

ON SPELLING
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About a week ago another faculty member and I got into a bitter battle in the faculty lounge about spelling. He'll have his own story to tell about the fracas, but you know what kind of fabricated fiction that'll be. The one who shall remain nameless hit me first with a couple of wild verbal swings which had no substance behind them whatever. Then I unloaded with my statistics and he crumpled. That really made me feel powerful, and if there is anything we beleaguered English teachers need right now, it's power.

More times than I can count, I've heard teachers say, "Kids can't spell." I have said it myself, making the same assumptions many of you have made and remembering only the worst spellers I've known. With too many things about our schools, we have been our own worst detractors, especially when we meekly agree with lay persons who criticize schools, students, and teachers without knowing the facts. Perhaps we should look at our students' spelling more carefully to learn what the facts are and how good it really is.

When my ninth grade students wrote their last three themes, I had them count the words and write the totals at the bottoms of their papers. I circled the misspelled words as I checked their work. Then it was a simple matter to count the circled words and add the

total words with a calculator. For my purposes in teaching writing,

I chose to check the items as they are listed below. Note that items three and four are labeled "style."

1. All misspelled words (The same word was counted each time it was misspelled in a student's paper.)
2. Words lacking apostrophes
3. Numbers written as figures which can be written with two or fewer words (style)
4. Ordinals written in abbreviated form which can be written with two or fewer words (style)

In the table below are the counts made on the three sets of themes, Matter with Me, Spring, and Stained Glass. The identifying titles come from the short films which were used to stimulate a flow of ideas before the writing assignment. With the exception of the themes from a few students who were absent, all writing, both rough draft and final copy, was completed during the regular class period.

Matter with Me

<u>Hour</u>	<u>Total Words</u>	<u>Misspelled Words</u>	
2	3,579	53	
3	2,968	46	
4	2,731	61	
5	2,912	56	
6	2,868	62	
	<u>15,058</u>	<u>278</u>	1.84%

Spring

2	2,333	19	
3	2,229	14	
4	2,341	42	
5	2,514	34	
6	2,240	38	
	<u>11,657</u>	<u>147</u>	1.26%

Stained Glass

<u>Hour</u>	<u>Total Words</u>	<u>Misspelled Words</u>	
2	2,834	23	
3	2,741	28	
4	2,357	38	
5	2,790	30	
6	3,200	34	
	<u>13,955</u>	<u>153</u>	1.09%

If items three (numbers) and four (ordinals) had not been counted, the percentage of misspelled words for the Stained Glass theme would have been well below one per cent. Discarding the half dozen papers which have the most spelling errors would drop the percentage almost a quarter of a per cent.

Whether the improvement from 1.84% to 1.09% is significant or not, I can't say. A great many factors could have affected the change. When the Matter with Me theme was written, the students were asked to check their spelling before handing in their papers. When the Stained Glass theme was written, students were asked to check a check list posted on the classroom wall before handing in their papers. They were also told that if any one of the "check-listed" words was misspelled, the theme with that error would receive a goose egg. The words below are the "checklisted" words.

there/their/they're your/you're its/it's a lot

Of course, there could be other reasons why the percent of errors went down on the last theme. Maybe the topic grabbed more students, or more students decided they had something they wanted to say, something important. We could have been under the influence of a high pressure (or a low pressure) weather system. That theme

was written after the kids had had a good rest during Easter vacation. Or maybe the moon had something to do with it. Seriously, I would not discount any one of these reasons, even though they seem silly at first glance. But teaching could have been a factor too. Now that I think about it, that's what it had to be. Great teaching.

Although I think that we can improve on it, a one per cent rate of error in spelling isn't bad. I doubt that a cross section of the adult population would do any better. I think we should give credit to the teachers in the Willmar Elementary Schools, the seventh and eighth grade teachers in Willmar Junior High, and the students themselves.

1979 SPRING CONFERENCE

Minnesota Council of Teachers of English

May 4 - 5, 1979

Sunwood Inn
St. Cloud, Minnesota

Theme: A New Visibility

Program Chairperson: Mil Voelker
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