Retirement Opportunities

What do English teachers do after retiring? According to The Washington Post, some start grammar hotlines. One, the Grammar Lady, also known to her friends as Mary Newton Bruder, is out to clean up the nation's grammar, one speaker at a time. Ms. Bruder writes the "Grammar Lady" column, maintains her World Wide Web page (www.grammar-lady.com), and answers her toll-free Grammar Hotline. Her book, The Grammar Lady: You're Smarter Than You Think You Are, is due out this fall. All this grammar action happens from her home office in Mount Lebanon, Pennsylvania. She feels that knowledge of grammar has deteriorated in the past few years because teachers today are poorly equipped to instill the grammar skills that were taken for granted a generation ago. Basic grammar, she feels, is "so damn boring. And that's why grammar gets a bad name." Ms. Bruder is not the only grammar expert dispensing advice on propriety. Tidewater Community College in Virginia Beach, Virginia, posts a state-by-state list of grammar hotlines on the Internet. Next time you have a grammar question, look up a hotline or give Ms. Bruder a call at 800-279-9708.

The Washington Post
26 February 1999

Plain English . . . Not!

The Washington Post's "Plain English Watch" reported recently on the "new, streamlined, simplified Rules of the House of Representatives." This new document, written in response to Vice President Gore's call for a return to plain English in official communications, turns out to be much shorter than the original but is still a whopping ninety-seven pages long. How much simpler is it? Judge for yourself. The new improved version reads: Rule XVI (16)—When an amendable proposition is under consideration, a motion to amend and a motion to amend that amendment shall be in order, and it also shall be in order to offer a further amendment by way of substitute for the original motion to amend, to which one amendment may be offered but which may not be voted on until the original amendment is perfected. Are you not sure whether you understood this plain English rewrite? The Post suggests a further rewrite, which might read: In lawmaking as in lovemaking, it is possible to amend a proposition, but unwise to try. Other revisions like this one might make the government run a little more smoothly.

The Washington Post
26 February 1999
Changing English

The subject of how the Internet is shaping language was the topic of discussion at a recent meeting of the Modern Language Association. It is also the focus of several new books and online forums. It is clear that the Internet has increased the traditionally deliberate pace of language evolution, which points to a trend of society moving toward less institutional control, toward a more democratic marketplace of ideas. How does this affect us in the classroom? One example is Andrew Walker, age twelve, of Woodstock, New York, who logs on to America Online three or four times a day. Andrew, or “Off Cpring,” as he is known online, is fluent in onlinespeak. This slurring together of written and spoken language is innovative and efficient. For example:

OFF Cpring: Wuzup?
Prettyflic: n2m
OFF Cpring: well g/g c ya

Translation: “What’s up?” “Not too much.” “Well, got to go. See you.” Sometimes Andrew slips into onlinespeak in his schoolwork, as when he wrote “Surplus is an excess, but surplus can also mean 2much.” His teacher took off ten points.

San Bernardino County Sun
11 March 1999

Language, Technology, and Power

A discussion among David Ramirez, Jim Cummins, and Alma Flor Ada about the politics of language was recently published. Cummins made clear that “power relations in societies around the world have always dictated who has access to literacy and who is prevented from having access.” He maintains that literacy “provides access to information . . . and to the ability to influence both one’s own life and that of others.” As educators, we must examine ways in which technology might transform our classrooms and schools from places to absorb knowledge into places where teachers and students generate new knowledge, create literature and art, and act upon social realities. Cummins also discussed two-way bilingual immersion programs and how they can enable all our students, regardless of their linguistic background, to develop bilingual competencies. He believes that we should educate the dominant groups to avoid squandering our homegrown linguistic resources. We should make research findings more accessible to these groups and the media, and finally, we should challenge the “us vs. them” divisions and establish collaborative relations of power. Use of technology is one way to achieve these goals, but first we must educate the software producers. For example, in Microsoft Word 97, the spell checker does not even recognize the words bilingualism, multilingualism, or transformative, but, ironically, does recognize monopoly.

The Multilingual Educator
October/November 1998

Clinton Proposals and Reality

President Clinton has promised to spend more to improve America’s educational systems. What are the realities facing us in spite of these proposals? Clinton wants to end social promotion. Research shows
that retention helps in the short term but results in more dropouts, so Clinton has proposed $200 million for special programs, increasing this to $600 million by the year 2000. With the increase, this money will reach only 3 million of the 28 million kids who need extra help. Clinton also wants to hire 100,000 new teachers, but the estimated teacher shortage will grow to 2.2 million in the next decade. One-fourth of secondary school teachers don’t even have degrees in the subjects they currently teach; many hold “emergency” credentials designed to get them into the classroom. Clinton demands national testing at the fourth and eighth grades. Educators feel that tests should be used to enhance teaching, but not as nineteen states are using them— to rank and publicly name low performing schools. Clinton also proposes $25 million to pay the interest on bonds to repair schools. Back in 1995, it was estimated that at least $112 billion would be needed to make repairs to existing schools, and another $200 billion to build needed new schools.

USA Weekend
5–7 March 1999

High Stakes Exams Threaten Student Teaching

Some school districts in Virginia are turning away student teachers in the fear that they might negatively affect standardized test scores. In Virginia, as in many other states, schools with low test scores risk takeover by the state. Most teacher education programs ask that student teachers assume responsibilities for the classes they teach in the spring, exactly when the state tests are given. As a result, principals are no longer willing to take a chance on student teachers, especially in subject areas that are being tested, such as math. In the Roanoke area, Ron Wetzel, the county’s director of curriculum, explained that the district wanted to give teachers a chance to focus on their pupils without the added responsibility of a student teacher. Another nearby district explained their refusal to use student teachers as “an attempt on our part to bolster our scores.” This has concerned schools of education, and they are examining possible solutions. These include working with public schools to relieve their concerns, having the student teacher work with the master teacher in a team-teaching approach, and avoiding placement of student teachers in the spring, when the state tests are given. Across the nation, as these tests become more widespread and more critical, refusal to accept student teachers could negatively impact the availability of well-trained teacher candidates.

The Washington Post
20 February 1999

The New Business Writing

In the olden days, managers and business executives relied upon their support staff to ensure that all their reports and correspondence were properly executed. With the infusion of computers at all levels of business, many of the support staff are being laid off, and many middle managers are now responsible for generating their own correspondence. And rightfully so. With the universal use of e-mail, time is of the essence, as is effective business writing. Fortunately, there are school-teachers willing to train not just America’s youth, but also America’s
business people in the art of effective writing. One of these intrepid schoolteachers is Gloria Pincu. She offers corporate training to enable business people to also be effective writers. Her book, Bull's Eye Business Writing: 10 Easy Guides for Getting to Your Writing Target, is supported by her Website, www.basic-learning.com. The site offers a weekly writing tip via e-mail. One of Pincu's main points: "The rules of thumb learned in grammar school don't apply in the business world. Forget those long, windy essays. Concise, direct, diplomatic business writing is an art—and it can be learned." Pincu's workshops are increasingly popular with corporations. Business writers' most common mistakes include (1) burying the main point (business people want important news up front with details following), and (2) being aware of the power of language subtleties. Instead of telling the client that they made a mistake, the writer might employ the passive voice, "A mistake was made," and avoid offending the client.

The Washington Post
28 February 1999

We Are to Blame . . . Again!

Japanese teachers report that decorum in the classroom has eroded to the point that they are suffering from "collapsed classroom syndrome." Japanese students, traditionally recognized for their obedience, self-discipline, and respectfulness, have resorted to talking in the classroom, playing games, standing on their desks, and walking out on the teacher if they are provoked. The causes of this extreme change in student behavior have been cited as the influence of television and computer games, increasing numbers of broken families, and, of course, the mimicking of American youngsters.

Sacramento Bee
9 February 1999

Private College Counselors

In many high schools, the ratio of guidance counselor to students is sometimes as high as 1 to 600 or even 1 to 1,700. Most counselors do not have the time to give intensive guidance to their seniors regarding the college application process; therefore, parents are increasingly turning to private college counselors to ensure that their children have the best chance for admission to the colleges of their choice. Parents hope that these private counselors bring an extensive knowledge of the process, as well as expertise in the "packaging" of their future colleagues. Although there is no regulation of this fledgling industry, some counselors seem to really know their stuff. One is Barbara Barnett, whose office is in California. She has a staff of five, who shepherd their charges through the entire process. Her staff encourages students to register early for college entrance exams, to sign up for advanced academic courses, and to send their grades to the office for monitoring. One of Barnett's associates edits and reedits personal statements to perfection, while another coaches the students in interview techniques. Barnett agrees that grades, test scores, and achievements are important, but packaging can make the difference between acceptance and rejection. One client said of his counselor, "He's able to say things
Less Homework

In an effort to improve school achievement, a Boston area elementary school has placed severe restrictions on the amount of homework teachers are allowed to assign. Principal Mark Springer of the Mason-Rice School met with parents and presented research that showed that, at the elementary level, homework has no relationship to students' grades and test scores. In addition, excessive homework in elementary grades can lead to lack of academic interest. Experts agree that reading, including reading to a child, is the most important contributor to learning, but Springer learned from his parents that reading is often what is left for last, when both the parents and students are usually too exhausted to read at all. Two years ago, he issued a policy limiting homework to ten minutes per grade level, not including reading. He also discouraged long-term projects, since "they became projects done by parents anyway." Not all parents agree with the new policy, but in the latest round of testing, Mason-Rice came in eighth and twelfth among the state’s 1,200 elementary schools.

USA Weekend
5-7 March 1999

More Homework

US students are spending more time doing homework than in years past. They are also spending more time playing organized sports and watching TV than ever before. American students can find solace in the fact that Chinese and Japanese students spend about seven times as much time doing homework. In contrast to elementary students, studies show that students who complete homework in middle and high school do better in class grades and test scores. Dr. Harris Cooper of the University of Missouri—Columbia has found that homework has a positive effect on achievement as children grow older. He believes that all kids should have homework every day in order to learn to set up a schedule and develop study habits and time-management skills. But some educators argue that, in today's reality, homework is doing some students more harm than good. In a survey of high school dropouts in the early 1990s, researcher Etta Kralovec found that a key factor in the students' decisions to drop out was their inability to keep up with homework. A number of factors contribute to this inability, including jobs, family responsibilities, and participation in extracurricular activities. How can educators make homework work? Cooper recommends never using homework as punishment and never giving kids a homework pass for a job well done. In addition, schools where students lack parental support shouldn't abandon homework. For these students, homework should be short, simple, and of high interest. Finally, Cooper contends that schools need consistency. Every grade should assign homework, with each successive grade assigning more.

NEA Today
April 1999
Horror Stories

Are you afraid of the dark? Of someone or something lurking under the bed or in the closet? Of someone jumping out at you when you least expect it? Basic human fears have probably not changed much in the past thousand years. Some authors take full advantage of that fact, and one of them is R. L. Stine, who plays upon those fears when he writes. Although the future holds more technological and imaginative monsters, the old standby vampires and ghosts will always be popular with his readers. He recalls his mother restricting his reading of comic books because they were trash, so he made weekly visits to the barbershop just to keep up with the latest issues, and the latest gore. He believes that kids often feel like outsiders, “different, ugly, out of control, frightened by their angry feelings.” Stephen King once wrote that we “make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.” Stine believes that we also “make up monsters because we are them.” He believes that kids like horror stories because they want to escape reality. They want to face their monsters and confront the supernatural. In fact, Stine finds horror stories to be comforting, especially as reality becomes even more surreal. He feels that kids in the year 2000 will be facing even more frightening new dangers than kids today and will therefore need more of his horror stories for comfort.

Newsweek
2 November 1998

Editor’s Note: Many thanks to our contributors this month: Judy White from Washington, D.C., and George Sheridan from Cool, California. (I love that name.) I happily accept all contributions, so send yours in if you feel it would be of interest to our readers.—BCH

The NCTE 2000 Edwin A. Hoey Award

This award is given to an outstanding teacher, grades 5–8, in honor of Edwin A. Hoey, who brought limitless imagination and creativity to the pages of Read during his nearly forty-year career as writer, editor, and managing editor of the renowned educational magazine. The Edwin A. Hoey Award recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers for their love of learning in their students. The winner of the award will receive $2,500, plus up to $1,000 for expenses to attend the NCTE Annual Convention in November; a one-year complimentary NCTE membership; a one-year subscription to Voices from the Middle; and the opportunity to present at the NCTE Annual Convention. You may obtain an application form by calling NCTE Headquarters at 1-800-369-6283, ext. 3612. Applications must be postmarked no later than February 11, 2000. Results will be announced in Spring 2000, and the award will be presented at the 2000 Annual Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.