

# Improving the Writing Process and Making it Accessible to All

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**Abstract:** We live in a time where writing is ever-present in our world. Communication often happens in the form of writing and the majority of jobs require the skill of writing. The problem at hand is that not everyone has equal access to formal writing. In the history of education, writing has been taught as a corrective process, in which some students are “called out” for writing improperly. Most often these students are those who speak a stereotyped language such as African American Vernacular. The corrective method can create further roadblocks for students to grow in their writing. A solution to this problem is the teaching of code-switching in which students learn to “flip” from the informal to the formal.

## Introduction

Writing is at the heart of every English language arts classroom. Students are graded on their composition based on mechanics such as correct grammar, spelling, capitalizing, and so forth as well as stylistic elements such as voice and tone. Students develop their writing skills behind a desk in the classroom and continue to hone them throughout their academic careers and even into adulthood. According to the World Economic Forum, the literacy rate in our world is currently 87% of our population (Buchholz, 2022). Writing is everywhere and is a requirement for most jobs in the world. Unfortunately, a report published in 2003 by the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges reported that writing has been neglected in schools for the past twenty years and needs attention now more than ever (NCOW, 2003). While some students take to writing and thrive off its mix of creativity and structure, others feel threatened by its strict guidelines.

For some students, writing is a constant battle of being offered corrections which oftentimes results in confusion in understanding the correction and how to proceed forward in the revision process. According to the National Council of Teachers of English’s “Positive Statement on Writing Instruction in School” published in 2022, writing is often judged as being done “well” or “effectively.” Teachers may excessively correct student papers because the writers are using informal language. Unfortunately, this idea of writing being “good” or “quality” is rooted in white, Eurocentric norms. Therefore, children who speak and write in stereotyped dialects, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also called Black English Vernacular (BEV), may feel ostracized when it comes to the writing process. Additionally, students who fall into this category are more likely to be perceived as having writing deficits.

Teachers use their editing marks to explain to students what went wrong and how they can better their writing in the future. They may be nit-picky and identify all of the errors a student has in their writing in hopes that students will learn from their mistakes and find more success the next time. Correcting students’ language, whether it is written or spoken, creates a problematic situation and often puts stu-

dents on the defensive. For a student who struggles with formal writing, a paper overrun by red pen marks on every little error can be frustrating, overwhelming, and disheartening which can lead to a fear of and perhaps even a refusal to write.

How can we, as educators, teach these students to flip between their everyday spoken and written language to the formal, Standard American English (SAE), also known as Standard English (SE)? More importantly, how can teachers do so with consideration of students' identities? Overall, what can educators do to inspire more student success when it comes to writing? Instead of correcting, educators must think about how they can best support students in their editing process. The overarching goal is to make writing a safe and comfortable space for students, rather than an uninviting and unapproachable one. According to our nation's current status with writing, some changes need to be made to improve the writing process and student results. Every person should have access to writing, regardless of how one speaks or writes in their everyday life. Students can find success in the writing process by learning how to code-switch.

## What is Code-Switching?

The process of code-switching allows students to “flip” between their everyday spoken language to a language that can be used successfully in an academic classroom. Code-switching avoids “good” versus “bad” and “correct” versus “incorrect” when it comes to both spoken and written language. Instead, code-switching places emphasis on the “formal” versus “informal”.

The action of code-switching can be compared to choosing what clothing to wear, based on the occasion. When attending a formal event, such as a graduation or wedding ceremony, an individual would most likely choose to put more effort into their appearance, wearing a suit, dress, or similar outfit. This outfit is very different from what one might wear on a day spent at home, lounging around their house. On this occasion, they would most likely choose to wear more relaxed clothes, such as pajamas or sweats. An individual must consider the circumstances of the occasion to decide what outfit they will put on for the day. With code-switching, an individual must consider the environment they are in when deciding what kind of dialect they should use. For example, one would speak differently, using slang and specific jargon around their friends compared to the more formal language that might be used with their teacher or professor.

Teaching code-switching can be accomplished through contrastive analysis. In her article, Wheeler (2008) explains:

She leads students in contrasting the grammatical patterns of Informal English with the grammatical patterns of Formal English written on the right-hand side of the code-switching chart. This process builds an explicit, conscious understanding of the differences between the two language forms (p. 56).

After comparing and contrasting both the formal and informal versions of sentences, students are asked to determine the pattern in both the informal and the formal as well as the pattern to transition from the informal to the formal and vice-versa. Students learn patterns for grammatical elements such as subject-verb agreement, showing past time, possessive forms, and showing plurality (p. 56).

Code-switching allows students who speak a stereotyped language, such as AAVE, the ability to switch to a formal language that is more appropriate for the English classroom, thus improving their writing skills and granting them access to SAE.

## Correcting Language

For a significant amount of time in English language arts education, writing has been taught as a corrective process. Students have been asked to approach a chalk or whiteboard with a grammatically incorrect sentence on it and correct the writer's mistakes. Studies, such as the one conducted by Godley, Carpenter, and Werner (2007), have shown that these instructional methods are not always effective in teaching students how to write in a formal language. The researchers' study implemented daily language practice, such as the process detailed above, in 10th-grade English classrooms of an urban high school in a midwestern city. An example sentence used in the study reads, "Romeo sneaks into the Capulets party. Him and Juliet see each other and fall in love" (p. 117). Researchers were curious to find if this type of instruction "aligned with research on effective grammar and language instruction for speakers of African American English and other stigmatized dialects" (p. 107). Does this form of correction benefit students in the long run?

This study took place over the course of one school year, from August to June. Similar to the previous study, students were assessed with pre- and post-grammatical tests. Ultimately, researchers found that students' understanding of grammar and conventions of written SAE failed to improve throughout the course of the school year (p. 122). Also, within this study, the teacher heavily used the terminology "correct" and "incorrect" when speaking to their students both in terms of the daily language practice assignments and with students' spoken language.

The authors detail an in-class scenario in which the students were asked to correct their daily language practice sentences. Cindy, the teacher, asks for volunteers to go to the board to make a correction and then asks the class if they are correct or not. One student volunteered information from her seat and another asked why she could not go to the board. The student replied by saying, "I ain't going nowhere." The teacher pressed the student, trying to get her to correct her speech to formal English and eventually the student replied, "I mean, I in my seat right now, Mrs. Werner, if I stand up in front of you (rising pitch, pointing finger at Cindy) I will taspak proper, whatever you call it. But I'll speak in proper slang right now" (p. 120).

The pressure that Cindy placed on this student to speak "correctly" caused the student to become defensive, as she defended her spoken language. After polling the students, researchers found that they understood the reason behind their teacher's corrections, saying that she was probably looking out for them for when they apply to jobs. Other students shared how they felt about being corrected on their language, saying that it was "annoying," "too aggressive" and that they chose not to speak for fear of being corrected (p. 121). Finally, researchers suggested:

Our findings suggest that grammar and language instruction need to be reconceptualized in order to promote language ideologies that are reflective of current research in linguistics, that help students become more proficient in

written Standard English, and that build upon students' linguistic experiences in positive ways. (p. 123)

## Beneficial Switching

Teaching students how to code-switch has been proven to be effective in many research studies. For example, Fogel and Ehri (2000) conducted a study with a group of eighty-nine African-American students in the third and fourth grade who all spoke Black English Vernacular (BEV). The study took place in two Northeastern United States cities. Researchers divided the students into three different focus groups with three different treatment procedures: exposure (E), exposure and strategies (ES), and exposure, strategies and practice (ESP). Students in the E group simply listened to stories with sentences written in Standard American English. Students in the ES group listened to the same stories and were given a worksheet with the six SAE forms labeled and illustrated. Finally, students in the ESP group were given both of the previously mentioned treatments and were given practice examples in which students were asked to flip between SAE and BEV as well as feedback from the teacher.

Students were given a pretest of the six syntactical features used, exposed to the materials, and then given a post-test that provided researchers with their results. Ultimately, Fogel and Ehri (2000) found that the ESP group showed the most results. They concluded, "ESP instruction enabled students to translate BEV sentences into SE forms more effectively, and it enabled students to employ the targeted SE forms in their free-writing to a greater extent" (p. 228). They consider the switching between BEV to SE to be a mastery experience that maximizes student performance and growth.

## Conclusion

It is possible for teachers to place a greater focus on teaching writing in order to help students experience greater success in writing. Current studies on the topic explain that in order for students to improve their writing, they should be writing and code-switching every single day. Dr. Steve Graham (2019), a skilled writing professor and author of several handbooks for writing, explains the characteristics of a superb writing teacher beautifully by saying:

In terms of teaching writing, good instruction requires rich and interconnected knowledge about subject matter and content, students' learning and diversity, and subject-specific as well as general pedagogical methods; a professional vision of teaching as well as adaptive skills for applying this knowledge productively, strategically, and effectively; and a professional commitment to ensure that this knowledge and needed actions are applied day in and day out. (p. 283)

It is not surprising that Graham mentions knowledge of students' learning and diversity. As with many elements of teaching, teaching writing begins with deep care for students and what makes them unique.

When taking the previously mentioned studies into account, it becomes apparent that English language arts educators must leave the daily language practice, in which students are asked to correct the incorrect, behind and move into a more contrastive analytical approach when it comes to syntactic structures. Code-switching not only benefits students' growth grammatically, but it approaches the topic of spoken and written language in a more sensitive way. Students are not being called out for their incorrectness; instead, they are being guided toward a different way of speaking and writing that is more suitable for certain occasions and thus, students' uniqueness is being preserved. With their switching abilities, students will be able to write successful formal essays in the English class and beyond.

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## About the Author

Drew Longmore received a Bachelors of Arts in Art History and Theatre from The Ohio University in 2020. She recently obtained her Masters in Education in adolescent young adult English Language Arts education from the University of Toledo. Drew currently works at the Toledo Zoo & Aquarium in Donor Event Coordinating.