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COMMENTARY

Welcome Back, My Ungrammatical Students

Unlike your friends, who will excuse your errors, your college professor may or may not like you.

By **MARK GOLDBLATT**

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The fall is mere weeks away, another college semester either under way or soon to be. If you're one of thousands of freshmen nationwide, you've just discovered you've been placed in a remedial English class.

"How can this be?" you're asking yourself. "I got straight As in high school! I love writing stories and poems! I'm good in English!"

The culprit is your grammar—and, just to be clear, I'm using the word "grammar" in a general way to refer to the overall mechanics of your writing, including punctuation, syntax and usage. Students in remedial English classes are almost always smart enough to write college-level prose, but they don't know how to put sentences together in ways that clarify, rather than cloud, what they're trying to say. The form of their expression gets in the way of the content of their expression, which is not helpful for a college student.

Sure, grammar might not seem like a big deal if you're composing a text message, or

updating your Facebook status, or tweeting about what you've just had for lunch. Your reader, in such cases, is someone who wants to know what's on your mind, who has an emotional stake in the information . . . who likes you. Your college professors may or may not like you.

They'll smile at you, but they'll also be weeping on the inside over the stacks of papers they have to grade. The last thing they want, the last thing any reader who's not your "BFF" wants, is to wade through a bog of your ungrammatical writing.

Suppose, for example, you don't know that a semicolon is properly used to join two closely related independent clauses. Based on three decades of teaching English prep courses, I can assure you this is a safe supposition since no more than one in a hundred remedial students can define the term "clause." You're therefore liable to write something like this: "Oedipus attempts to avoid his fate by running away from home, it's a decision he will come to regret."

That's wrong. You're using a comma where you should be using a semicolon. But does it really matter? After all, the reader can still figure out what you're trying to say.

Yes, it does matter. It really matters. As the reader's eyes scan down the lines of your page, deciphering your meaning, he's going to come to that comma—and it's going to look wrong. He's going to think, "That looks wrong," or maybe even "Hey, shouldn't that be a semicolon?"

But at the moment he's thinking one of those things, guess what he's no longer thinking about? He's no longer thinking about what you're trying to say.

Though there are many genres of writing, and many variations within each genre, the one characteristic that unites all good writing is that it communicates effectively what the writer wishes to say. Whatever gets in the way of that process, whatever gums up the works, is a problem.

While there is definitely such a thing as good writing, there's no such thing as good grammar. The belief that there is betrays a basic misunderstanding of grammar's purpose—which is to illuminate, not to sparkle. You never come to the end of a newspaper article and think, "Wow, the grammar in that story was fierce." The best thing you can say about a writer's grammar is that it's competent; it doesn't get in the way. Competent grammar is grammar you don't notice.

Do you detect a trace of elitism in what I've just said? Well, I'm a freaking college

professor! *L'élite, c'est moi*. But in case you haven't noticed, that's the door you're knocking on. If you tough out the next four years to your bachelor's degree, that's your parting gift—you'll join the elite of the college-educated. It won't make you a nicer person, but it will give you lots to think about.

You're going to come away with many opinions—and a desire to write down those opinions and to have them taken seriously. But they'll never be taken seriously if your reader keeps getting sidetracked by your faulty pronoun antecedents. That's why it's absurd to claim that teaching students standard grammatical rules and expecting students to abide by them is a form of oppression. There are "other" grammars, or so the argument goes: grammars of the victimized, the ostracized, the marginalized.

Please. Nothing prolongs the socioeconomic struggles of historically victimized people more than an inability to communicate effectively with the broader culture. They have a desperate incentive to make themselves heard—not in ways that grammatically underscore generations of hardship but on the precise linguistic terms of that broader culture.

Frederick Douglass understood this point; his writings are a testament to it. So did Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr.

So take your medicine. It won't be fun, but you need it. Learn what a clause is, what a gerund is, what a misplaced modifier is—because your father did not shoot an elephant in his pajamas. If you're going to stew over your workload, fine. But cast the blame where it belongs. You should have learned this stuff a long time ago, maybe instead of writing a few of those ungrammatical stories or poems.

Now get out of here. Class is about to start.

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