Notes from the “Supporting Language Diversity in Writing” discussion
Western Washington University—April 18th, 2018

Different faculty members have different jobs, and their writing pedagogy may vary accordingly.

- Linguists have the job to educate everyone about inherent biases, including standard English biases, that arise not out of linguistic facts but out of societal attitudes.
- This is not what you’re going to focus on if your job is to grade an assignment in a math or science class.
  - to what extent should someone with that job force a societal change in language?
  - rather than rewrite the rules for a discipline, a professor might emphasize those rules as part of writing in the context of a discipline.
    - explain that you’re using a variety of writing that’s accepted in the field. This is a disciplinary standard, not a broader social standard.
    - emphasize the difference between written and spoken language
      - people don’t write the way they speak, and they shouldn’t.
      - writing that too closely follows speech is a problem for students from privileged speech backgrounds as well as non-privileged.

Can we get rid of the word “standard” and talk about formal English prose? Calling it “standard” indicates that some people aren’t normal/standard.

- But we need a term for it because we need to carve out formal writing as something people do, different from other language practices (speaking, phone texting).
- Students have a sense that you have to write differently for formal writing, but they may not see that formal writing itself has different varieties. There’s a huge difference between writing for the Atlantic and the professional Journal of whatever: these are different Englishes.
  - it would be good to get out of their heads that there’s just one kind of formal writing: students are envisioning a strict dichotomy that’s not helpful or accurate.
- Some ways that students define formal writing:
  - formal writing should not use slang
  - formal writing should not contain affective content: anything that reveals identity or emotion. For example:
    - “language that reveals my Southern heritage”
    - punctuation or alternative spelling that reveals emotional state, as in texting.
  - many students are walking around with a set of arbitrary rules (“You can’t start a sentence with the word ‘And’”’ that they’ve picked up along the way and lumped together into a single category of “formal writing”
most of the discussion participants have already developed multiple language identities (I write this way to my friend and this way to my boss and this way to my professional journal); students may not have.

- the development of multiple language identities is further complicated for multilingual students.
  - students may be sophisticated in a spoken language but have no literacy in that language: for example they’ve grown up speaking a language but have not been trained to write in it
    - they may always feel insufficient in the written language they do have.
    - they may feel they are “bad writers”
- K-12 teachers, instead of calling it “Standard English,” call it “academic prose” or “academic language.”

If we’re not throwing out the category “academic prose,” how can we have an academic prose that’s less biased?
- Recognize that conventions change
  - email messages: do I correct students who send me text-speak in an email?
    - many profs don’t want to receive an email beginning “Hey, Josie—”
    - students may be surprised to be corrected in an informal writing venue like email
    - students may not understand that a professor who came of age with the language of email is unlikely to appreciate being addressed via email with the language of phone text
      - this is a useful thing for students to know
      - even a prof who doesn’t issue a correction may feel put on edge, and this can create an unconscious bias against the student. You don’t want an unconscious bias against you when you’re writing to an audience to ask for something.
        - this applies to job letters, too
    - often students have never really thought about the audience for their writing.
    - on the other hand, conventions change. Is the professor behind the times by refusing to accept a new use of language that’s on its way to becoming a convention (or has already become one)?
- Whose job is it to correct writing?
  - English professor: I see my role as editing their language use or instructing their language use.
    - but do instructors in other classes feel they should do this?
      - who has to do the work of correcting language?
    - research shows students don’t always transfer academic writing conventions from one context to another.
• students who learn practices in their English classes may not transfer them to their other classes.
• this goes for academic-nonacademic transfers as well: if they go to write a cover letter, will they remember the rule you taught them in a lab report?
  o are we wasting our time on what’s really just our pet peeves?
  o one instructor grades students up if they will avoid his pet peeves, rather than grading students down if they commit them.
  o WP class: I spend a lot of time correcting them because they want their English corrected by me; I know they’re going to get discriminated against if they’re non-native speakers and I don’t want to add to that.
    ▪ we may see permitting students’ language use as not being fair to them.
• It comes down to a question of goals and priorities.
  o when students ask to learn standard English, it’s because the context is set up in such a way that they have to do that to protect themselves
    ▪ upholding standard English puts the burden on the disadvantaged student, not on the society.
    ▪ are our choices supporting a societal change?
• It would be nice if ENG 101 did a piece in a disadvantaged dialect.
  o currently one ENG 101 class is set up so that if you are speaking a disadvantaged dialect, it won’t hurt your grade. But when students leave that class, it does hurt—plus upper-division instructors want to know why didn’t those students get prepared in 101?
• Where does the responsibility lay for initiating the social change?
  o we should have campus-wide discussions about this
  o we should empower students
    ▪ but there IS a power differential. It’s important to acknowledge that people will feel unconscious bias depending on how you write.
    ▪ instructors could talk about conventions that students already know about; what does punctuation mean in a text on a cell phone?