

Speaking Southern, Writing English

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Essential Grammar Skills

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Introduction

Important Note to Students:

Please read the introduction before starting to work in the book.

Language is like clothing. We have clothes to wear to school, clothes to wear to church, clothes for doing yard work, and a uniform for work. It wouldn't be appropriate to wear your work uniform to church, and you wouldn't wear your church clothes to work in the yard. Language is the same way. The language you use around other adults is not always the language you use when talking to children. The way you speak to your boss is not the same way you speak to your best friend. Just like you wouldn't want to be stuck with only one outfit that you had to wear everywhere, you don't want to be stuck with only one way to speak or write.

Most of us grow up learning the language of our families, with their dialect, expressions, and vocabularies. That's the most valuable language we have because it's how we communicate with the most important people in our lives—our families. We don't ever want to forget this language. However, those aren't the only people we want to communicate with. To be successful in school and work, you have to be able to use standard American English. Learning standard American English doesn't mean forgetting the language you learned from your family. It means having several languages, like outfits, to choose from in different situations.

For example, if you called your mother on the phone, you wouldn't start by saying, "Hello, may I please speak to Mrs. Jones?" You would probably just say, "Hey, Mom." On the other hand, if you were at work calling a client, you wouldn't begin a conversation with someone you'd never met by saying, "Hey, Lisa." You would ask to speak to Ms. Jones. If you went to a friend's house and knocked on the door and your friend asked, "Who is it?" you wouldn't say, "It is I," even though that's correct English. It's not the right way to communicate with your friend. Standard American English is essential in some situations, but not all of them, so you should never give up the other versions of English that you already know.

Learning standard English is difficult because it isn't a whole new language; it's a variation of a language you already know. Most of the English people speak every day is correct, so it's hard to recognize the parts that need to change when you begin writing for school or work. Another difficulty is that the way you've always heard language spoken sounds familiar and therefore "right."

When students say to me, “‘He has *lain* on the couch all day’? That doesn’t *sound right*,” they really mean, “It doesn’t *sound familiar*.” If they write, “He has *laid* on the couch all day,” that sounds *familiar*, but it’s not right. Using standard American English means writing the way books are written, not how you have always heard English spoken.

Because we all write by ear, writing language the way that is most familiar to us, writers often have places in early drafts of a paragraph or essay where they don’t use standard English. In school, as you probably already know, these places are called errors. Your goal should not be never to write errors, because no one writes a perfect first draft of a paper. In fact, if you stop and think about every word and punctuation mark, you will never get the first draft done at all. Instead, your goal should be to draft your paper quickly, using the language that is familiar to you, and then reread, edit, and proofread your paper to find and correct any places where you are not using standard American English before turning your paper in for a grade or sending an email to your boss or co-workers.

If you eliminate the errors from your writing before other people read it, you gain credibility—people are more likely to listen to you and believe you. It’s not entirely fair, but it is certainly true, that people judge you on your grammar, just like they judge you on your clothes. People have more respect for a speaker who is wearing a good suit; people have more respect for a writer who uses good grammar.

In addition to credibility, using standard American English makes sure that all the people who may read what you’ve written, no matter what state or country or culture they come from, will understand what you have said. When I first heard someone say, “I had to carry my grandmother to the doctor,” I was confused. The person picked up and carried her grandmother? Wouldn’t anyone give them a ride? I didn’t know that she was using “carry” the same way I was used to hearing “take” or “drive.” I also remember asking a friend to swap hours with me at work and feeling hurt when he said, “I don’t care to.” I thought he meant he didn’t want to, but he was saying he didn’t mind. People from different regions of the country, even different parts of the South, say things differently. When you send a letter, a résumé, or an email to someone far away, you don’t want to use language that is only familiar to people in your area.

It’s true that some students do not have to study standard English. They’re not smarter. They grew up hearing standard English spoken, or they read many books, or maybe they just watched the right TV shows; somehow, they developed an ear for what’s right and wrong in standard English. They write it correctly with little editing. People’s skill with standard English really comes from where they have lived and what they have heard, not their level of intelligence or even education. Although some people can write standard English with little effort, you may have to put a lot of time and effort into your writing at first. In the end, though, your final product can be as good as anyone’s. This book will show you how to write and edit so that you will be confident your writing is correct and will make a good impression.