

IMPROVING THE POOR SELF IMAGE OF THE REMEDIAL STUDENT

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Almost every student who is required to take Remedial English, or Standard English as we prefer to call it, comes to the course with poor self image. He didn't do well in high school English, and now in college he has been shot down again because his low ACT score has landed him in Remedial. He's ashamed and disheartened.

What can we do to improve his self image? We're not psychotherapists, but we must do something. More important than teaching him where the commas go is helping him gain a modicum of self respect. We must do something other than convince him once again that he's a failure.

At Western Illinois University we do six things that seem to help:

First we try to alleviate the student's feeling of failure. He's been told often enough that English is important and that he's no good at it. He needs to hear another story. So we say, "Everybody's good at something, and English just isn't your thing. Perhaps your thing is math or sports or music or mechanics. English may not be your thing just as mechanics isn't mine. I have no idea how a carburetor works or why valves have to be ground or piston rings replaced. And yet I get by.

"Likewise many people get by very well without knowing much about English. Lots of good careers don't require a knowledge of English. A top mechanic or an electrician can get by without it. In fact some of you who are going into such fields may decide eventually that English, and college in general, just isn't worth the bother. It's certainly possible to have a good life without a college education.

"But if you do intend to finish college, you'll need to learn something about writing. And even if you don't plan to finish, it's a good idea to learn a few things about writing because someday you may have to write an application or a report, and you'll be glad if you can be proud of what you write. Besides, this course will teach you to think, and that's important for everybody."

Then we say that the course teaches Standard English, the English people all over the world write, and that it may be different from the dialect the student speaks, particularly if he comes from the South or the East or a black community. We say that former President Kennedy spoke a dialect, saying *dollah* for *dollar*, *idear* for *idea* and *Cubar* for *Cuba*, but that he wrote Standard English, as we all must do. And we emphasize the social and economic values to being able to write the Standard dialect.

We then point out that about ten percent of the freshman class have to take Standard English, that last year the majority of those who took it made a C average later in regular composition, and that many of them said taking standard English was the best thing they had ever done.

We let the student know we're on his side. It may be the first time he's ever thought of an English teacher as anything but an enemy. We say, "Your job is to learn to write well enough to pass the final essay exam. Unfortunately I won't be grading that essay. It will be read by a committee of English instructors, who will decide whether you are ready for a regular composition course. My job is to help you prepare yourself to write that essay." Thus the instructor becomes the ally rather than the adversary of the student.

The second way we help the student improve his self image is to free him from his inhibitions about writing. To do this we let him start writing at once. Just as the music department doesn't make the student work for months on scales and five-finger exercises before allowing him to play his instrument, and the art department doesn't make him spend an inordinate amount of time on design and art history before letting him dabble with his paints, so our program, instead of making him spend hours on grammar or on reading about writing, lets him begin writing immediately.

He begins with free writing, which we assure him no one will ever read. It may be his first experience with free writing, and he will find it satisfying to put down ideas without worrying about errors. That in itself takes away a bit of pressure.

Next he begins to write about material he's familiar with—an account of a significant incident in his life or a moment he'd like to live over, a discussion of what he could do to get along better with someone he's at odds with, a letter to his parents telling them what they did wrong or right in bringing him up. He can succeed in these assignments because he has deep feelings about them, and he isn't at a loss for specific details.

To gain confidence he needs to write and write and rewrite. In preparation for each class hour he writes either a complete thesis statement, a rough draft, or a final draft. In all he turns in a paper a week, some written in class, some out of class, the first ones only a page, the last ones a full five paragraphs. And every paper he turns in is returned to him the next class period—before he has forgotten about it or lost interest. The papers have to be read sometime, and we have found “tonight” as good a time as any.

Third, we give the student confidence he can think by teaching him to work out a thesis statement for each paper he writes. All writing, we tell him, is persuasive writing. Whether he is discussing an aspect of euthanasia or describing a snowstorm, he is trying to persuade his reader of something, and that something must be stated in one sentence and then backed up by two or three points, each of which goes into its own paragraph. Working in this way on an entire paper teaches him more about organization and thinking than working endlessly on sentences and paragraphs, which can be boring and often lead nowhere. (Frequently classes bog down on sentence combining or paragraph construction and never get on with the real business of writing a paper.)

Once he has learned to think through a question until he can write a thesis statement with supporting points, he finds that having to write a paper no longer floors him. He knows how to go about it. Often his writing in the past has failed to communicate not so much because he transgressed rules of grammar as because he had not learned to organize his thoughts logically. Learning to write a thesis statement, which is really learning to think, is the single most important thing we teach.

Fourth, we give the student confidence that he can master mechanics. To do this we teach the least grammar possible, thus convincing him that what he has to learn is finite and that he can encompass it. When he hears the first day that he isn't going to have to bother with most of the things his high school teachers talked about, he comes alive; and when he hears the name of the textbook, *The Least You Should Know about English*, he gets the idea that maybe for once an English course won't be beyond him.

Research has shown that the study of grammar, whether traditional or transformational, has virtually no influence on writing skills. In fact, teaching too much grammar may even be harmful because it will usurp time the student should spend on writing.

He has always thought that there was no sense in learning most of what his English teachers were trying to teach him; he has always known that it won't make any difference a couple of years from now whether he can tell a direct object from an indirect object or a gerund from a participle; and now he is pleased to discover that some English instructors agree with him.

We use little terminology. As Gary A. Sutton has said, “The emphasis should be on usage rather than on terminology. . . . Other than the very basic grammar terms, grammar terminology might best be reserved for the class in linguistics.” Students need not know the grammatical labels for words, phrases, and clauses in order to manipulate syntactic structures effectively. We never mention adjectives or adverbs or predicate nouns. A conjunction is simply a connecting word, an antecedent is the word referred to, gerunds and present participles are *ing* words, and a parenthetical expression is an interrupter. The student works with words he knows rather than learn an extensive vocabulary he'll never use again.

He does not need to identify subjects and verbs and clauses so that he won't write run-ons and fragments. He needs to know that a modifier (never mind its name) goes close the word it modifies. He needs to know there are two kinds of pronouns—the subject kind (used as a subject or as a word that means the same as the subject) and the nonsubject kind (used for everything else). He needs to know that

like ideas are put in parallel form and that he must not shift tense or person. He needs to know a dozen rules of punctuation and capitalization, and of course he needs to learn to spell common words and to make contractions and possessives. But that's about all.

We avoid lengthy explanations. We simply present a rule and say, "Now learn it by using it in one hundred sentences." He does ten sentences at a time, correcting them by the answers at the back of the textbook, thus teaching himself as he goes; and as he gets more and more sentences right, he gains confidence about the mechanics of writing.

Fifth, we help the student see himself in a better light by helping him become more responsible. He has poor study habits, he's unorganized, and he's probably lazy. By insisting that he complete his daily assignments, we try to show him that he can be a worker and that we expect him to achieve. No one checks to see whether he does his one hundred sentences for each rule, but at the beginning of each class period, we give a one-sentence test. Those tests, along with a record of his writing, make part of his final mark of Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory, and he comes to see that doing his hundred sentences for each rule enables him to pass those sentence tests. Also he understands that unless he does his work every step of the way, he probably will not succeed in writing that final essay.

By making the course rigorous, we shove him into taking responsibility for his performance. Tests cannot be made up, and late papers are never accepted, regardless of the reason. We explain that we allot a certain time to reading and recording a set of papers, and that we haven't time to do an odd one later. We will correct one during an office hour, but the student forfeits credit. It is amazing how our rule encourages him to get papers in on time.

We tell him that a student is expected to spend two hours outside of class for every hour in class; and if he fails a daily test, we say, "Did you work for two hours? Did you do all one hundred sentences? Why not?" Gradually he comes to see that work is necessary, and often he admits that he is working at English for the first time in his life.

And we do get some results. One freshman composition instructor said this about our students: They're doing better than many of our regular freshmen. They still use some fragments and run-ons, but their papers are well organized, with thesis statements and concrete details. And the big difference is their attitude. They hand their papers in without fail. They come to class confident, ready to learn, willing to receive criticism, open to the possibility that they can improve. Something good must have happened to them in Standard English.

The sixth and most important thing we do for the student is to let him taste success. On every paper he hands in we write an encouraging remark, even though it may be nothing more than "Good idea, but. . . ." His ultimate success, however, the real booster of his self image, comes when one of his papers is read to the class. Nothing else we can possibly do for him will equal that experience. We create a trusting community in the class by reading only papers that are praiseworthy and by never identifying the author. We keep a careful record of papers read aloud to make sure that each student has at least one paper read during the semester, one opportunity to think well of himself.

Last spring a young man who had been in my Standard English section more than a year before saw me on campus and said, "Remember me? You liked that paper I wrote in your class, the one about cross-country skiing. That was the first time in my life any writing of mine was ever read aloud to a class. . . or praised by a teacher."

Self image? That student and many like him have now come to believe in themselves as possible, rather than impossible, writers.