

STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH (PODCAST 35 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about Standard American English and writing.

If you are listening to this podcast, then the chances are high that you already speak, read, and write English. Even if your first language is something other than English, you use English in your college courses. You probably use English in your daily life as well—to talk to your child’s teachers, to communicate at work, to cheer on your favorite sports team, or to order a taco at the neighborhood restaurant.

But do you use the same version of the English language under every condition and circumstance? Do you speak with your boss the same way you talk with your friends or with your children? Do you use the same words, pronunciations, and sentence structures that everyone else in the country uses? I bet not!

Conversation is filled with different words and grammar constructions, clearly revealing our different regional dialects. Let me give you some examples. How would you react if someone said to you, “Hey! Whereyat?” To folks who live in New Orleans, this is a friendly greeting meaning something like “Hi, how are you?” Someone in another part of the country might say “Sup?” and mean the same thing. If you order a milk shake in Boston, you might have to ask for a “frappe” to be properly understood. Want some shaved chocolate on that? Ask for “sprinkles.” When you order something to drink with lunch, do you ask for a “soda,” “pop,” or a “soft drink”? On a summer night, do you like to watch “fireflies” or “lightning bugs”? Would you ever say “We be happy” or “We might could” or “Comeon, youse guys” in conversation with your friends? If any of these examples sound familiar, you know what a dialect is.

English is not one set thing or language. It is instead many different dialects. Folk in Louisiana speak and use language differently from those of the Navajo Nation in Arizona, who use it differently from those who live in Chicago’s south side, who use it differently from folks in Los Angeles. Everyone speaks a dialect—a particular variety of language with different vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

In conversation, dialects rarely cause problems. We can understand one another even when words are unfamiliar because we can ask questions, observe facial and physical gestures, listen to tone of voice, and engage in free—flowing back—and—forth chat. Dialects in writing, however, can be problematic because we can do none of these things. We must rely only on the words on the page to arrive at complete understanding.

This is why the dialect called Standard American English (SAE) matters. Consisting of particular



conventions of writing—spelling, punctuation, and grammar, for example—Standard American English makes it possible for us all to understand one another without conversation. Students learn SAE in school, professionals use it in their work, and professors expect you to use it in your compositions. It's the language of books, news articles, legal documents, and other published discourse. It's the form of English you read and write, in other words.

When you draft a composition, write freely, use the English dialect that comes naturally to you. Try to capture and express your ideas without worrying too much about correctness. When you revise and edit your work, however, you must “translate” any nonstandard language into Standard American English, so your readers will take your ideas and even *you* seriously. Just as you use good manners when presenting yourself in public, you use SAE to present yourself in writing.

What should you look for when revising and editing, then? Well, after you have a good, healthy draft that does not use Standard American English, go through the paper looking for content that needs to be revised accordingly. Check your sentences to make sure they are clear and correct. Eliminate fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices. Avoid slang and contractions like “kids don't study,” opting instead to write “children do not study.” Avoid instructing the reader by using “you” and placing yourself on the stage through the use of “I.” Instead, use the more generalized “they,” “he,” or “she” to refer to all people. Use your spelling and grammar checker to catch minor errors, which if they recur become major ones. Proofread carefully before submitting your work for other instances of nonstandard language. Remember that a composition is written, not spoken, and practice, practice, practice!

With study, practice, and feedback from your professors, you will be on your way to writing like an educated individual who will be taken seriously. Your professors and peers long to hear what you have to say, so give yourself the opportunity to be heard!

Thanks everyone—happy writing!

