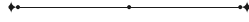


Chapter 1



WHY SAVING ENGLISH IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT

The English language, possessing a far larger vocabulary than any other language, boasts the richest literary heritage in world literature. Masterpieces like the King James Bible, Shakespeare's plays, and Charles Dickens' novels readily come to mind.

My family hails from a regional culture (the American South) where the English language was savored in storytelling, as memorialized by African folk tales preserved by Joel Chandler Harris and literature like the novels of William Faulkner and Walker Percy. This love of language and literature has, unfortunately, been largely eclipsed by the cultural shift from a print medium to a more visual one (as foreseen by Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong), accompanied by a philosophical transition from modernism to postmodernism.

The influence of postmodernism, as illustrated by the pioneering Directed Studies Program in English at Yale, was captured by William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*. He recalled how his writing course, when 170

students signed up for a class limited to fifteen students, created a stir:

That came as an astonishment to the English department, which was then the high temple of 'deconstruction' and other faddish studies in the clinical analysis of texts. The great writers on the Yale faculty weren't the theory-obsessed English professors. They were the History professors—strong stylists ... who understood that their knowledge could only be handed down if they imposed on the past an act of storytelling, one that had a narrative pull and a robust cast of characters.¹

No less an authority than Harvard professor Steven Pinker has pointedly criticized the postmodern style of writing for two reasons. One is that "the writer's chief, if unstated, concern is to escape being convicted of philosophical naiveté about his own enterprise."² His second reason for criticism lies in the epistemological skepticism and relativism of postmodern style, which precludes "disinterested truth" from serving as the primary motive for writing.³

1. William Zinsser, "First, use plain English," Yale Alumni Magazine, March/April 2009, 38.

2. Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2014), 30.

3. Pinker, *The Sense of Style*, 29, 35.

Today, the art of composition is by and large a lost art, vanquished by the stunted attention span of a postmodern generation. Ours is a generation less used to reading printed words on a page than to viewing flitting images on a computer screen and more used to “cutting and pasting” the words of others than creating their own.

Postmodernism has entailed the devaluation of language and its power to communicate what theologian Francis Schaeffer called “true truth,” especially through meta-narrative, and has led to several other harmful consequences. Many students enter college, even graduate school, with woefully deficient writing skills, necessitating remedial instruction and tutoring, resorting to “group” papers or even plagiarism. Writing instructors now routinely use software designed to detect student plagiarism.

Furthermore, even highly educated adults persistently flout elementary principles of English grammar and usage including:

- Rampant confusion between the subjective and objective cases in pronoun usage, especially in
 - prepositional phrases (*between you and me* – not *I*),
 - compound subjects (*The King and I* – not *Me*), and

- compound direct objects (*The National Academy of Science inducted **him and me** – not **he and I** – as members*).
- Widespread misuse of irregular verbs, most notably by cramming the past-tense form into a perfect tense: *I have **gone** fishing – not I have **went** fishing*.
- Burgeoning ignorance of prepositional idioms, something Richard Lanham in *Revising Prose* (1979) recognized, with (just to use one small example) *different **from*** replaced by *different **than***.⁴

Finally, two gaping holes in reading and writing instruction have been acknowledged. Recent research demonstrates how badly students need to learn how to recognize rhetorical structures, not only for reading comprehension but also for composition of the persuasive essay:

Any story or prose passage can be organized into an outline in which some material is at the highest level, some at the next level, and so on. For example, research on rhetorical structures (Chambliss & Calfree, 1998; Cook & Mayer, 1988) shows that prose passages may be organized into structures such as compare/contrast (comparing two or more

4. Richard Lanham, *Revising Prose* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), 82.

items across several dimensions in a matrix), classification (relating concepts to each other with subset relations as in hierarchy), sequence (presenting a cause-and-effect chain in correspondence with a flowchart), enumeration (presenting a list), or generalization (presenting a main point and supporting points). Interestingly, most students, even students entering college, are not aware of rhetorical structures, and therefore have difficulty judging what is important in a textbook passage (Cook & Mayer, 1988). In short, research in the science of learning pinpoints a specific kind of knowledge—knowledge of prose structure—that is crucial for reading comprehension but lacking in many students.⁵

Secondly, and more importantly, students must develop facility in writing the persuasive essay. Classic writing instruction focuses on the *mechanics of writing—legibility, spelling, grammar, and paragraph* structure—which, of course, are important skills. However, Hayes and Flower (1980) found that writers need to engage in three intertwined cognitive processes—planning (generating, evaluating,

5. Richard E. Mayer, “Applying the Science of Learning to Instruction in School Subjects” in *On Excellence in Teaching*, ed. Robert J. Marzano (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, 2010), 103.

and organizing information), translating (generating written text), and reviewing (detecting and correcting errors).

(Gould, 1980) found that most students spend almost no time engaged in global planning—that is, developing a writing plan before they start writing.... Instead, they engage in local planning—pausing at the end of a sentence or clause to plan out the next five or six words ... (Scandamalia, Bereiter and Goelman, 1982). When high school students are asked to write a persuasive essay, they do not engage in much planning and they produce an essay that is rated mediocre (about 6 out of 10 on a ten-point scale) by writing experts. However, when high school students are required to produce an outline before they begin writing—thus forcing them to generate, evaluate, and organize information—they write higher-quality essays rated between 9 and 10 on a ten-point scale). (Kellogg, 1994)⁶

The overriding purpose of this book is to unleash the power of the English language for Christian writers and speakers to defend the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) by presenting the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and with fitly chosen words (Prov. 25:11). *Saving English* will point out vastly underappreciated structural resources of

6. Mayer, "Applying the Science of Learning," 104–105.

the English language with the ultimate aim of honing the skills of Christians seeking to speak and write well and winsomely, as an essential element of their service to the Lord and witness to others.

Saving English follows from three premises.

1. The first is that writing is an art, like acting or sculpting, that can indeed be taught. Although native ability plays an undeniable part, no one can claim to be a born writer. It is a well-known fact that many writers improve their skills by reading accomplished writers. This improvement will not happen readily, however, unless a writer gains a basic working knowledge of English grammar and parts of speech, as presented here in chapter 2.
2. The second—and generally overlooked—premise is that verb selection plays a critical part in molding the shape and determining the effectiveness of any given sentence. Chapter 3 identifies the sentence types used for characterization, identification, and narration and lists the verbs usually used to anchor each sentence type. Even the simple subject-verb-adjective sentence is discovered to possess rich possibilities: it can utilize not merely linking verbs of being, duration, and sense perception but also, surprisingly, more dynamic verbs of