IF THEY TEACH EBONICS, THOSE CHILDREN WILL NEVER LEARN TO SPEAK PROPERLY, RIGHT?

DANG TOOTIN', Y'ALL!

UFF-DA! YA, YOU BETCHA!

DAT'S DA TROOT!

FER SHUR....
world as black Americanistic and
president of the growing multiracial GPA
because the majority of the GPA's
member were black people. I'm not
afraid of diversity and the social
equality that comes from it. We are
an American nation on the
world stage, and in the world of
media, there seems to be a
dilemma of black media.

Our voices, our stories, our
tales, our experiences, our
histories, our pain, our joy, our
love, our hate, our dreams, our
visions, our realities, our
freedoms, our struggles, our
movies, our music, our
culture, our art, our
literature, our
philosophies, our
wisdom, our
knowledge, our
understanding, our
intelligence, our
compassion, our
empathy, our
emotions, our
feelings, our
passions, our
desires, our
aspirations, our
ambitions, our
goals, our
visions, our
dreams, our
goals, our
purposes, our
intentions, our
intentions, our
values, our
beliefs, our
convictions, our
principles, our
morals, our
ethics, our
dignity, our
honor, our
character, our
comradeship, our
friendship, our
community, our
neighborhood, our
city, our
country, our
world.

We are not a monolith, but a
diverse and dynamic
people who have
contributed to the
world in unique and
remarkable ways. We are
more than just a single
culture, a single
civilization, a single
religion, a single
language, a single
heritage, a single
people. We are
Americanistic, a
melting pot of
cultures, a
harmony of
difference, a
unity of
diversity.

In this world, where
media is a powerful
force, we must
embrace our
diversity, celebrate our
individualities, and
cherish our similarities.

We are not defined by
our differences, but
by our common
humanity. We are
Americanistic, a
people who
value freedom,
justice, equality,
and respect for
each other. We
are a nation of
dreamers,
innovators,
creators,
leaders,
entrepreneurs,
artists,
musicians,
writers,
filmmakers,
scientists,
athletes,
activists,
philanthropists,
thinkers,
visionaries,
heroes,
champions,
and
revolutionaries.

We are Americanistic,
and we are
united.

We are
Americanistic,
and we are
powerful.

We are
Americanistic,
and we are
worthy.

We are
Americanistic,
and we are
united.

We are
Americanistic,
and we are
powerful.

We are
Americanistic,
and we are
worthy.

We are
Americanistic,
and we are
united.

We are
Americanistic,
and we are
powerful.

We are
Americanistic,
and we are
worthy.
About Ebonics

Let's not pursue English substitute

When the Oakland, Calif., School Board recently voted to make ebonics, or "black English," an official second language to be taught along with standard English to aid inner-city black students who perform poorly on achievement tests, they unleashed a firestorm of controversy. The Oakland board further stated that teachers needed to show greater sensitivity to differences in English usage such as ebonics. The correct response for such a position is, "Rubbish." Ebonics is not a second language, but rather a form of slang used by many African-Americans. It does have a long history, at least in some form, stretching back to the disgraceful days when this nation subjugated blacks to slavery. Many poor and rural blacks have spoken their own version of pigeon English, and parts of that version have been coupled with "street" English to form what is being referred to as ebonics.

George Bentley
The Last Word

ebonics.

Deriding the Oakland decision, widely diverse individuals such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, former Education Secretary William Bennett, former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo and current Education Secretary Richard Riley have all spoken out against the establishment of ebonics as a second language. Jackson, in an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press," referred to the Oakland School Board's decision as "... unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace." He called the use of ebonics in the schools as "... teaching down to our children."

It is not often that you will find this column and the Rev. Jesse Jackson in total agreement, but this is one of those times. Ebonics is not a second language, and it certainly should not be taught as such. American society is based on English as the primary language, and it is unacceptable to begin teaching variations of that English as being acceptable and normal. If ebonics is acceptable, then pig Latin should be taught as well.

One of the primary purposes of education is to prepare students for the "real world" out there. Business is not conducted in ebonics, and it never will be. To teach children that speaking slang to the degree that is represented in ebonics does a disservice to those children and probably sets them back in their educational achievement.

It is essential that students be drilled in the proper usage of English so they can be properly prepared for the future. Many businesses already complain that high school graduates are poorly trained in language skills. To add ebonics to the educational mix will further set back an alreadyailing education system and set it on a faulty and grossly incorrect course.

We have to be very careful not to create an official second language in America. The experiences of Canada should stand as a very clear example of the tremendous costs and societal division that can be created over a dual language requirement. It is critical that English remain the primary language and be taught exclusively in our schools (with the possible exception of multi-language English tutoring for recent immigrants). The day that we accept another language as an official language is the day that America will truly be divided.

There is considerable pressure on the Oakland School Board to reverse its decision and drop ebonics as a second language. The Clinton administration has clearly stated that no federal funding will go toward the teaching of ebonics, and the state of California should do likewise.

Let's try to teach our children the language that they will need to achieve in the world, and not waste our money and the time of the students and teachers on useless classes in ebonics or any other English language alternative. Students should be encouraged to learn foreign languages, but to learn English as the language of America.

(George Bentley is a businessman and former Eden Prairie City Council member. His column is one of several commentaries and opinion pieces appearing regularly in this newspaper.)
NOT WHITE, JUST RIGHT

I believe the debate over Ebonics is flawed; to succeed kids need to master standard English

BY RACHEL L. JONES

In December of 1992, Newsweek published a my turn column that launched my professional writing career and changed the course of my life. In that essay, entitled "What's Wrong With Black English," I argued that black youngsters need to become proficient in standard English. While the dialect known as black English is a valid part of our cultural history, I wrote, success in America requires a mastery of communications skills.

Fourteen years later, watching the increasingly heated debate over the use of black English in struggling minority urban school districts, I can't help but offer my own experience as proof that the premise is greatly flawed. My skill with standard English propelled me from a life of poverty and dead ends to a future I could have scarcely imagined. It has opened doors for me that might never have budged an inch for a poor black girl from Cairo, Ill. It has empowered me in ways I can't begin to explain.

That empowerment still amazes me. The column, one that Ralph Waldo Emerson might have described as "a frank and hearty expression of what force and meaning is in me," has assumed an identity of its own, far beyond what I envisioned. It has been reprinted in at least 50 college English texts, anthologies and writing course books. I still have a scrapbook of some of the letters that poured in from around the country, from blacks and whites, overwhelmingly applauding my opinion. An editor in Detroit said he recognized my name on a job-application letter because he'd clipped the column and used it in a class he'd taught.

Recently, a professor from Brigham Young University requested permission to record the material on a tape used for blind students. But perhaps the most humbling experience of all occurred in 1991, when I was on fellowship in Chicago and received a phone call from a 20-year-old college student. He had just read the essay in one of his textbooks and, on impulse, dialed directory assistance, seeking my name. Because the column was written in 1982, when I'd been a student in Carbondale—and Chicago wasn't my hometown—there was no reason for him to have found me; I could have been anywhere in the world.

We talked for about an hour that night. He thanked me profuse...
Youth sound off on ebonics at summit

By Tonya Robertson
Staff Writer

The voices of nearly 100 young people who attended the YMCA Black Achievers Summit in St. Paul on Saturday were as different and unique as their hairstyles.

The youth, including baby-faced boys in neat afros or long braids and girls in beaded updos and sleek perms, provided varied responses about the issue of ebonics, or black English.

But in the midst of the sometimes heated discussion among youths from the Twin Cities area and Rockford, Ill., there was one common belief: The way they speak has little, if anything, to do with a perceived inability to learn, but everything to do with the kind of occasion it is and the people they're talking to.

"It's about choice," said Quintell Hill, 17, of Rockford. "When you get into the business area, it's only common sense to talk the way that people will understand. It's a choice of words."

The discussion was spurred by the recent decision by the Oakland, Calif., school board to recognize ebonics (a combination of the words "ebony" and "phonics") as a second language.

School officials argued that the way many black youngsters speak is a barrier to learning standard English and sought federal funding for ebonics programs. One student at Saturday's summit said she notices a difference between how her mother speaks at work and at home. "It's like a totally different way of talking," she said. "I think it's something basically inside of you."

Some said ebonics is slang, while others said they think it's a legitimate African-based dialect. Others agreed with some adult leaders who say that to make it in the United States, black employees must speak like their white employers.

But what these young people didn't buy is that all white people speak "standard English."

"I've been to the South, and the white people there speak like us, so why do they call it black English?" one student said.

"I think everyone speaks bad English," said Kenya Thigpen, 16, of Oakdale. "No one in America speaks proper English, and what is that? Ebonics is a tool to help all people, not just black people."

Student opinions ranged from agreeing that blacks should accept funding for ebonics programs to wanting to view the controversy as part of a broader economic issue. said Laurel Bunker, director of St. Paul's Black Achievers, a mentoring program for children in grades seven through 12.

"What we heard was their concern on the whole issue of ebonics, that society was saying they were incapable of learning, but they are saying they are already capable," she said.

She said the discussion also touched on the view of some participants that schools lack role models, and that black teens, especially boys, are too often labeled as gang members.

"They think ebonics is another way of justifying the bell curve," she said.

Classroom is the last place that we need ebonics

By Eldridge Cleaver

There are children who go around biting other children. Should our response be to legalize and institutionalize cannibalism and hand out bottles of ketchup?

I am one of the most liberal people in the world. And I am all for black pride. I am not just a freedom fighter; I am a freedom fighter. But I say "no" to ebonics.

When I was growing up, what is now being euphemistically called ebonics was accurately called bad English. I have the greatest respect for linguistic diversity. I speak English, Spanish and French. If I hadn't learned Spanish growing up in Los Angeles, I would not have survived my sojourn in Cuba. And I survived Algeria and France because I speak French.

At the same time, I insist that as U.S. citizens, we must put English first and uphold a standard of excellence. I understand and applaud cultural and linguistic diversity, but I reject all arguments that carry political correctness to the extreme of promoting anything other than English as our official language.

I believe that schoolchildren should be required to study foreign languages, particularly Spanish, but not to the detriment of their mastery and excelling in English.

The thirst for exclusivity and recognition often is misguided, as it is in this instance. It is like Jesse Jackson running down the street naked, screaming "I am a man! I am somebody!"

Thanks for telling us. We never would have noticed.

The only place for ebonics is the streets. We don't need it in the classroom; we need to rescue kids from ebonics, the illegitimate offspring of the shotgun wedding of ebony and phonics.

African-Americans are creative linguistically and have enriched the English language. But ebonics is the opposite of creative. It is a pathetic attempt to institutionalize dysfunction and to establish an idol.

Begone, you "poors." And you teachers of ebonics, get a real job teaching something with a redeeming social value. Stop flaunting your ignorance.

— Eldridge Cleaver, formerly minister of information of the Black Panther Party, is author of the upcoming "The Eldridge Cleaver Anthology." He wrote this article for the Los Angeles Times.
Johnny Be Good
Ebonics and the language of cultural separatism.

The school board of Oakland, California, can feel good about one thing: it has enabled Chuck D and William Bennett to find common ground. This is not an everyday occurrence. When these men are of one mind on an issue, it is safe to assume that consensus has been reached. The issue, of course, is Ebonics, which the Oakland school board announced last month to be the "primary language" of African-Americans, thereby providing the nation's newspapers with manna in what is normally a barren season. Between December 20th, two days after the board passed its resolution, and January 2nd, the Times ran seven news stories, one editorial, one column, two Op-Ed pieces, and three letters to the editor on the subject—fourteen items in thirteen days.

Even people who couldn't care less what either Mr. D or Mr. B thinks about anything, let alone whether they think alike, seem inclined to agree on this one. For Ebonics is, indeed, an unfortunate idea pretty much any way you look at it. It associates language with skin color (the name, as everyone now knows, is an amalgam of "ebony" and "phonics"), it smacks of cultural separatism, and it standardizes a pattern of speech that is regarded as purely colloquial even by most of the people who use it. The board's announcement, Jesse Jackson was quick to complain, made Oakland into the "laughterstock of the nation." It dressed up in the rhetoric of defiance what looked for all the world like an admission of defeat.

On December 24th, following a meeting with Jackson (who has a knack for entering as a conciliator controversies he himself has helped stir up), Oakland school officials began frantically to backpedal. The board was not, officials explained, proposing either to teach Ebonics or to teach in Ebonics—despite having directed the Oakland school superintendent, in its original resolution, to "devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language...and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills." Nor was it touting for state or federal funds intended for bilingual education—despite having concluded that "the English language acquisition and improvement skills of African-American students are as fundamental as is application of bilingual education principles for others whose primary languages are other than English." And it was not as-
that something useful can be learned about people from the origins of the way they talk is a myth. It makes not the slightest difference whether the colloquial speech of twentieth-century inner-city African-Americans is traceable to the speech of eighteenth-century English immigrants, to slave-boat pidgin, or to West African languages. The belief that it does make a difference belongs to the belief that "cultures" are discrete possessions of discrete groups—things whose "legitimacy and richness" (in the words of the Oakland school board) require official recognition and protection. Those words may seem the most sympathetic ones in the board's resolution—it must be good, people feel, to recognize all subcultures as equally worthy—but they are really the saddest. Multiculturalism, of the strident sort that the Oakland board has espoused, is no favor to American subcultures. In the short run, it may enliven everyone's appreciation of the variety of American styles, but in the long run it can only turn that variety into mainstream mush. Diversity has been an official mantra for several years; even Bob Dole recited it. But a whole society cannot think "It's good to be diverse" and actually be diverse at the same time. Subcultures flourish when they are just part of life, not part of the curriculum. When they acquire official patronage, they're on the way to the museum.

—LOUIS MENAND
The rich dialect that Portia McClain learned decades ago as a girl in Mississippi wasn’t well-received at her school in the North. Today, she’s looking for ways to make black English less of an obstacle.

She’s hoping to build a language bridge

By Kimberly Hayes Taylor
Star Tribune Staff Writer

During summers in Jackson, Miss., Portia McClain sat on the front porch listening to her great-grandmother and grandmother tell stories about slavery, chopping sugar cane, baling cotton, picking peanuts and sharecropping.

She was enchanted with the richness of their words. So she asked them questions until her curiosity ran dry.

By the time they had died, they left her a precious gift. She had learned to speak exactly as they did.

When she was back home on Chicago’s South Side, she thought little of the gift she proudly shared with friends, relatives and neighbors.

But the way McClain talked — with a Creole-Southern black dialect mixed with Gullah handed down from her African ancestors — didn’t sit well with her all-white teachers in her all-black school.

The teachers always said, “Portia, you didn’t get it right.” “Portia, you are not doing very well.” Portia, why do you speak that way?”

She asked no questions. Her papers were filled with red marks.

She and the other first-generation migrants from the South were shipped to the “dummy rooms.”

Those were the special education classes in the basement. She hated school. And she boiled with anger about her gift.

“I heard teachers say they don’t know how to talk,” McClain said. “They don’t know how to write, what are we to do with them?”

McClain didn’t know what to do, either. So when she turned 16, she dropped out.

She said it took nearly 20 years to regain her self-esteem. She went back to school at age 35 and began studying her language, black English, which some people now call ebonics.

Now she’s 50, has a bachelor’s degree and is at the University of Minnesota working on a master’s that focuses on the way black people talk. In her undergraduate studies, she managed to get the university to recognize black English as her first language to satisfy a second language requirement. She found 172 books on the subject in the university’s library and has studied black English patterns for 15 years.

She has gotten the attention of Minneapolis City Council Member Brian Herron, Minneapolis school board member Louis King and others. And she is determined to start an enrichment program that will help black students in Minneapolis learn standard English better without making them feel inadequate or stupid simply because they speak differently from their teachers.

High dropout rates

The state Department of Children, Families and Learning is projecting that 62 percent of the black students in Minneapolis schools who started ninth grade in 1993-94 will have dropped out within four years. The number jumps to 67 percent in St. Paul schools and is about 62 percent for the state.

McClain, Herron, King others believe those numbers are directly related to a language barrier between many black students and their teachers, who are primarily white.

How and whether to bridge that gap became a national debate after the Oakland (Calif.) school board announced last month that it would recognize ebonics as a language. On Thursday, the issue made its way to Capitol Hill, where a U.S. Senate subcommittee heard testimony on whether using black dialect can help black children learn standard English and whether the federal government should fund ebonics programs.

Critics, however, have argued that ebonics is not a distinct language. Sen. Lauch Faircloth, R-N.C., for example, said at the hearing that the decision to have teachers recognize ebonics struck him as “political correctness gone out of control.”
Program could help

The majority of [black] kids moving to Minnesota speak black English, and the majority of inner-city kids speak black English," McClain said. "When they assessed, they are placed in a remedial education.

McClain is certain that a program that first explains to parents what black English or ebonics is and then uses it to help students learn standard English will help.

"Do we care that our kids learn?" McClain said. "If they know the history behind the way they speak, they won't feel inadequate.

"When you tell a kid he's incorrect, you're telling him his whole family is incorrect and you lose that kid right away. But when you recognize it as a culture, you can say, 'I'm not here to take your culture away from you. I'm trying to make you successful outside your community.'"

King said a program that would be conducted outside of the regular school day could be in place by summer or at the beginning of the 1997-98 school year.

The program would feature the historical features of ebonics and language styles used in the black community.

"I had it happen to me," he said. "Not only in school, but even after I ran for office. When you're talking like that and those teachers don't understand you and are flippant to you and embarrass you in front of the class, you don't want to learn... I'm for this.

Something, he said, has to be done to help black students have a level playing field no matter how they speak at home and with their friends. "Everybody's talking about the gap, but nobody is talking about doing something to bridge the gap," Herron said. "I'm willing to try anything.

Seeking consensus

King said it will take another three to four months to build consensus among policymakers. First, policymakers must understand the difference between ebonics and slang. Then, he believes, funding can be obtained for a pilot program.

The ultimate goal is not to teach young people ebonics. They already know it.

"They must be able to understand English if they are going to succeed," King said. "We are giving them another tool in their toolboxes. And that tool is called standard English."

At a panel discussion last week on ebonics sponsored by Insight News, the Men of M.A.R.C.H. and KMOJ-FM, Ronald McGinnis, an Eagan attorney who formerly was a St. Paul districtwide administrator, spoke about the Emergency School Act, a program he directed. The program, which included ebonics in a broad effort to bridge disparities between white and black students, was initiated in 1976 in St. Paul schools.

First, through sixth-grade students with low to average test scores in reading and writing were taught using ebonics. When the same students were retested, on average, they outsored all other students in the city, he said.

The students also were surveyed before and after the program about how they felt about themselves. McGinnis said confidence levels among the students, some of whom went on to great accomplishments, increased by 60 percent. But the program was canceled in 1982, he said.

"Our kids can succeed. They are not getting what they need," McGinnis said. "Instead, they are placed in special education.

Students' wishes

Several young people said they know what they want: to understand each other and also to perform well in school.

Aisha Lewis, 18, a senior at North High School in Minneapolis, doesn't want teachers understanding the way she speaks to her friends and relatives.

"I don't need help to learn standard English," she said adamantly. "I'm very equipped and able to speak standard English and will when necessary. The way I speak to my friends is none of their business. The way I speak to my grandmother is none of their business.

Adam Davis, 16, a student at Harvest Preparatory School in Minneapolis, said blacks should have their own way of speaking to each other. He likes the way his teacher, who is black, speaks to him and his method of teaching.

"I used to go to a public school, and they didn't teach me anything that I'm learning now about my culture and my heritage," he said. "But I can take a European test."

Some distinctive features of black English

- If is the final letter of a consonant cluster, it is dropped. For example, "soft" (soft), "ack" (act). The voiced th is often replaced by d. For example, "dis" (this), "doz" (those).
- The invariant form "be" is used to denote habitual action or something ongoing. For example, "We be playing after school." (We play every day after school.) "To be" is deleted whenever one can use a contraction. For example, "He tired." "She at home.
- Multiple negatives are used in one sentence. "Don't nobody want no friends like that."
- The "s" is omitted when there are other words in the sentence that indicate pluralization. "I got two book." "He have 10 cent."
- Possession is indicated by position and context, not by the possessive marker's. "Carrie hair pretty. "That John cousin."

Source: "Black English Dialect and the Classroom Teacher," Franklin Alexander, Medgar Evers College, New York City.
Can Lawyers Write English?

"[People] ... may get mesmerized by some petty point and they think that is what makes the difference between good writing and bad writing. But it doesn't."

For several years my older brother was a junior clerk to a New York Supreme Court judge based in Lower Manhattan. I remember meeting Henry down in the judge's chambers one afternoon about closing time. We all left together to drive the judge home, a daily ritual. On the way uptown they argued about if one of them had used which when he should have used that in some conversation they were having before I arrived. They went back and forth on whether the clause in question was restrictive or adjectival. I'd heard about this before. The judge took enormous pride in his impeccable diction and loved correcting those whose language was not as syntactically meticulous as his. My brother was not above doing the same thing. I don't know how they passed their time in the office but I got the impression that if they paid any attention to each other at all, it was in hope of catching the other making some grammatical error. I never heard either say anything of substance, so busy were they picking on each other's speech.

That obsession with certain grammatical sticky places still haunts some people. They get nervous about their writing, they often worry about the difference between which and that, or like and as. They write convoluted phrases to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. They get tangled in their who's and whom's. I got a call yesterday from some reputable local attorneys who were arguing over this point. Which is correct: "Tell us if the time and date is acceptable to you," or "Tell us if the time and date are acceptable to you."

Now, is it important to know this stuff? No and yes. When I wrote a column in the Tallahassee Democrat offering the possibility that what people
had to say might be more important than how they said it. I got outraged letters to the editor and vicious personal attacks. I was accused of aiding and abetting the epidemic of ignorance, and hastening the collapse of western civilization as we know it. Someone wrote that I may be right about usage changing but that he was glad that he would not be around much longer to see it happen. Another inquired about the possibility of my being fired.

People get as irrationally attached to their grammatical rules as they might to the religion of their childhood. Their ferocity shows how deep language is in us; it hurts so much when we hear changes and variations that we tend to be prejudiced against the speaker. Local law firms not only have the right contacts, they have the right dialect.

The answer to the question, “Does language have fixed rules?” is no and yes. English has been changing for a thousand years. If you sampled backward every hundred years, you’d find two samples back, it would be unfamiliar; four samples back your have a very hard time understanding it; two more and it’s a foreign language. So the answer is no, language has no fixed rules. A short time ago it was considered in bad taste to use contact as a verb. You never contacted someone. You made contact with someone. If you insisted on that now, people would think you eccentric.

Hopefully used to mean only full of hope. It didn’t mean I hope or we hope. The proper traditional use of hopefully is, "The mother of the defendant waited hopefully outside the court." Only lately did people start to say, "Hopefully, we’ll win this case," when "We hope we’ll win this case" was meant. But only retired senior partners know that anymore.

But supposing you are writing for a judge or a client who does remember it. Or who separates the sheep from the goats by those who know the difference between disinterested and uninterested (disinterested, you remember, means objective and fair; uninterested means bored), or this potential employer hates people who unnecessarily split infinitives?

The conservative side of the fashion rack may be a bit boring but generally it protects you from unwanted hostility. Remaining on the traditional side of English usage is similarly likely to be safer than going for being "green."

This usage stuff is important, it might even be crucial, but it is not substance. As in the case of my mother’s judge, people with a little bit of learning, or who’ve gone to a school where they had a few strict rules beaten into them get mesmerized by some petty point and they think that is what makes the difference between good writing and bad writing. But it doesn’t.

Just because you are grammatical, that doesn’t mean you are logical. It doesn’t mean you have a clear style. It doesn’t mean you are persuasive. You need grammar, but it is only a small part of good writing. And, for some people it is a device that they use to torture those below them in the pecking order.

Good writing is something more complicated than memorizing the arcane rules for the differences between shall and will. If you want to improve your writing, you might want to look at big issues as well as small problems.

For several years Nancy Daniels ran a valuable clinic for public defenders and appeals lawyers at Florida State University, the Appellate Advocacy Training Program. Each clinic lasted several days and included various discussions and speakers. Nancy had the idea of having workshops in which appeals would be critiqued by a nonlawyer with an interest in writing and a lawyer who had done a good deal of appeals work. The nonlawyer would address the quality of the writing and the lawyer would talk about how the legal issues were handled.

They were good sessions. I met dedicated people and I learned a bit about legal writing. It was interesting to me that the public defenders, who were all experienced themselves, were more nervous about having their writing criticized than their legal reasoning.

What I found was this: Except for a wandering modifier or an awkward clause here or there, the writing, on a sentence-by-sentence level, presented no big problems. It was not elegant writing but it was not an elegant venue. There were not flagrant grammatical gaffes or monster misusages. It was, by and large, sturdy straightforward prose with errors few, far between, and certainly not fatal.

The issues I noticed were much more interesting than misplaced apostrophes.

As I read the appeals over the three years I visited the program, I began to see how much writing an appeal is like writing a short story. It is fiction with a particular set of rules. You are to create a short story but you cannot change the set of facts that are supplied to you.

It’s comparable to a complicated French poetic form in which the rules are the poem has to be 19 lines long and you can only use two rhymes, and line 1 is to be repeated in full on lines 6, 12, and 15, while your third lines must form a closing couplet. I didn’t make this up. It’s called a villanelle, and making any sense at all, much less writing a decent poem within the rules, is no mean feat. But people have done it.

Dylan Thomas’ “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” is a villanelle.

Anyway, back to legal writing. An appeal is a sharply fictional written within a tight set of constraints. In this type of story the point is to show that a miscarriage of justice occurred that, if allowed to stand, will cause a whole lot of trouble down the road that nobody wants. Briefs and orders and other legal arguments tell different stories. This is what should be done. This is what should not be done. This is what will happen if you don’t do what I tell you.

Now what did I often find in the appeals I had? I'd start off and I'd read who got out on the left side
of the car and who got out on the right side. And I'd be told the car was an aqua four-door 1978 Bonneville with a dent in the hood. Now, it's authors of fiction establish a detail, it is something you need to remember because later on it'll turn out that the dent in the hood is an important clue, and who got out on what side determined the angle of the shot. The reader of the appeal reasons similarly. You focus on what you are told because you're thinking; that's important, the author went to the trouble of pointing out that detail. Left side, right side, Bonneville, four-door, aqua, dent in hood, borrowed from his sister. And the story goes on with who crossed the street first and stood in front of Florsheim Shoes and the other guy then crossed the street and stood in the doorway of Ivan's Clothing Cupboard. So you remember Florsheim. Ivan's. And it goes on like this for a couple of pages, and you don't see what the point is, what the writer is driving at, and what the issue is because it turns out that all this detail has nothing to do with the basis for the appeal, but by that time you think this writer is trying to be literary or trying to confuse you or you don't know what.

Other information can turn out to be similarly irrelevant. Historical reviews. Discussions of rulings not required for the argument. But these were potentially interesting briefs. Embedded within them were good stories that raised serious and interesting points of law that might easily arouse the interest of a judge. Often at writers' workshops and conferences there's a session called an editors' panel. You collect four or five editors of literary magazines and put them in front of a room and they're supposed to tell about their editorial policy and the work they are looking for. What they actually do is moan a lot. They say the number of stories the magazine receives is overwhelming. They complain about how they get too many manuscripts and they don't have time to read them and too many people are writing and they have too little room in the magazine and can only publish a small fraction of submissions and they are sorely put upon and not particularly appreciated.

In 1989 Judge Stephen Grimes of the Florida Supreme Court spoke at the last Appellate Advocacy Training Program. He was a thoughtful speaker, addressing other professionals and honestly confronting the issues. He said the number of appeals the court receives is overwhelming. They get too many appeals and don't have time to read them, too many people are writing them, they have too little room in the docket and can only take a small fraction of appeals, and they are sorely put upon and not particularly appreciated.

This was too close for comfort. Judge Grimes continued, like any honest, beleaguered editor, to note that the appeals he and his clerks read often started slowly detailing insignificant fact after insignificant fact. The writers seemed infatuated with trivial detail, too interested in showing off how much effort they put into their work, too digressive, self-indulgent with their own style, and you could fall into a coma before they got to the point.

When overworked persons are bombarded by too much material demanding their attention, if they can't figure out why information is being given, how the writer is developing the argument, what the point is, attention wanders, and the memo, brief, report, whatever gets put aside, ignored, passed over, lost in the shuffle.

And for writers, that is failure, oblivion, the death of our work. The persons you wanted to reach never heard what you had to say.

So, what are the answers? Here I hesitate because of the danger of sounding

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Are you worn down by drafting briefs, pleadings, and appeals? Are you someone who writes for love of exploring current trends, developments, and ideas and sharing the exploration with readers? Then there is hope that you may find happiness as a contributor to Bench & Bar.

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—ED.
“It is possible to work toward exorcising the demon of English that haunts your writing, that makes it stiff and awkward and painful. Numerous features of legal material turn out not to be necessary.”

like someone you’d least like to find yourself next to at a party — an English teacher. It happens to me all the time — I admit I teach English and the first thing people say is, “Oh I better watch how I talk.” Then they contrive to sneak away. Politely, of course. Things have changed though. Now I tell people I teach writing fiction. Then the reaction is different. People have stories to tell and want to tell them. They talk to me about their writing. It is as if there were two different universes. English, a cruel maze of rules, pitfalls, traps, embarrassments, and painful hours chiseling deadly prose. And fiction, a relief, an opportunity to express yourself, to recapture experiences, to exercise your imagination, to create something of your own.

It is possible to work toward exorcising the demon of English that haunts your writing, that makes it stiff and awkward and painful. Numerous features of legal material turn out not to be necessary.

In the advocates’ workshop, discussions revealed that many of the more boring features of briefs were not required by law. Sometimes they were the results of house rules established by each office. They did it in a certain way because they did it a certain way. They didn’t think about it other, more efficient, and possibly more persuasive possibilities. Just because you are accustomed to something doesn’t mean you should be.

Good writing is being severe with yourself. Cutting out fancy phrases that you always like because you think it adds class to your prose. Example: Many people, when they write, never have anyone do something, they always proceed to do something. They proceed to present evidence and they proceed to enter a plea and proceed to make their arguments, and when you tell them you can just have the person present evidence, enter a plea and make their arguments, they look hurt and say, “But it sounds better.” Well, it doesn’t sound better. It proceeds to sound like hot air.

Any self-respecting office should have a shelf of books on writing: An up-to-date dictionary, the Chicago Manual of Style, a secretarial handbook, several different grammar books because no single one has all the answers, a dictionary of synonyms, at least two books on usage like Nicholson’s Modern American Usage or Bernstein’s The Careful Writer. No one can remember correct semicolon usage. You look it up.

Most important of all, you should refuse to hire anyone who does not have the principles of Strunk and White’s book. Elements of Style tattooed on their wrists. This 78-page classic has a section called “Elementary Principles of Composition.” It has 11 brief rules. You remember these rules and you will know all about writing you’ll ever need to make a living. You will never be hungry again.

Keep sentences brief. I never met a sentence that was too short to read. I have met many sentences that were so long that I felt I should have taken a box lunch. If you write sentences like that, the chances are that your readers will never get to the end, and if they do, they’ll be too exhausted to climb to the next mountain. I have a friend who loves to talk so much that he always ends his sentences with but and in case he wants to keep going. Some people write the same way. They write a sentence, and they go on to attach another, creating a sort of articulated worm, ruining two or three potentially good sentences. When you fall into some kind of verbal thickets, the best way out is to use your sentence machete.

Make clear your major points as early as possible. Some people seek to dazzle by constructing a convoluted argument that confuses the reader until the dramatic voila moment, when they pull their conclusion out of their hat, hoping their readers will applaud, stand up, throw their hats in the air, and shout, “Bravo, Brilliant! You’re absolutely right!” Actually what usually happens is that readers get bored and resentful, and unconsciously start building up reasons to discredit the argument they see too tediously building. So by the time you pull the rabbit out of the hat, your audience either has gone home or is inclined to believe your rabbit is a bad dog.

I tell my fiction writers to read aloud what they have written to themselves. I urge you to try it. Your ear tells you when you are being confusing and when you are confused.

Good writing is knowing your audience and addressing yourself to your audience’s needs. It’s much more than semicolon usage. It’s cutting to the chase. It’s being pungent. As my brother said, later in his career when he was asked if the city council was a rubber stamp for the mayor: “No,” he said, “a rubber stamp at least makes an impression.” Be sure people understand your point. Be sure you understand your point.

The good news is good writing is learnable. The bad news is good writing is good judgment. And that’s never easy.

Jerome Stern, professor of English at Florida State University and director of the creative writing program, is the author of Making Shapely Fiction and books columnist for the Tallahassee Democrat.
E-mail jargon exerts its influence on language

By Barbara Yost
Arizona Republic

AFAK, I'll BRB, FWIW. Until then, I'll TTYL. Time flies, IYKWIMAITYD.

Sanskrit? Hieroglyphics? If this looks like some indecipherable ancient language, rest assured you won't need the Rosetta Stone to translate it, just a working knowledge of e-mail jargon, a dialect that compresses English into as many acronyms as possible.

Translation: As far as I know, I'll be tight back, let's talk. Until then, I'll talk later. Time flies, if you know what I mean, and I think you do.

Are e-mail and the Internet changing the English language? Of course they are. Everything changes language, especially time, technology and politics.

Look at the epic poem "Beowulf," written more than 1,000 years ago in Old English. For modern readers, it's almost incomprehensible, resembling a cross between Norse and Latin:

Oft Scyld Seafing
monegum maegnum
epoode eorl;
feascfet funden;
weox under wulknun

Jump to the 14th century and try to read Geoffrey Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales." The text is a little easier than "Beowulf" but still a bit of a stumper without a glossary. "Whan that April with hys shoures soothe, the drogthe of March hath perced to the roote."

Shakespeare's plays, written in the late 1500s and early 1600s, are easier still, but no one would confuse them with Arthur Miller.

Now the Internet arrives with its own brand of poetry: "Forget 600 megahertz, this baby is running at a gigahertz through a RAM bus big enough to download twice the information."

To the uninformed, it might as well be a line from Chaucer, but language experts are not alarmed. They neither condemn nor condone the evolution but simply watch with interest as technology plays a hand in how we communicate.

Self-regulating

"There's nothing you can do about it," said Alleen Pace Nilsen, linguist and English professor at Arizona State University.

More formal writing, Nilsen says, probably won't be affected by acronyms and the casual structure of computer language — spelling and punctuation are lax and subjects are often omitted.

And don't despair that e-mailspeak will result in drastic changes in English.

E-MAIL continues on E2:
— New technology has always changed, added to language.
Unlikely that trend will mean drastic changes in language

"It's self-regulating," said Elly Van Gelderen, ASU linguist and associate professor of English. "If you don't understand someone anymore, you go back to what's slightly more standard."

What's standard?
That question could not have been answered 300 years ago. Until English was codified about 1700, when the printing press was well established, spellings and grammar were inconsistent.

Pronunciation, while difficult to determine before recorded speech, was also subject to the whims of time.

War can change language when conquering armies bring in their own vocabularies. When William I of Normandy invaded Saxon England in 1066, the English language was enriched with French influences and became the most important language in the world.

Creativity can change language. People invent new words. Shakespeare was the first to use such terms as pedant, assassination, obscene and frugal, though all have roots in Latin or Greek.

Some words are created because they sound like the objects they describe, a device called onomatopoeia. But not every ear hears these sounds the same.

Consider "Snap! Crack! Pop!" the sound Rice Krispies make. Sounds logical? Think again.

In Austria the cereal says, "Piff! Paff! Poff!" and in South America, it's "Pim! Pum! Pam!"

Invention can be the mother of language, but the life span of a new word depends on who invents it, who uses it and how relevant it is.

With the arrival of the automobile at the turn of the century came a new vocabulary to name new parts.

We borrow words from old technology to describe new technology. The word "car" comes from the previous mode of transportation, the carriage. The word "carriage" had come from "chariot."

Names are needed

Look at the Internet to see how software writers are giving us familiar terms for cyberspace functions: We "bookmark" favorite Web sites and store material in "folders."

But there also are new words, and technology has always expanded our vocabulary. Since the earliest times, objects have needed names.

The guy who invented the wheel had to come up with a word to describe it," said James W. Ney, ASU professor emeritus of linguistics.

Throughout history, subsets of society have invented their own vocabulary. American miners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries developed a language called Bootlunk. In the 1950s and '60s, blacks introduced such terms as "jazz me, baby," "let it all hang out" and "beat to his socks" (which evolved into the white term, the "Beat Generation").

Teenagers are notorious for creating their own slang — from "23 skiddoo" in the 1920s to "tubular" and "griddy to the max" in the 1990s. Slang is popular because it forges unity within a group, what Van Gelderen calls an "identity marker."

"It's appealing because it's for-