

Politics, the Written Word, and Your Mother's Vegetables That You Love to Hate

by Nicholas Viviano

A Thesis Served with Peas and Carrots

Any well-balanced home-cooked meal comes with a boring, tasteless, and dare I say nutritious side of vegetables. Regardless of the endless prayers to my lord and savior the night before or the pleas with my mother to be reasonable, like clockwork, those lackluster vegetables will still make an appearance. And after pushing them around for a couple of minutes and accidentally dropping half of them on the floor, I am still required to eat them.[1] But because the reward of having to endure nothing less than torture to forcefully ingest semi-watery, and throat clogging excuses for vegetables is the proposed promise of a decadent and chocolate-covered dessert, it's worth it.

Students growing up with the hopes of joining the elusive "one percent" are suffocated with the idea that they must learn an extremely specific way of communication and are forced to abide by certain rules that are shoved down their throats like mashed peas and carrots at their childhood dinner table. Novice and apprehensive freshmen are told that in order to become a professional in America, they need to be fluent in a foreign dialect formally known as Standard Written English. David Foster Wallace states, "In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It Is" (Wallace 627). In "Authority and American Usage," Wallace argues that Standard Written English is much more than just a way to communicate but is in itself political—political in the sense that using it asserts a sense of authority and affluence. Even if the reward might not be a chocolate covered cake, being force fed Standard Written English is tolerated with the hopes that something just as sweet is on the horizon, a high paying job. Because of the heavily structured courses that aspiring professionals are required to take based around standardized testing, American students are unable to delve into other modes of expression and denied a true education in effective communication beyond the confines of the diplomatic, polite and perfectly structured essays needed for high marks on an AP test or their SATs.

@nviviano My Mom's making peas and carrots yet again. Is there anybody who wants to get Boloco with me before I vomit? #hungry

The Eternal Affair that Nobody Wants to Remember and the Obsession that Everyone Loves to Hate: the Relationship Between Church and State

As loyal Americans that salute the flag and dutifully recite the Pledge of Allegiance every morning before school, we are told that one thing is absolute: the church has no business meddling in the affairs of the state and that the state has no justification interfering with the business of the church. An idea that has been firmly supported by the United States constitution,

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religions, or prohibiting the free expression thereof (*Religious Tolerance*).” Even though students are brainwashed into thinking that a democratic government cannot be involved with the affairs of the church, and vice versa, the church still seems to creep its way into government more times that we are expected to believe. While we were busy memorizing the words to the Pledge of Allegiance in elementary schools, our teachers neglected to point out that our country’s pledge was amended to include the phrase “Under God” in an attempt to separate us from those “Godless commies,” solidifying the idea that we were not only politically superior, but also morally superior. In the context of a more current example, the newly elected 113th Congress has only one, one out of the 533 members of Congress, who considers herself to be “religiously unaffiliated” (Miller 1).

Similar to the politics involved with standardized testing, there is a gap, maybe even a gorge, between what we are told to believe and what actually happens. In actuality, standardized tests are part of a deep-rooted web of politics and politics are justified by these standardized tests as gauges of what’s going on in the classroom. Even though politics is as relevant to me as the Tea Party is to Bill Maher, it’s interesting how a discussion about politics ultimately leads to a discussion about authority and a discussion of authority ultimately leads to a question of politics.[2] Because it is perceived that more power and authority is distributed to the states with the best schools, in this context at least, states with the highest standardized test scores are therefore the ones with the authority. This again raises Wallace’s point that not only does Standard Written English lead to a question about relevance and usage, but about authority. Students are forced to write in this specific style, without any deviance or outside influence, with the hope that they will perform above average on these tests, giving the state in which that student resides a sense of authority over lower scoring states, in a connection that is inextricably linked.

Insisting that students pledge allegiance to this standard of writing, teachers are not entirely at fault. This mentality is a baby birthed by proud governments. Every state government of the United States has nurtured and breast-fed their version of a perfect baby that they can call “gifted” and show off to other states, while they gloat about the academic success of their baby and smirk at the inferiority of other states’ babies. Standardized testing, which encourages teachers to insist on the use of Standard Written English in the classroom, has driven teachers to “teach to the test” in order to produce proficient test scores that state governments can gloat about (Great Schools).[3]

@nviviianoo Question: Why are kids who don’t stand up for the Pledge of Allegiance ostracized when they should applauded? #thoughts

“Maybe Some Women [and men] aren’t Meant to be Tamed.”[4]

Repetition is never exciting and the monotony of eating the same thing or writing the same type of essay can be a bore. When peas and carrots are served night after night in order to “promote health and well-being,” even if the intentions are there, it can have the reverse effect and make a child sick. Similar to the method employed my Jessica Seinfeld, its important to serve those tepid mushy vegetables in a variety of different ways and with other types of food to make them more interesting. Baked macaroni and cheese with vegetables mixed in with the sauce offers taste,

nutrition and an overall positive experience. When a lackluster side of vegetables is served by itself, yes it is nutritious, but not tasty. Likewise, when a side of macaroni and cheese is served without vegetables, it offers only half of the experience it should. However, when nutrition and taste is combined, in one cohesive dish, the potential torture victim is now able to indulge into a well-balanced side.

With the explosion of social networking and the addiction that most young people have for tweeting, instant messaging, and blogging about their every move, students growing up in this technological revolution have been told not to overlap the “inferior” language used to converse over social networking sites with the eloquent and proper diction that is required in a classroom setting. Because of the overuse of “incorrect abbreviations” and “inappropriate slang,” students have been victim to the somewhat overindulgent preaching of teachers asserting the idea that that type of colloquial language has no place in an English classroom. Instead of “linguistically backwards” laymen’s talk, students are expected to form proper sentences which form properly structured paragraphs in a mindless and expected essay. [5]

By brainwashing this artificially polite and formal way of writing, misguided teachers are depriving students of other and sometimes more effective ways of writing. Scrolling down a homepage on Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter or any other social networking site, a student will likely see correct usage of words, decent vocabulary, and examples of effective communication. Standard Written English, by the nature in which it is so forcefully taught, is unnatural to most students. When students are piecing together their perfect sentences and structured paragraphs, the final version seems awkward and forced because the Standard Written English in which they are using with its arbitrary rules is unnatural and makes creativity foreign when it should be familiar. Prompts instructing students to write a structured essay is simply a part of the daily grind. But for me, being assigned to write outside the box in a less structured, more fluid style of writing, like a rant, is dumbfounding. In my eyes, opening up Microsoft Word on my computer means that I need to switch gears into a tone that is professional and academically acceptable. But opening word processor to delve into the style and format of a rant proved difficult because instead of injecting emotion into my tirade and breaking standard norms, I was hesitant in fear of making a mistake and overly conscious of whether I was using the correct vocabulary or not. However, if I were to write a rant on Facebook and then post it for all to see, it would be second nature because that is the context where that style of writing and that way of speaking is accepted.

The homepage of Facebook and the page of a standardized test have been so polarized by teachers that any risk of overlap would be a slap on the wrist because “you’re suppose to know better.” Grammar Nazis put away your red pens and SNOOTs back down because it is apparent that combing the two into a cohesive and less awkward form of writing would not only effective but also more fluid and natural. Highlighting the style of David Foster Wallace, “Authority and American Usage” proves that an advanced and mastered knowledge of Standard Written English can be infused to produce something as commanding as Standard Written English alone. The idea is not to fight this fusion but to embrace the idea that essays don’t have to sound lackluster and stuffy, but can be infused with a person’s own unique style without insulting your English teacher.

@nviviianoo English teachers listen up! I know you had the best intentions for me in high school but insisting that I write using a certain lexicon and a specific style was not helpful. #truth

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1. Just in case: Mom, I would still eat your home cooking over the food they serve at Stetson East any day.

2. Those that tuned in weekly to follow the sexual escapades of four single, thirty-something women living in New York City will recognize this sentence originally written by Darren Star for the hit television show *Sex in the City* in the episode "Politically Erect." However, instead of comparing politics with authority, Carrie brings the discussion to the bedroom by asking, "Can there be sex without politics?"

3. As students bubble in their ethnicity, gender, social security numbers, and best guesses for possible answers, much more is at stake than a high grade. According to CNN, standardized test scores are not only gauges to see if a teacher is performing to the best of her ability or falling short of her promised tenure, it is used to rate schools based on students' test results to see who is

qualified to receive a portion of the \$4.3 billion President Obama was dishing out to school administrators (Kastenbaum). Ladies and Gentlemen, I present the definition of pressure.

4. In the second season finale of *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw professes that “maybe some women aren’t meant to be tamed” by a man that keeps her from reaching her potential and being herself. She suggests that maybe she should run free until she finds somebody that is just as wild as she is. Similarly, I suggest that all writers run free, experiment, and delve into every possible style of writing, regardless of what is assigned on their English syllabus.

5. Let’s not forget that since seventh grade, we have all been taught that a proper essay must take the shape of a metaphorical hamburger; the introduction take the place of the top bun, the 2-3 body paragraphs represent the “meat” of the hamburger and the bottom bun used to support the rest of the sandwich similar to the way that a conclusion paragraph is suppose to support your essay by summing up any main points. Why, may I ask, are we forcing children to eat hamburgers, a packaged and processed piece of meat, when they can enjoy the delicacy of a perfectly cooked piece of filet mignon?