it comes to writing, we are repeatedly cast in the role of novices.

Even if we know how to construct sentences and paragraphs and arguments, we are continually starting over. It's not just that we must discover and satisfy anew the expectations of high school or college or professional writing, we must also relearn how to write each time we face a new subject matter, and more narrowly still, each time we develop a new topic. The familiar image of the writer staring apprehensively at a blank page becomes a metaphor for the unending cycle of beginnings that writing forces on us.

Looking at writing this way has important consequences for teaching. Too often we treat composition as if it were a skill independent of content. We assume that if a student can get through five paragraphs using a variety of sentence types, conventional spelling, and recognizable punctuation, but without dangling modifiers or splitting infinitives, then he or she is ready for any writing challenge the world may offer. Unfortunately such an assumption may be overly optimistic. It identifies students who observe a few of the conventions of standard written English – like subject-verb agreement – most of the time. At best the writing facility we develop in these students will make other writing tasks if not easy at least less formidable. At worst, we falsely certify students in a skill in which they will quickly find themselves deficient when they arrive at their next writing task. In our writing courses we are training students merely to be novice writers; they must develop their own writing expertise for each new field they study.

Ultimately the problem of writing instruction is this: no matter how well we master the conventions of one writing situation, each time we write for a new field, or a new audience, we must begin again at the beginning. Until there is a body of knowledge that students can control, that they can become experts on, their writing will remain more or less concrete, unconvincing, and ineffective. Which means that we cannot expect to do a good job in the writing classroom if there isn't something for us to be writing about.

This affirms two convictions writing teachers frequently express, that students who have something to say write better than those who don't; and that adults are easier to teach in writing classes because they have more experience, and therefore more to write about, than school children, or college students. But it also means that our college freshman writing instruction is frequently misdirected, if not impractical, for most such courses are conceived as general, and subject-independent, providing students with a skill that may be transferred to any situation.

Writing in the Curriculum

This brings us to the problem of locating writing in the curriculum. It seems only a little while ago that theorists were fighting to divorce writing instruction from literary study, on the grounds that traditional, literature-based writing courses were a disservice to anyone not majoring in English. The writing needs of students differ, went the argument, and no one should be forced to write in what is sometimes considered the unenviable style of English majors.

It was English majors themselves who argued thus, exhibiting ambivalence over the value of their own enterprise, if not outright self-hatred, and romanticizing the writing done in what they fondly characterized as the real world. As a headline in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports, the fight against writing the expository essay still goes on: "Writing Skills Taught in College Said to Muddy Clear Expression; Belle-lettres [*sic*] style called ill-suited for professional

life" (Dec. 4, 1985, 29). The accompanying article reports the opinions of English teachers presented at the 1985 conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, who call for training in professional writing, perceived as clean, concise, and straightforward, rather than the murkily literary essay of the "traditional" writing class.

While the Renaissance and the Romantic age celebrated the "natural" language of shepherds, the modern, bureaucratic era looks to business writing as the most natural form of communication. Professional writing, according to the English teachers cited in the article, is top-down writing: the reader is told right off what the subject is, and what to think about it, whereas the principle of organization of the belletristic essay is often obscure, requiring the reader to think about the subject, and perhaps about other things as well. Of course many essays are clear and to the point, and if I am not mistaken the fashion in literary criticism has been for some time to state right off what you are going to do, and then to do it. In contrast, I have read many a piece of "professional" or corporate prose which is awkward and inflated, muddled and bumbling, with no discernible subject, and which contains nothing worth thinking about.

The argument that English teachers are teaching the wrong kind of writing is not particularly telling. Good and bad professional writing exists alongside good and bad expository essays. However, it appears that many of us want to believe that English and writing do not belong together, or at least we question whether they do. A number of colleges and universities, taking up the chant that English instructors do not warrant the composition monopoly they have almost everywhere acquired, have gone so far as to separate writing from its traditional home in English departments. Some English departments, in turn, preferring to teach literature but only too aware that they teach writing because no one else wants to, consider such divestment a relief, despite its economic and political consequences. Even with this separation from literary studies, many of the new departments or divisions or programs in writing are still headed and staffed by English teachers, who now specialize in writing as a subject-independent subject and who can no longer rely on the clout that goes with membership in one of their school's larger departments to get funds for staff or equipment. Worse yet, locating composition in a discrete but subjectless university division brings with it the danger that the problem of writing will be considered solved, and that writing will receive less rather than more attention from the university as a whole.

More popular than writing divestment, at least in theory, is the movement that we call writing across the curriculum. Here at last is an attempt to recognize the writing cycle and to confirm writing as discipline-specific, to place the responsibility for making students write not just with English teachers, but with every subject area from accounting to chemical engineering to veterinary medicine. With such an approach we spread the responsibility around, sending students the message that writing is something we expect of them as a matter of course, not just in the humanities but in fine arts, science, and professional studies. And writing assignments coming out of courses with a recognizable subject matter will not be the kind of essays that we associate with the freshman writing class, exercises made up out of thin air and destined to return there once they have been scanned and graded.

The idea behind writing across the curriculum is further supported by research which shows that people read better when they are reading material about which they already know something than when they are reading in a new and unfamiliar subject. Ideally, writing across the curriculum allows English teachers to teach the kind of writing they have some competence in, writing about literature. In other departments as well, this approach should provide a subject matter for writers to become expert in. In practice, though, this does not always happen.

In many cases, writing across the curriculum simply means writing in two or three parts of the curriculum, a freshman-level course, probably taught by English teachers who are constrained not to make it a literature course, and an upper-level course or two in a student's major field, where some sort of paper is expected. However, according to Voss, undergraduate majors are probably not that much more expert than nonmajors. Writing may be a skill, but it is not a skill we learn only once, like riding a bicycle. Instead, it is something that must be practiced continually or it will atrophy. Research shows that if you don't use it, writing proficiency actually falls off. So the addition of a single advanced writing course, while better than nothing at all, may not make a great deal of difference to students if they are not expected to write much anywhere else, since whatever expertise they do develop in the additional course is likely to erode.

Furthermore, not every faculty member wants to step into shoes left vacant by English department colleagues. True writing across the curriculum means a mandate to include writing in every course a student takes, not just in two or three. Although this would boost overall writing competence, it would be difficult if not impossible to impose on our faculties, who rightly insist on determining their own academic requirements.

Unfortunately there are no simple, universal answers to the instructional problems that writing poses. But there is one more thing we should take into account: we must be prepared to admit that the writing crisis, like the other language-related crises in our history, is in part a fiction arising from our inability to reconcile the democratic spirit of free public education with the elitist judgment that some people are simply smarter than others.

We don't expect everyone to achieve equal facility in the complexities of algebra, but we would like to think that anyone coming out of our schools should be able to write a decent paragraph, letter, or essay. And most people probably can, given the motivation to practice and something significant to say. But that doesn't mean everyone can become an expert writer. The novice-expert analogy does not work quite so well for writers as for social scientists or mathematicians. Someone who masters the subject matter of mathematics to the extent of earning a doctorate and doing research and teaching in the field will qualify as an expert. Knowing subject matter in and of itself is far from enough to make an expert writer, for an expert writer must control style as well as content. This is where the intervention of a writing teacher, particularly one who shares the writer's knowledge of subject matter, may do the most good.

The Ways We Write

Just as writing instruction has traditionally undervalued the writer's knowledge, it has until very recently ignored the ways writers go about writing. One common injunction of writing teachers to their students is "Plan your work." This usually means that students are encouraged before they write to decide on a specific, narrowed-down topic, as well as the manner in which they will treat it. We tell students their essay must begin with a thesis statement that predicts what the finished product will be about. We may further expect that each of their paragraphs will have a similarly binding topic sentence directing the focus of each major unit of text. Particularly with longer works like research papers, we may go so far as to require that students create outlines which they will expand as they write, and we often ask that these be handed in together with the final draft as a check to ensure that the essay keeps the promise of the outline.

Such methodology proceeds from an instructional model that works backwards from the finished piece of writing, assuming that the elements of its construction reflect the process of its creation. Such an approach, we are only now discovering, is naïve. Just as movies are edited to give the illusion that they proceed from start to finish, when in fact scenes and sequences may be shot out of order, sound dubbed in, and special effects added even later still, so too, the process of writing seldom goes smoothly from beginning to middle to end. Many writers do not start at the beginning and have only a dim idea at the outset of what the end product will look like. It is in the juxtapositions created in the final cut of a film that the illusion of continuity is created, and it is only after what may be extensive revision, cutting and pasting that many an essay finally takes on form.

Lately, writing research has focused on the process of writing and revising. It has become quantitative and cognitive, relying heavily on the reconstruction of the writing situation by the writer or an observer. Unlike composition specialists, who have come to this method of analysis only recently, professional writers have always been naturally interested in process: they tend to discuss their particular writing quirks whenever they get together. And from such discussion, informal and statistically invalid as it is, there emerges a portrait of two distinct types of composition which the more empirically oriented cognitive specialists might be able to confirm.

Most writers I have talked to – let us call them speculative writers for want of a better term – discover their subject as they write. Of course they have some idea of general topic, of some of the examples they will use, and of other aspects of development, and they may even have sketched an outline of their work. But their plans invariably change with the writing, and it may be no exaggeration to say that like a good mystery they do not know what the outcome will be until the task is done. For such writers, the sequence of construction confirms the uncertainty

of composition. Outlines, like weather forecasts, must be discarded or continually reworked. Thesis statements and the introduction itself are written last (or, if written earlier, they must be revised to reflect the new direction of the content). And topic sentences may be absent from many or most paragraphs. For these speculative writers, structure is imposed in some degree through revision, which creates an outline after the fact rather than before. It is no wonder that so many of these writers, for whom revision is writing, have enthusiastically embraced the word processor, which greatly facilitates their arduous task of shaping and polishing the text.

Other writers, perhaps fifteen or twenty percent of those I know, do things just the opposite: they plan everything in their heads before pen ever touches paper. According to Iryce Baron (personal communication), these mnemonic writers, as I call them, lay out the work to be composed very carefully in their minds. They require more time than speculative writers to do what we call prewriting: to assimilate their source material, and to etch into their minds the key aspects of their organization, argument, and style. But once the mental planning work is done, the sentences of mnemonic writers flow onto the paper with some spontaneity. The mnemonic writer is so familiar with the material and the plan of attack that revision comes before writing, editing is accomplished as the writing is done, and little else is needed later. First draft is virtually the same for these writers as final draft. In addition, although mnemonic writers need more planning time, they can write more in a single sitting than speculative writers. While a speculative writer may produce three pages a day, and then spend several hours revising and editing them, a mnemonic writer may write ten pages and have little or no clean up work to do until the entire piece is finished.

This division of writers into speculative and mnemonic seems fairly decisive. Although I have nothing empirical to back this up, the types seem to represent two incompatible ways of processing written language. Each kind of writer is incredulous that the others can write the way they do, and each seems unable to adapt to the other's method with any ease, particularly when they are producing long documents like research papers, dissertations, or book manuscripts. Most important from the perspective of the writing teacher is the fact that neither type fits the usual model of writing instruction. Speculative writers know that all their attempts to plan ahead will ultimately be ineffective, that they will never manage to flesh out those outlines the way their teachers encouraged them to do. On the other hand, revision, for mnemonic writers, is a strange concept, encompassing little more than minor tinkering and proofreading, and they wonder why writing teachers place so much stress on the revising process. Mnemonic writers see little use for expensive word processors: self-correcting typewriters are sufficient for their needs.

Much of today's writing research focuses on how novices go about their chores. As these last examples show, we must look just as closely at what writing experts – that is, professional writers – do. Examining the differences between novices and experts, as well as those between speculative and mnemonic writers, might give us some much-needed clues about how better writers come to be, and this in turn will help us not only to make basic writers into passable ones, thus satisfying the demands of minimal competence, but what is an even more important and much neglected social goal, it will help our best writers to become experts.

Discussion questions:

1. If the goal of teaching English to speakers of other languages is to provide them with facility in speaking, reading and writing a new language, then what is the goal of teaching English to speakers of English, students who already fluent in the language?
2. Compare your own school experience as a K-12 student being taught English grammar, vocabulary, usage, reading, writing, and speech – with your experience learning a foreign language.
3. English teachers are generally drawn to the subject by their love of literature, and their college preparation focuses on literature more than any other aspect of English teaching. Yet once on the job, English teachers find that they are expected to be arbiters of usage, ready to correct and even ridicule the language of others.

4. English grammar is often taught as a means for improving student writing. But research has not established a good correlation between grammar instruction, or grammatical knowledge, and effective writing. In fact, professional writers tend to know very little about the intricacies of grammar. When they break the rules, they are either excused, because the pro's are often considered above the law, or they're vilified for carelessness (shoulda known better). If grammar doesn't improve writing, why study it? If it does, then why aren't we all better writers?
5. We can see the history of education as a long series of literacy crises: a perception that no one reads and writes sufficiently well brings on a series of school reforms. Twenty years later, it turns out that no one reads and writes sufficiently well, and the last wave of reforms gets the blame, forcing us either "back to basics" or toward some other school reform, only to be followed by yet another indication that things are just not working. What does this cycle of crisis and reform tell us about literacy? About education? What is to be done?