



Some Causes of Bad English in the United States

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Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Feb., 1913), pp. 124-126

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/801782>

Accessed: 25-10-2021 04:03 UTC

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EIGHTH-SEMESTER STUDENTS

The Bad Effects of Education; A Trip to the Brooklyn Navy Yard; The Passing of the Peanut Roaster; Some Uses of the Spectroscope; Class Activities; The Ice Industry; The Birds of Forest Park; The Cornell Domestic Science Course; A Reason Why Shakespeare Really Wrote the Works Credited to Him; Color Photography; Why the Continents Don't Sink; Recommendation of Mark Twain's *Innocence Abroad*; Professionals Should Not Be Debarred from Participating in High-School and College Athletics; Recommendation of E. B. Oppenheim's *The Master Mummer*; St. Patrick's Friendship to Ireland; Examination Questions on Macaulay's Johnson; There Should Be Enough Life Boats on Every Vessel to Accommodate All Passengers; The Sinking of the "Maine" and the "Maine" Memorial; Novel Party Decorations; The New Stepless Street Car; Application to Life of Lessons Learned from Literature Studied during the Fourth Year in High School; The Tree-Planting Association; Summary of a Lecture on India; How to Make Bread and Butter; A Class Reunion (speech for a class spread).

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SOME CAUSES OF BAD ENGLISH IN THE UNITED STATES

"The United States people," said an English woman, "do not speak English. They speak American, like which there is no language on earth."

She was partially correct; but if she should visit America, she would find the American language of the East very different from that of the West; that of the North, from that of the South; and that of the center, from any of the cardinal points. These local differences explain the resentment of the Boston girl when an Englishman told her that the Americans drop as many letters as possible, and use slang whenever they

cannot shorten an established word. She flatly denied that an American girl would say, "The fish was a buhnin' shame." The Virginia girl vehemently protested against our saying, "I like England vurry much, but I'm an Amurrican; don't you know?"

Foreigners say they learn sooner to make themselves understood by listening to American idioms, localisms, and slang than by poring over books with brilliant instructors. Why do we resort to slang when our vocabulary is so extensive? Why do we carelessly elide letters and even words? For this there are probably two reasons: first, the influence of locality and associates, and secondly, deficiency in teaching.

Our teachers are hampered in their efforts toward pure English by social influences and home indifference. A teacher may have a pupil who writes perfect grammar exercises and recites excellently. By constant application to his oral defects, she finds encouraging improvement. But when she visits his home, she hears him use the most faulty English in conversation with his playmates and his parents. Mortified that her influence has extended no farther than the schoolroom, she speaks to the parents. The father laughs: "I want my boy to know how to calculate and be quick in business. I don't care nothin' about his knowing grammar." The mother voices his sentiments: "Yes; I never was learned no grammar, and I ain't never missed it neither."

Countless children whose parents use excellent English are dependent on servants for companionship; and are allowed to play with the ignorant, and the street arab, and to hang around the haunts of the professional loafer. Thus, they absorb several dialects, slang, and profane language. What can the teacher do in the short time allotted to her, against all these forces combining against her?

Yet, though the teacher has all of this to contend with, she is not always fitted to teach English even to pupils with receptive minds. I have gone into schools where only the better class of people was represented. The fourth-, fifth-, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade pupils could quote every rule of grammar in the book, and yet were unable to apply one rule. I have had seventh-grade pupils who answered gladly two pages of grammar questions, either orally or in writing, and called it easy. But the same pupils rebelled at the difficulty of an assignment of one page of reading from which they were to select the nouns and pronouns, or the adjectives and adverbs. I have had eighth-grade pupils, who had been promoted the past year on perfect examinations on rules and definitions, in tears at the prospect of trying to give examples of three of these rules, of writing a paragraph description of "A Man I

know," or of writing a friendly letter from a town which they had visited.

"Oh!" they cried, "we never had grammar like this before. We learned it. We didn't have to write and give examples, and we never picked phrases and clauses in anything except our grammars." They declared and tried to prove that they could not give a book description except in the exact words of the book; and asked if I thought it fair to give sentences out of my head when they studied the book only. These incidents show that the teacher has become such a slave to the textbook that her pupils seem to know in theory what they cannot put into practice.

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"PARAGRAPHS AS TRAINS"—THE CABOOSE

Will Professor Crawford permit the addition of a caboose to his paragraph-train? I have found the close of the paragraph—or of the whole theme—to be the most difficult part for the young student to master. He begins bravely and with "emphasis." He leads on with apparent "clearness" and "coherence." Then losing the train of thought among disconcerting switches and sidetracks, he slows down and, instead of driving his thought home with force and decision, he stops limply in a "weak close." All for want of a caboose at the end of his train!

On the freight train—perhaps Professor Crawford has never handled freight traffic—the conductor rides in the caboose. From this point of vantage he directs the movements of the train and, if need be, keeps a lookout for whatever may follow. Though the engineer on the locomotive pulls the throttle, even he takes orders from the caboose. Likewise in exposition or argument the statement with which the paragraph closes should give direction to every sentence in it, even to the topic sentence itself. All should lead up to it. On a passenger train, of course, the conductor rides where he likes. He moves to and fro at pleasure or sits beside the affable pretty girl in the Pullman, for he has no caboose. And in the fast express of the narrative or descriptive paragraph, we never know where to look for a key sentence. An expository or argumentative paragraph, however, to avoid collision and confusion and to bring the thought safely home, should carry its directing idea in the final sentence—in the caboose.

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