

January 5, 1940

To Members of the Faculty:

One of the requirements for the degrees of Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, and Bachelor of Science in Education in Youngstown College is the following: "No student shall be graduated who has not satisfied the head of the English department concerning his proficiency in the use of English." (Catalog Number 1939-1940, pp.32, 35, 36). It is assumed by the English department that that proficiency has been attained if the student has completed English 101-102 with a grade of C or better. But it is impossible for the English department to compel the student to write habitually, in and out of school, in such a way as to demonstrate that proficiency. This committee suggests that one means of forcing the student into an habitual use of acceptable written English is to penalize him severely for all written work which is not mechanically acceptable. In order to determine the feasibility of such a plan the committee is attempting to gather pertinent information from the faculty. Will you, therefore, please answer the following questions. If you have any suggestions we should be very grateful to have you write them on the back of this paper.

1. Is the written work of your students of such a nature that you are in a position to determine their mechanical proficiency in written English?

Yes. Frequently.

2. Do you at present reduce grades on written work if you consider it mechanically deficient? If you do, approximately how much?

Subconsciously, without doubt; but not intentionally.

3. Would you be willing to impose penalties for mechanically unacceptable written work if such a method were favored by a majority of the instructors?

If agreed on, yes. But I think there is a better system. See other side.

4. Do you feel that it would be undesirable to penalize students in courses where mechanical proficiency in written English can be judged, when there are other courses where the written work is of such a nature that the proficiency cannot be determined, and hence no penalty can be imposed?

Yes, if nothing better can be devised.

5. Obviously one of the greatest problems in imposing penalties is the determination of what is acceptable and what is not. For that reason some of the possible kinds of errors have been listed in approximate order of flagrancy. Please check those which you consider sufficiently heinous to be looked upon as an indication of a serious lack of proficiency. (This is not a problem for the English department to solve; correctness is determined by usage; an item is correct or incorrect only as cultivated people believe it to be so.)

Improper capitalization is mere carelessness and should be heavily penalized if only for disciplinary reasons. same idea holds for failure to punctuate ends of sentences.

Incorrect spelling - Of course no one ever expects to spell unassisted by a dictionary; so on examinations we must necessarily pardon some mistakes. But is there not an essential minimum ability which we can expect even in examinations?

Improper capitalization

Punctuation - Failure to indicate the end of a sentence

- Failure to use marks of punctuation with any sense of their value

Usage - Use of words and phrases generally felt to be indicative of lack of cultivation (ain't, you was, them books, etc.)

Considerable leeway is permissible, but spelling can be so bad as to be almost fatal. The same idea holds for generally faulty punctuation.

Please fill in the blank and place it in Mr. Dykema's box as soon as possible.

Errors of usage such as are indicated above should be considered sufficient grounds to withhold graduation, though special consideration might be given to students with a foreign background. I should be willing to extend the list

Academic Standards Committee  
Subcommittee on English Grammar  
K. W. Dykema  
E. D. Scudder  
C. B. Semans

to include many other usages, even down to such sequences as "different than". A carefully prepared list of such usages taken from actual experience and put into the hands of all students might be helpful.

(Over)

I am taking the liberty of giving to the committee my ideas on this subject. There are two objections to the plan of having all instructors who ordinarily receive suitable papers grade them on English. The first objection may seem to be a reflection on my colleagues, but it is not meant in that way. Poor English has become so thoroughly shot through our educational system that many college professors (I am not referring to Youngstown College any more than to all others including Harvard or Johns Hopkins) are not really competent to grade on English. Any one who has had to edit materials submitted by college faculties will certainly agree to this point. The second objection is that many find it difficult enough to grade on subject material, and the deflection of attention from the subject in hand to the English will result in a generally poorer job of grading all around. It is also to be remembered that all graders are subconsciously influenced by the English of the paper under consideration. Poor writing and bad English make it more difficult to get the student's meaning and constantly call off the attention from the argument being presented, with the result that the reader invariably sets a lower value on the material itself. It would be well for this to be pointed out to the students.

~~The above objections would be trivial if they were inherent in all plans to~~ achieve the results desired by the committee. Would it not be possible, however, to leave the grading entirely to the Department of English? If each member of faculty who receives papers in formal English were required to turn over to the Department of English each semester three papers that seem the poorest in English, it would enable that department to determine which students are not living up to the standards that can reasonably be expected of them. The Department of English might then be authorized to cancel the credit in English composition until the student has passed another semester of work in that subject. Students whose credit is canceled might be put into a special, remedial class or be thrown in with a regular class in English composition as is the more convenient, but the preference would certainly be in favor of the former. This plan not only punishes the student who is merely careless but also offers aid to those who really need it.

In suggesting this plan, I must confess that twice have I seen something similar tried and fail. In each case the weakness lay in the fact that the submission of papers to the Department of English was left optional with the faculty and practically no papers were submitted. If such a plan should be tried, it ought to be inaugurated by a strong statement from the president that cooperation is an important part of the instructor's duty. Furthermore, the head of the department should take the initiative to make the scheme work by calling on the instructors individually to hand in their poorest papers whether good or bad. In spite of former failures, I still believe that this is the road to better college English.

Bad English in colleges is one of my pet peeves, and I am in thorough sympathy with the objectives of the committee. I should like to see the Modern Language Association call upon all colleges to undertake a period of twenty years of specialization in English composition even, if necessary, to the neglect of English literature during that time. It would take about twenty years of training the teachers before the reform would be felt from the grade schools up, and not until a change is effected from the bottom to the top will the improvement be permanent.

Respectfully submitted,

Monroe P. Gould