

Reporters, Actors, Renters, and Presidents: Grammatical Stories about Real World Writing
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Stories....powerful, moving, instructive. By stories, I mean the incidents or events in the news or on tv, stories about people and things our students know and care about. Haven't all of us teachers used anecdotes to stress a point in our classes? And I have found one of the best opportunities to use these stories is, believe it or not, during lessons on the supposedly dry subject of grammar (as well as punctuation and usage). Usually, my students, putting on that "oh-yeah! Whatever" look, give only nodding acknowledgment when I remind them that good editing will be important to them in the world beyond the ivied-covered walls of school. However, when I sprinkle grammar stories throughout my lessons, students understand better that the "real" world thinks effective editing is, indeed, essential to all writers.

Here are some examples of what I mean, and feel free to use these stories in your own lessons.^[1]

News Reporter and the Split Infinitive

The first Iraqi war provides a timely story about grammar's importance, a story which shows that English grammar plays a role in reporting. The former CNN reporter Peter Arnett, explained that during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, he had prepared a brief dispatch which contained absolutely no sensitive information. After Arnett had given his writing to an Iraqi head censor for approval, the censor told him, "You expect me to pass that [send the dispatch]?" Arnett was surprised, arguing that there was nothing in it to violate security. The Iraqi censor replied, "No, it's not the security, it's the grammar. You have split the infinitives." Arnett discovered that this Iraqi censor had majored in English literature at a Scottish university (388). When reporters get the grammar wrong, news stories might not get published.

Television Quiz Shows and Commas

Watching quiz shows is another source of grammatical anecdotes. Recently, a minor variation in a comma played a seminal role in such a program. The X-File actor David Duchovny, appearing on a celebrity version of Who Wants To Be a Millionaire? was asked,

“What film ends with the line, ‘Good luck among them, English’.” The actor promptly named Mel Gibson’s famous Scottish epic Braveheart. The correct answer, however, was Harrison Ford’s movie about the Pennsylvania Amish Witness. Duchovny contended that without the comma after them the answer was Braveheart. But the producers of the tv show claimed there was a comma after them, so the correct answer was the Ford film. As a result, Duchovny’s charity lost \$500,000 (“Actor” 2-A). Commas have monetary power; commas do matter.

Renting an Apartment and Good Editing

As teachers, we read widely, and, as we do, it might be useful to keep note cards handy to write down any terrific quotation about grammar, punctuation, and usage; all can be fodder for discussing an editing concern during a class. When reading through The Wall Street Journal, for example, I came across a story about a Los Angeles apartment owner who focused on good writing and grammar. Before he rented his upscale apartments, he asked applicants to write an essay about themselves. The owner did not like it when professional script writers or others with talent merely dashed off their essays; he made them rewrite, correcting all errors. Presumably, if there were bad grammar, the apartment was not rented! (Kranhold A2). Such a humorous, instructive tale validates good editing with the rather unusual benefit of a desirable apartment.

Presidents, Usage, and Pronoun Case

The speeches of Presidents illustrate what may happen if good usage and proper pronoun case are absent. When discussing the leader of North Korea, President George W. Bush explained the effect Kim Jong Il has had on the North Koreans: “One of the reasons why the people are starving is because the leader of North Koreans hasn’t seen to it that their economy is strong or that they are fed” (D-3, emphasis added). The President’s redundancy can lead to a discussion about how listeners receive a negative impression when speakers are not careful with sentence structure.

An example from former President Bill Clinton also indicates that in the world outside the classroom, grammar is important. During a 1992 campaign stop in St. Louis, President Clinton rallied the crowds by saying, “If you want a spring in your step and a song in your

hearts, you give Al Gore and I a chance to bring America back” (qtd. in Kilpatrick, emphasis added). From all over the nation, editorial writers lampooned Mr. Clinton for misusing pronoun cases, revealing that even a President can misstep, thereby causing himself, at the very least, extreme embarrassment.

Locating examples for the classroom takes some time and a bit of effort, but we teachers can discover language mishaps in newspapers, in news magazines, and in our own wide reading. Dropping in examples from current events also shows classes that their teachers possess a wide range of reading interests, certainly a good role model for students.

Would these anecdotes inadvertently convey that grammar, usage, and punctuation is trying to “get” the student, or as E. B. White once complained, “The English language is always sticking a foot out to trip a man. Every week we get thrown, writing merrily along” (151)? Actually, stories from the so-called real world do just the opposite. These examples from the realm of reporters, actors, renters, and Presidents (and other notables) illustrate that grammar deserves careful attention. One might, in fact, say that “. . . editing [is] the last glance in the mirror to pick off the lint” (Professor Sue Wheeler qtd. in Harrigan). Such attention to the fine points of grammar, punctuation, and usage creates the proper persona for our student writers so instead of language controlling them, they control language.... a worthy image for the real world.

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^[1]And, please, as you find your own grammatical stories, share them with me, too, at devetb@cofc.edu.