

Why Standard Academic English?

What is Academic English

Standard Academic English (SAE), or Standard American English (in north America) can be seen as the only way to speak properly and is often presented as objectively more correct or superior to other dialects of english. That's pretentious nonsense.

The idea that there is only one right version of english, or any language, starts to fall apart when you ask why a specific version is seen as better than another. The reason is proximity to power, usually historic colonial power. This handout sheet is intended to provide some background information on this topic, at the SLH we will support you with whatever version of English you choose to use for an assignment.

Language is a tool for communication and if your audience understands you, the communication works. We often discuss dialects as if they only exist when there is enough of a difference that we can easily categorize it. We might also know about a dialect if it is used by a large enough population it enters public conversations, like African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the US. But everyone speaks a version of english different from SAE.

While we can't change what instructors' grade on, you can ask an instructor if they are requiring standard academic English for assignments or if writing in other englishes is welcomed.

Consultants can also help you write an email to your instructor to ask about this if it is a conversation you want to start

Want to Learn More? Check out these resources

How do we stop languaging so people stop killing each other, or what do we do with white language supremacy?



Why We Need Greater Linguistic Diversity



Code Meshing

This idea is so well explained by Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young (Dr. Vay) that I am gonna quote not paraphrase:

"Let me drop some code meshing knowledge on y'all. Code meshing what we all do whenever we communicate—writin, speakin, whateva. Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts



This mode of communication be just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers. It be used by writers of color to compose full-length books; and it's sometimes added intentionally to standard English to make the point that there aint no one way to communicate" (Young 2010)

Code meshing doesn't mean that we don't have to put work in to write or to communicate. But it does change what that work is. This idea asks us to focus on the function of language and how it helps us communicate, instead of if we can fit communication into a very small, white, square box. If we have multiple englishes, then we have multiple tools to help us communicate our ideas clearly and with nuance.

We can see examples of code meshing in pop culture, books, journalism, politics and academic writing. Legally Blond showed the difference in englishes used in different cultural contexts even within US academia, and how value was assigned to those englishes. Really, this is just the TLDR for a big topic.

Want to Learn More? Check out these resources

PBS Connections with Dr. Vay



Should Writers Use They Own English?



Young, V. A., 2010. *Should Writers Use They Own English?*, Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies 12(1), 110-117.

Linguistic Diversity

As much as we want to move away from privileging one version of language over another, that is still what most of us are familiar with so we will start there. Like most words, there are also multiple definitions of language and dialect, but these are the uses we're talking about right now.

If you check the Merriam-Webster (2025) dictionary:

Language is explained as "the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a community"

Dialect is explained as "a regional variety of language distinguished by features of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from other regional varieties and constituting together with them a single language" or "a variety of language whose identity is fixed by a factor other than geography (such as social class)"

All dialects are languages, and all languages have dialects, but no language is in use that is not a dialect. We don't often talk about language in this way but once broken down, language is like apple. There is no one apple that represents all of the variations of apples, despite it being a useful category to talk about them. Apples only exist as their variations, Spartan, McIntosh, Gala ect.

Want to Learn More? Check out the readings below

The Place of World Englishes in Composition



CCCC Statement on Translingual Writing



"Language." & "Dialect" Merriam-Webster.com. 2025. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>(6/12/2025).

Linguistic Diversity: Language and Dialect

We can see the same thing in dialects, the more different a dialect is from those we are familiar with, the easier it is to recognize. But that does not mean that all dialects are the same as histories and cultural significance varies. African American English is a well-documented dialect with a rich history in north America. Textspeak is primarily a written dialect, it is fluid and spans multiple cultural contexts and has less well-defined boundaries. This is a type of dialect that we often refer to as slang, however, it fits the definition of dialect.

While both these examples are dialects, they don't have the same cultural importance to the groups that use them, and none of this should be taken as justification for the dismissal or denigration of any version of a language. SAE is also a dialect, also primarily a written dialect, so why do we see it as having more value than textspeak? and ... we're back to power.

There is a quote attributed to several people that explains the power dynamic embedded in how we talk about language vs dialect by saying "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy." This has been attributed to a listserv email from sociologist Max Weinreich but the specific source is difficult to pinpoint

Why should you care?

Regardless of what language or version of English you choose to write in, being aware of the history and context we all work in when using SAE is still important. If you want to, you can still avoid reinforcing a hierarchy of Englishes while using SAE by adjusting how you talk and think about language.

This can also help identify what assumptions we make about someone based on how they speak or write, ideally so we can avoid making those assumptions.



How is this relevant for classes?

If you're interested in writing in other englishes or meshing english with other languages, and your instructor hasn't mentioned it, then you can ask your instructor about it.

Also, the SLH Writing Consultants can help you write this email to your instructor if you want help with that.

No matter the circumstances or language choice, the writing consultants will help you write your assignment in the version of english that you choose.

Food for thought....

This handout is not written as fully standard academic english. But a lot of it still is as we also have trouble breaking old habits

While reading this handout, did you have trouble understanding the points being made or the information?

How did the language used in the handout change how you felt while reading?

Did any of the language make this easier or more difficult?

Questions, comments, concerns, or sarcastic remarks?

learning.hub@ubc.ca

If you have questions you can also book a meeting with a writing consultant, but send comments, concerns and sarcastic remarks to the coordinator via email

