The Prevalence of Grammar in Virginia Higher Education

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Abstract

This thesis describes why the prescriptive grammar model should be implemented in public education rather than the descriptive grammar model. For the purposes of this paper, prescriptive grammar refers to how words ought to be used, while descriptive grammar refers to how words are used by native speakers in natural settings.

The central issue I address in this thesis is how prescriptive grammar enables students to read and write properly, heightens their linguistic knowledge, improves their ability to express themselves, and teaches them useful skills for future educational and employment opportunities. Additionally, it outlines the flaws inherent in the descriptive grammar model, namely its lack of pragmatism as well as its impractical and unachievable objectives, e.g. an instructor cannot possibly teach every linguistic variant of English to students.

Furthermore, this thesis examines my research on the top-rated public universities in Virginia, specifically which writing features are most commonly listed in their student resources. This research served as the foundation of a grammar manual I compiled for Virginia high school teachers to use in their writing instruction. My hope is that educators will begin to embrace prescriptivism in order to adequately prepare their students for a successful professional future.

Keywords: prescriptive grammar, descriptive grammar

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Chapter I: Introduction

Grammar education has been a contentious topic among educators for decades. While some scholars argue that grammar should be relayed as a set of concrete rules, others insist that language is flexible and ever-evolving, and so should be taught as native speakers and writers use it. Several questions tend to arise around this debate: How should teachers approach this topic? Should grammar be taught in the classroom? If so, which method is more effective: prescriptivism or descriptivism? Because of the essential role grammar plays in much of education and the workforce, it is crucial for instructors to answer these questions effectively and find a teaching model that best prepares their students for future professional endeavors.

The history of grammar education is long and extensive, and the approved teaching models have undergone much change in the last few decades alone. From the eighteenth century to the early twenty-first century, the preferred model was prescriptivism, i.e. "an account of a language that sets out rules (prescriptions) for how it should be used and for what should not be used (proscriptions), based on norms derived from a particular model of grammar" (Oxford University Press, 2016). This model of grammar education was mainly propagated by grammarians, who proposed a "correct" usage of language and compiled manuals that directed how people should and should not speak (Potter, 1999).

The philosophy of prescriptive grammar is thought to have originated in the 1760s and was especially popular during the nineteenth century, when "distinctive British and American traditions of grammar writing" developed and became commonplace in public education (Anderwald, 2014). There are several suspected motivators behind this approach to grammar, including a sense of national superiority in Britain, the belief that language development is inherently regressive (Anderwald, 2016), and a desire to codify the language of the social elites

(Wilton, 2014). Additionally, many early prescriptivists sought to address the value in language and increase conformity in how particular groups and/or social classes communicated (Wilton, 2014). Unlike descriptive grammar, which was always changing and conforming to culture, prescriptive grammar was considered concrete, reliable, and socially unifying.

Since the late 1950s, the descriptive grammar model has become steadily more common in the English and linguistic fields due to its cross-linguistic nature (Oxford University Press, 2016), and grammar instruction has been removed entirely from school curriculums in English-speaking countries (Crystal, 2017). This development has commonly been ascribed to a shift in priorities. While the classical grammars of Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit aimed to preserve language so that readers of subsequent generations could access historical or sacred texts (Finegan, 2013), it has recently become more popular for language to be described and understood as it is used in the present day. Indeed, the descriptive philosophy has been adopted by many twenty-first century dictionaries and grammar books, which strive for "descriptive accuracy in reporting which words are in use and which senses they carry" (Finegan, 2013). Many modern instructors take the same approach in their teachings, as they emphasize how language is used naturally and oppose the use of concrete rules and guidelines.

Between educators, grammarians, and linguists, descriptive grammar has steadily been gaining recognition and widespread usage in the public education system. Many scholars attribute this trend to the evolvement of English as a language. Finegan (2013) notes that "living languages must change, must adapt, must grow. Shakespeare could not have understood Chaucer without study, nor Chaucer the *Beowulf* poet. Whether change is good or bad is not the question, descriptivists say, for change is inevitable. The only languages no longer in flux are those no longer in use." Beyond this sense of pragmatism and inevitability, many proponents of

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descriptive grammar criticize prescriptivism for disregarding language change and imposing certain norms on every speaker of a language (Oxford University Press, 2016). Due to its rigid and strictly traditional approach, critics claim that prescriptive grammar rejects how language is used by native speakers in favor of enforcing a "right" and "wrong" way to use grammar.

From my perspective, this modern school of thought (and subsequent shift in how grammar is taught in public education) is detrimental to students; not only does it impede them from learning to write properly, but it narrows their future educational and employment opportunities, which often require a high command of the written English language. My thesis pushes for the re-implementation of prescriptive grammar based on the following rationales:

- The descriptivist's desire to teach how language is used naturally is unattainable, as an instructor cannot possibly teach every dialect of English,

- The goal of teaching grammar should be to improve a student's ability to write; therefore, how language is used in a verbal setting is significantly less relevant, and

- Grammar is uniform and thus more prescriptive in nature at an institutional level, such as at universities and publication houses.

Firstly, many descriptivists take issue with prescriptive grammar because they perceive it as imposing limits on disadvantaged dialects and favoring language used by the social elites. While there is some authenticity to this argument, it remains a reality that a unifying dialect must exist within any given language, especially for official business. For example, in Spain, Castilian Spanish is the dominant dialect despite the existence of many alternative dialects and languages across the country (Posner, 1998). Therefore, it is not only prudent to advocate for a widely understood dialect that connects English speakers, but the only feasible option, given the impossibility of teaching students every dialect used in the United States.

Secondly, most arguments in favor of descriptive grammar reference how language is used in natural settings and argue that how one writes should reflect how one speaks. I contend that writing is a vastly different form of communication than speech; when speaking, people tend to mispronounce words, use incorrect syntax, layer in hedge words, etc. This is not acceptable in writing, and so it is not sensible to expect the written word to replicate human speech patterns, even in a less stringent sense. In truth, if we were to write as we speak, it would likely be even more difficult for others to comprehend or recreate our statements.

Lastly, and perhaps most notably, prescriptive grammar is closely intertwined with practically every institution in the United States, from public universities to businesses to government. The descriptivist vision simply does not account for this reality. In not teaching students the writing expectations of the professional world, teachers are putting them at a further disadvantage, especially those students who belong to minority dialects, as they will likely struggle more to adapt to rigorous writing standards. Hence, if the goal of public education is to equip students with the tools they require to succeed beyond the classroom, then prescriptive grammar is far more beneficial and applicable to their needs.

On both a nationwide and a statewide level, grammar is essential for one's college experience. The top-rated universities in Virginia require grammar competency and often facilitate further development of proper English, from writing-intensives to personalized statements to academic writing courses. Many admissions officers warn that poor grammar skills put students at a disadvantage during the application process, and it is common for department heads, even those in non-English fields, to require high grammar aptitude. Consequently, if a student is not adequately schooled in how to write properly, they will be much less likely to succeed in or even be admitted to the university of their choice.

On this basis, I propose that descriptivism should not be embraced by grammar instructors. Rather, public education should return to the traditional prescriptive model in an effort to provide students more opportunities in education and the workforce, to promote uniformity in written communication, and to improve students' reading and writing skills.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The literature cited in *The Prevalence of Grammar in Virginia Higher Education* concerns three focal subjects: prescriptive grammar, descriptive grammar, and the prevalence of grammar in education and the workforce. Both prescriptivism and descriptivism are thoroughly defined and discussed, with an emphasis on the various commendations and criticisms each grammar model has received by educators, grammarians, linguists, and related experts. Moreover, the role of grammar in higher education and the workforce is examined and evaluated in depth. In total, this review contains a summary of the main points, discussion of the competing professional views, and an evaluation of the current state of grammar in education and employment.

OVERVIEW

In grammar education, there are two primary teaching models: prescriptivism and descriptivism. Finegan (2013) of the Linguistic Society of America highlights the key difference between the two models: "Descriptive grammarians ask the question, 'What is English (or another language) like – what are its forms and how do they function in various situations?' By contrast, prescriptive grammarians ask 'What should English be like – what forms should people use and what functions should they serve?'" Reynolds (2014) elaborates on this definition with her assertion that prescriptive grammar's aim is to propagate a particular form of a language that is often regarded as "proper" or "correct," while descriptive grammar's aim is to describe language as it is actually used and not dictate how it ought to be used. In essence, most prescriptivists believe that English should adhere to fixed standards, and most descriptivists advocate for a depiction of language according to its natural uses.

Laurel and Donna Brinton (2010) illustrate prescriptive and descriptive grammar as two different types of linguistic rules. "The difference between descriptive grammar and prescriptive grammar is comparable to the difference between constitutive rules, which determine how something works (such as the rules for the game of chess), and regulatory rules, which control behavior (such as the rules of etiquette)," they explain. "If the former are violated, the thing cannot work, but if the latter are violated, the thing works, but crudely, awkwardly, or rudely." Curzan (2009) uses the same analogy, describing prescriptivism as a form of "etiquette" or "table manners," with an emphasis on what speakers should not do. Meanwhile, she defines descriptivism as the unspoken and often subconscious rules that are "considered too basic" to confuse native speakers and writers.

In their assessment of the two grammar models, Khansir and Pakdel (2016) argue that prescriptive grammar teaches a more traditional, Latin-based form of English, while descriptive grammar adheres to English as it is used in the present. They observe that descriptivism is ultimately a reflection of one's "basic linguistic knowledge," unimpeded by the prescriptivist's intent to "legislate" how grammar is used. Reynolds (2014) frames prescriptive and descriptive grammar as different processes entirely. "The descriptive grammarian hears a form and tries to describe the mental processes underneath the produced (spoken) form," she writes, "while a prescriptive grammarian does not hypothesize about the mental grammar at all, but is merely concerned with 'editing' the surface form." Both interpretations showcase how the descriptivist focuses on a speaker's intrinsic knowledge of the English language, whereas the prescriptivist is concerned with the spoken or written grammar forms themselves.

Most scholars concur that the primary difference between the two grammar models is that prescriptivism proposes a framework of "right" and "wrong" grammar, while descriptivism seeks

to reflect language according to its uses in natural settings. Due to a plethora of competing views, both teaching models have undergone acclaim and criticism alike. Educators and linguists who recommend prescriptivism often cite how it improves one's performance in education and employment, fosters homogeneity among English speakers, and provides a strong foundation for grammar curriculums. Conversely, proponents of descriptivism believe limitations on how language is used can disadvantage minority students, portray grammar inaccurately, and impede natural language development. As a result, grammar education has experienced a recent influx of change, with many scholars embracing descriptivism over the more traditional prescriptivism.

<p align="center">PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR</p>

The term "prescriptivism" most commonly refers to the effort some scholars make to impose rules for how language should and should not be used (Crystal-a, 2008, p. 384). Such rules often address grammatical features like spelling, pronunciation, syntax, and semantics. Kapović (2014) draws a distinction between "prescription" and "prescriptivism," defining the former as the "process of codification of a certain variety of language for some sort of official use" and the latter as an "unscientific tendency to mystify linguistic prescription." The majority of prescriptive grammarians are concerned with setting forth a concrete standard of language so as to promote communicability, high quality, and uniformity in writing.

Outside grammar, prescriptivism may refer to a socially proper or politically correct application of language (Reaser, Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2017, p. 117). In this sense, prescriptivism can mean the establishment of a standard language that imposes a "best" or "correct" way to speak and write. Occasionally, particularly in more conservative cases, this can lead to a society's resistance to language change and/or an increase in neologisms (McArthur, 1992). Likewise, it may be informed by linguistic purism and so assign low aesthetic value to speakers and writers of alternative dialects (Walsh, 2016, pp. 8-9).

Though "prescriptivism" is a broad linguistic term, it most frequently propagates the majority dialect of a given region. For English speakers, this is Standard English. Merriam-Webster (2009) defines Standard English as "the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood." Curzan (2009) notes that it is a "slippery" term and refers to one dialect among many that forms the basis of "usage rules for formal written English." According to Trudgill (1999), Standard English is primarily used in printing and can be distinguished from other dialects by its unique grammar.

Despite Standard English's likeness to "official" English grammar, Trudgill (1999) points out that its grammatical forms are not identical to those venerated by prescriptive grammarians. PBS (2005) similarly argues that spoken Standard English incorporates more informal features, such as contractions, into its grammar than written Standard English: "In fact, Americans tend to demand a certain amount of informality in speech. Formal speech can be seen as stilted or even rude. Thus, the closest we can get to defining spoken Standard American English is perhaps 'spoken informal Mainstream American English for _____,' where the blank is filled in by the area (Chicago, the South, California, etc.). This informal standard would include the regional pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar that are not locally stigmatized." Trask (2000) concurs that Standard English can differ depending on region, with notable differences including spelling, phrasing, etc. In spite of these variations in grammar forms, Standard English's role in writing is generally regarded as "unassailable" (Trudgill, 1999).

Over the last century, prescriptivism has been criticized by some scholars for resisting language change and forcing all speakers of a language to adopt the linguistic norms of certain

groups (Oxford University Press, 2016). Due to its rigid and strictly traditional approach, these critics reason that prescriptive grammar rejects how language is actually used in favor of enforcing a "right" and "wrong" way to use grammar. In doing so, they contend, prescriptivism's flaws are inherent:

- It does not articulate inaccuracies in its depiction of language,

- It does not account for modern linguistic trends,

- It does not allow for versatility in the classroom, and

- It does not reinforce minority dialects, which are consistently at a disadvantage.

On the first point, Al-Rushaidi (2020) emphasizes how some linguists have criticized prescriptivism for lacking scientific rigor. "Any field of study has to assert that it is objective, impartial, and using scientific methods of investigation," he posits. "Otherwise, it loses its credibility. Nonetheless, the study of language does not lend itself easily to empirical observation. Once you apply this 'scientific rigour' to the traditional study of language, you will find many cracks and gaps." Prescriptive grammarians are less concerned with authentic language usage, as their goal is to impose criteria for writers to abide by, and as a result, they sometimes fail to depict English accurately. Finegan (2013) maintains that, in order to provide precise portrayals of language, grammarians must identify which expressions are actually in use and explore their situational and social-group correlations.

On the second point, Bose (2005) criticizes prescriptivism for ignoring speech trends in favor of enforcing rules that are antithetical to modern English. He accuses prescriptivists of failing to acknowledge English as a living language and thus imposing arbitrary rules that are not helpful to its learners or teachers. McBee Orzulak (2012) suggests that technology-related

terminology, such as language used in texting, can influence how English speakers communicate with one another and so may not be accounted for by prescriptivists.

On the third point, Schaffer (1991) argues that prescriptive grammar imposes limits on teachers and uniformity on students, as its adherence to hard rules and unbendable teaching methods robs the classroom of creativity, experimentation, and flexibility:

> While the teachers may be enlightened in dealing with language in the classroom, very often school administrators, parents, and other curriculum planners are not. That is, even though increasing numbers of English teachers are trying to focus their classes on what research suggests are the most useful information and activities for their students, presenting their material in as accurate, nonjudgmental, and persuasive a fashion as possible, the powers that be in school systems still very frequently insist on highly regimented, prescriptive, traditional curricula, most likely because many parents and educators alike consider it important (a sound education, after all, includes the basics).

Curzan (2009) assumes the same stance in her assertion that English teachers, whose opinions on grammar will undoubtedly vary, must answer to individual grammarians, such as those on the Usage Panel. "If [a] censure seems based largely on personal preferences," she remarks, "that's because it is. Who is this Usage Panel? It is part of the 'they' that writers and English teachers rely on to tell us what we should and should not do." Like Schaffer (1991), she chafes at administrative interference in how instructors teach grammar, as she believes prescriptive rules to be arbitrary, contentious, and ultimately restrictive.

On the fourth point, Finegan (2013) warns that prescriptivism inevitably leads to problematic social power dynamics. "Some observers claim that the real issue about linguistic right and wrong is one of deciding who wields power and who doesn't," he explains. "Viewing

language as a form of cultural capital, they note that stigmatized forms are typically those used by social groups other than the educated middle classes – professional people, including those in law, medicine, and publishing." Mooney and Evans (2018) take this approach as well, arguing that prescriptivism adheres to the standard language ideology, or the practice of promoting a certain language variety as linguistically superior to others. However, scholars like Kliffer (2008) and McIntyre (2011) consider prescriptivism to merely be a recommendation or mandate for how language should be used in a specific context or register rather than an endorsement of standard language ideology. Still others, such as Kordić (2006), interpret prescriptivism to be a form of norm-formulating and codification of a given speech community.

Some scholars regard prescriptivism as "judgmental" due to its negligence of English dialects that do not resemble Standard English. Honda and O'Neil (2008) hold this view, as they believe that prescriptivism seeks to change linguistic behavior. Likewise, Curzan (2009) rejects prescriptivism for its denial of a student's individuality. "We can choose to acquire new languages or language varieties, which we can master with differing levels of competence, often depending on how old we are," she contends. "But our home language will always be part of our cognition and, arguably, part of who we are. We grow up speaking the way those in our home community speak." From this vantagepoint, grammar instruction is regarded as offensive to and disparaging of students who cannot speak or write in Standard English.

Because of the frequency with which critics attack prescriptivism, one might be led to think that it is a philosophy of loftiness and pedantism. Nonetheless, many scholars, even those critical of prescriptive grammar, have confessed that one should not take a "black and white" view of the issue (Crystal, 2017, p. 109). "Close attention to the books that advanced the doctrine of correctness shows that they were not so very doctrinaire," says Hitchings (2011) on the history

of prescriptivism. "It has become orthodox to lay into 'eighteenth-century prescriptivists' and accuse them of establishing silly rules. Yet while there really were some hardcore prescriptivists in this period, it is an oversimplification to say that eighteenth-century thinking about English was militarily rigid" (p. 87). Mulroy (2003) has likewise called for a serious re-examination of the criticisms that abound in many modern linguistics books.

Despite the condemnation it has suffered in recent decades, prescriptivism has been lauded for its ability to provide a basis for formal written English and its encouragement of elegance in speech and writing (Tamasi & Antieau, 2015). Because of prescriptivism's adherence to linguistic function, precision, and consistency, it is often commended for its effects on education and society at large:

- It allows for greater communicability between different regions,

- It is more eloquent, expressive, and lexically rich,

- It provides a strong basis for grammar education, and

- It equips students for the demands of higher education and the workforce.

On the first point, many scholars agree that any nation with a variety of different dialects and speech patterns can only achieve mutual intelligibility through a standard language (Crystal, 2006, p. 22). Especially in the modern era, where some languages are spoken in hundreds of countries, a standard language ensures that communication can be achieved across borders, dialects, and nationalities. "The reason that Americans can communicate with Australians or South Africans is the existence of a standard language," writes Al-Rushaidi (2020). "It is the same reason why Omani people can communicate with Moroccans despite the fact that each country is on a different continent." In fact, the use of a standard language is not restricted to English speakers. Mulroy (2003) points out how language academies in foreign countries, such

as the French Academy, allowed for the development of standard languages and thus mutual intelligibility between speakers of different dialects. To show an example of this phenomenon, Al-Rushaidi (2020) highlights how prescriptivists who fought to preserve classical Arabic have done a "great service" to modern Arabic speakers, as most can read ancient Arabic texts like *The Revival of Religious Sciences* with little to no difficulty.

On the second point, there is little dispute that some individuals are more linguistically knowledgeable than others and that exposure to new vocabulary will increase one's expressive capabilities. "Spoken dialects have relatively tiny vocabularies," Mulroy (2003) explains. "Deficient vocabularies may not prevent speakers from expressing everyday feelings, but fully developed ones enable them to express themselves with much greater precision and on a wider range of subjects" (p. 86). Like many prescriptivists, he does not believe in limiting a learner to dialectical interactions; rather, he maintains that a standard language provides its learners an expansive array of linguistic resources from which they can glean lexical richness. The prescriptivist philosophy as a whole posits that exposing students to vocabulary outside of their own dialect will have a positive effect on their language skills, as it will inexorably increase both their linguistic knowledge and their ability to express themselves with eloquence and precision.

Mulroy (2003) also points out that standard languages encompass a wide range of "classical works, dictionaries, grammars, and systems of education" (p. 81) that can, in some cases, represent centuries of collaboration, contribution, and enrichment by a society's top scholars. If students are not exposed to the language used in such texts, they will be limited to what has been published in the last 50 years or so, which severely hampers the vocabulary, idioms, etc. they can acquire from reading. Al-Rushaidi (2020) makes the same argument. "Nobody can deny that some individuals have greater linguistic genius than the rest of us," he

says. "When all of these individuals choose one linguistic variety to be the medium of their linguistic creativity, this language variety is deeply enriched. After a few centuries, the great literature produced in this variety becomes a resource for anyone whose ambition is to acquire the power of expression and the eloquence that can be not only effective, but also delightful." For instance, he illustrates, millions of books have been written in classical Arabic, whereas far fewer have been written in the Egyptian dialect. Descriptivists do not have an incentive to preserve or revere language, which leaves readers of subsequent generations unwilling or unable to interact with texts outside of their own dialect and time period.

On the third point, Artini (2016) credits prescriptive grammar for teaching students the deeper properties and structure of a language. She breaks this principle into two types of grammar knowledge: the first is known from birth and thus intuitive in nature, while the second entails familiarity with a language's grammar mechanics and can only be achieved through formal learning. Native speakers can instinctively grasp the rules of a language, she argues, but cannot understand its nuances or speak it proficiently without first studying its finer elements. Al-Rushaidi (2020) comparably observes that students of traditional grammar who first learn about "broad categories," such as parts of speech, can use their knowledge to more fully appreciate finite concepts, like how sentences are constructed.

On the fourth point, many scholars consider prescriptivism to be a far more honest depiction of reality, particularly in regard to higher education and the workforce. Bassett (1980) reasons that a "truth of life is that a substantial number of people in our culture still expect communication to be addressed in standard English. Those people are likely to reject whatever message is intended if the image the message carries is inappropriate. Thus, the goal of teaching prescriptive rules of standard English is to give to all students a flexibility to conduct a discourse

in whatever terms the specific situation requires." While descriptive grammar accounts for informal language choices, such as slang and colloquialisms, prescriptive grammar trains students to use more academic language and adhere to a society's standards of professionalism. Artini (2016) emphasizes this point in her declaration that a student's grammar aptitude directly correlates with their future and can have significant effects on their career path. Schaffer (1991), herself a critic of prescriptivism, admits that she is sympathetic to this argument and likens grammar competency to business attire. "If we recognize that knowledge of these rules is looked at as a sign of education," she writes, "which in turn is a highly valued, prestigious factor in employment and certain social situations, then learning those rules can perhaps be accepted with as much equanimity as the necessity of spending good money on business clothes." For these reasons, many proponents of prescriptivism regard it as the philosophy that best prepares students, including those of alternative dialects, for the demands of the professional realm.

DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

"Descriptivism" typically refers to the objective analysis of how a language is used by native speakers and writers (François & Ponsonnet, 2013, pp. 184-187). BBC (2015) defines descriptive grammar as "a set of rules about language based on how it is actually used [in which] there is no right or wrong language." The majority of descriptivists concentrate on communication used in natural settings, most notably that of a casual or informal nature, regardless of dialect or social protocol (Andrews, 2006). Furthermore, most descriptive grammarians intend for their analyses to be unbiased and an honest reflection of reality rather than influenced by preconceived notions of how language "ought" to be used, like in prescriptivism (Martinet, 1980, pp. 6-7.). Andrews (2006) suspects that most linguists are descriptive grammarians, while most educators are prescriptive grammarians.

Though many proponents of descriptivism believe it should be applied to education and linguistics, some concede that language should have a standardized form for certain uses, such as printing (Finegan, 2013). "It is important to note that most descriptivists are not against Mainstream Standard (American) English," PBS (2005) clarifies. "Rather, they tend to believe that there is a place and function for Standard English but that there is also a place and reason for vernacular language varieties. Most descriptivists publish their research findings as articles and books, which they almost always write according to the norms of Standard English." Finegan (2013) acknowledges this reality but cautions that descriptivists tend to regard dictionaries and grammars as mere guides for practical use and not suitable for every circumstance. Some descriptivists reject prescriptivist dictionaries altogether. For instance, Marckwardt (1966), in his defense of the word "ain't" being included in *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, suggests that dictionaries should reflect how language is used and has changed, with no bearing on conventions or societal approval (pp. 50-55).

A significant feature of descriptivism is its propagation of the concept of "mental grammar." This theory was popularized by American linguist Noam Chomsky, who proposed that grammar was a mental entity (Binder & Smith, 2013). Most descriptivists agree with Chomsky's evaluation of language and so put emphasis on a speaker's implicit knowledge of grammar concepts, including pronunciation, word structure, sentence structure, meaning, and vocabulary. "One way to clarify mental or competence grammar is to ask a friend a question about a sentence," says Sharpe (1999). "Your friend probably won't know why it's correct, but that friend will know if it's correct. So one of the features of mental or competence grammar is this incredible sense of correctness and the ability to hear something that 'sounds odd' in a language." Ritchie and Bhatia (2008) point out that it is mental grammar that dictates a speaker's

production and perception of speech utterances; thus, it stands to reason that language must be represented in the brain in some capacity. Reynolds (2014) offers more specificity on this point in her assertion that a descriptive grammarian would conflate a speaker's verbiage with their writing, i.e. they would consider how someone speaks to be grammatically correct in their writing as well, and might theorize about the mental processes that led up to the surface forms of the person's speech.

Chomsky's approach to language is rooted in the idea that creativity is an important component of human nature (McGilvray, 1998). Goldberg (2006) asserts that the goal of linguistics is to account "for the creative potential of language" (p. 22), while Chomsky (1965) lauds it as "an essential property of language" (p. 6). Hoffmann (2019) surmises that linguists use the term "creativity" in an unconventional sense. "In linguistics, 'creativity' is largely limited to productivity," he explains, "i.e. how established abstract schemas of a language can be used to license novel utterances." This argument is emblematic of how most descriptivists view language as an intricate feature of humanity and, in many cases, deeply personal to its speakers. They favor descriptivism because it provides insight into the human mind, helps scholars understand the social, cultural, and psychological forces at work in society, and imposes no limits on a speaker's creative capacity (PBS, 2005).

Since the start of prescriptivism's decline in the late 1950s, descriptivism has become increasingly embraced by linguists (Oxford University Press, 2016). Many proponents of this grammar model extol it for being "scientific" and not making "value judgments" about language (Al-Rushaidi, 2020). Additionally, they reason, it better captures the reality of modern English as it is used by native speakers and writers. Among their chief arguments are the following:

- It treats all dialects and languages equally,

- It is consistent with modern language usage, and

- It accounts for the inevitability of language change.

On the first point, many scholars believe that descriptivism does not assign superior status to any one language but rather recognizes that every grammar is "equally complex, logical, and capable of producing an infinite set of sentences to express any thought" (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2014, p. 15). Therefore, they maintain, it is not hindered by dialectical variances and can evaluate every language equally, including those of minority cultures. Unlike prescriptivists, who assign value to language based on social factors, descriptivists regard themselves as fair-minded and impartial, and do not laud a particular dialect as being inherently superior or of more intrinsic value than another (Al-Rushaidi, 2020).

Scholars who assume this stance tend to see it as an issue of social justice. "In public debates about language, we need more informed citizens, who do not condemn nonstandard American dialects as broken English," implores Curzan (2009), "who understand that students do not need to erase their home languages to learn Standard English, spoken or written. We need students who understand that it is not fair to judge someone as inferior because they speak differently or break a prescriptive usage rule." One such example is how society does not have a favorable view of vulgar expressions. Descriptivists would say this phenomenon occurs because vulgarity is affiliated with the lower classes and thus only inferior by perception (Al-Rushaidi, 2020). Hall (1960) comes to a similar conclusion: "the 'badness' of swear-words of this kind comes from the fact that people – people who are dominant in our society – are displeased by them and will act unfavourably towards people who use them" (p. 22). Many descriptivists believe this issue can be resolved by removing limits and/or language standards in the classroom so as to affirm each student's identity, background, and cultural upbringing.

On the second point, descriptivists strive to truthfully represent how language is used. If a common linguistic choice is not consistent with Standard English, prescriptivists regard it as "wrong," thereby deeming the speaker's mental grammar incorrect. In essence, they are not depicting the speaker's language as it is represented in their minds (Fromkin et al., 2014, pp. 14-15). Descriptive grammar does not have this problem, Fromkin et al. (2014) say, because it describes language according to how it is authentically expressed and understood. This, in turn, makes every descriptive grammar rule consistent with how language is used in a natural setting and how it is represented mentally in the minds of its native speakers. Curzan (2009) makes a similar observation in her explanation of descriptive rules as "the grammatical knowledge that allows speakers to communicate systematically and meaningfully." While prescriptivism can invoke confusion or conflict between spoken and written utterances due to discrepancies, descriptivism is more consistent with modern English and thus more widely understood by its speakers and writers.

On the third point, many proponents of descriptivism deduce that language change is both unavoidable and desirable. Hall (1960) notes that "purists have always been complaining of change in language, and have never accomplished anything by their complaints" (p. 54), while Dr. Johnson compares a scholar's efforts to preserve language to "lashing the wind" (Crystal, 2017). PBS (2005) suggests that most descriptivists do not view language change as either negative or positive but rather as "inevitable" and that their goal is to understand what prompts such changes. In his documentation of this view, Al-Rushaidi (2020) posits that descriptive grammarians believe language must change in order to reflect cultural change, scientific and technological developments, and related phenomena. Finegan (2013) goes so far as to credit language change for making English into the "rich, flexible, and adaptable language so popular

throughout the world today." He insists that languages must adapt, change, and grow over time and suggests that the only languages that are not undergoing evolution are those no longer in use. As Crystal (2010) puts it: "The only languages that don't change are dead ones" (p. 131).

Though descriptive grammar is popular among modern educators and linguists, it has been criticized by prescriptivists for its impracticality, lack of uniformity, and discouragement of language standards. Furthermore, some scholars question why it levels such vitriol at the prescriptive grammarians whose preservation of English led to unity among its speakers (Al-Rushaidi, 2020). These rationales form the basis of prescriptivists' critiques of descriptivism:

- It lacks homogeneity,

- It leads to frequent and significant shifts in meaning,

- It does not hold speakers or writers to any standards, and

- It misrepresents prescriptivism.

On the first point, descriptive grammar has been criticized for its lack of uniformity. Al-Rushaidi (2020) points out that a standard language "helped solve the problems of mutual intelligibility between speakers of different English dialects" and that extensive study of classical grammar "can give [one] access to millions of books that can enrich [their] lexicon." Thus, the breakdown of homogeneity in speech decreases communicability between speakers of differing dialects and hinders one's ability to interact with traditional texts. Artini (2016) is critical of this aspect of descriptive grammar, particularly in regard to teaching English as a second language: "The descriptionists do not seem to pay attention [to] certain conditions such as language testing, and the teaching of English as a foreign language in developing countries. In language testing, where validity and reliability [are] concerned, there is a need to have uniformity so that the tests can be objectively assessed, and when a language is learned as a totally foreign language, there

must be certain rules that can guide the learners to understand the language." In other words, foreign students are put at a significant disadvantage due to their lack of experience and knowledge regarding the nuances of a language, such as idioms and slang. Artini (2016) contends that prescriptive grammar accounts for this discrepancy by providing discernable rules and structure for students to emulate, regardless of their familiarity with the target language.

On the second point, it is not uncommon for English words to undergo meaning shifts, i.e. they do not change phonologically, but their meaning gets replaced (Al-Rushaidi, 2020). Hall (1960) uses the word "nice" as an example of a word that has changed definitionally over time. He iterates that a word's meaning is entirely dependent on its speakers; thus, as is put forth by most descriptivist grammarians, words do not have "real meanings" and sounds are simply "arbitrary signs" (Al-Rushaidi, 2020). This naturally leads to confusion when readers interact with historical texts, such as Shakespeare. "We find the majority of Shakespeare's difficult words – difficult not because they are different in form from the vocabulary we know today," explains Crystal, "but because they have changed their meaning" (Crystal-b, 2008, p. 156). This can be especially problematic when governmental or religious texts are misinterpreted, as it can generate conflict between different factions or sects.

On the third point, many descriptivists discourage moral virtue in speech. Since they deem it inappropriate for prescriptivists to assume authority over language, they regard taboos as arbitrary and entirely dependent on place and time (Al-Rushaidi, 2020). This implies that language should not be held to a moral standard and that any utterance, even a slur or swear word, should be subject to a society's judgment. Hornsby (2014) warns that if "you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy […] at school […] all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and

once you lose standards there's no imperative to stay out of crime" (p. 33). In fact, some scholars suggest that prescriptive works encourage "refined character" and that giving students a high standard of English to aspire to increases their ambition to wield it proficiently (Al-Rushaidi, 2020).

On the fourth point, one of the most common criticisms of descriptivism, or more appropriately its advocates, is its mischaracterization of prescriptivism, including its history, objectives, and underlying motivations. Firstly, it is a common misconception that early prescriptivist works, such as Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, were "mere opinions about language usage created by pundits who lived in ivory towers" (Al-Rushaidi, 2020). Many scholars, including Al-Rushaidi (2020) and Mulroy (2003), believe it is an error to dismiss the merits of such works and denounce descriptivists who make broad accusations based on only a few examples. Secondly, many descriptivists wrongly assume that prescriptive grammarians are attempting to reach theoretical truths. "The point missed by such criticism," remarks Mulroy (2003), "is that the purpose of the taxonomy is practical guidance, not theoretical exactitude" (p. 37). Al-Rushaidi (2020) agrees with Mulroy's claim, asserting that prescriptivists do not aim to be "scientific" or "sound." Thirdly, some descriptivists assign ill intent to prescriptivists, whom they regard as callous and elitist. Mulroy (2003) observes that "concern with correct speech is taken as a sign that a person is a despotic, reactionary old fogey, indifferent to social justice and contemptuous of cultural diversity" (p. 79). Al-Rushaidi (2020) reasons that this is because modern society has "cultivated a negative and skeptical attitude towards authority" and that this particular argument is appealing to those who are "zealous about ideas of equality and democracy."

GRAMMAR IN EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE

Throughout history, grammar has been regarded as a necessary life skill. "We study grammar because a knowledge of sentence structure is an aid in the interpretation of literature," writes Webster (1905), "because continual dealing with sentences influences the student to form better sentences in his own composition; and because grammar is the best subject in our course of study for the development of reasoning power." Particularly in regard to education, grammar is a precursor to success, both during the admissions process and in the classroom. Many employers similarly expect a high command of grammar, as their aim is to improve clientele relations, marketing ventures, and communication between employees. However, it is of considerable debate whether the public education system adequately prepares students for the demands of the professional realm. Despite some dissenting views, most scholars agree that a student or employee with advanced grammar skills is much more likely to succeed in academia and/or the workforce than one without and that the current system does not provide a strong foundation of grammar education for its students and workers.

Though grammar is no longer formally taught in American public schools, it remains a requirement of the Common Core Curriculum. The English Language Arts strand includes 18 standards related to grammar, including subject-verb agreement, punctuation, verb tense, and more (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). Moreover, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2013) emphasizes the importance of grammar mastery in writing and expects students to have a "substantial knowledge of spelling, grammar, usage, capitalization, and punctuation" by Grade 12. However, Frederick (2015) demonstrates how the nature of grammar education has changed significantly since the late 1990s: "Contemporary language teaching further emphasizes the importance of communicative skills, thus substituting the importance of grammar ability for fluency. […] As a result of this shift, it is becoming more

important simply to convey ideas than to convey them properly." She goes on to admit that, since the Common Core State Standards were only put into effect in 2009, it is "impossible" to gauge their full impact.

Butrymowicz (2017) is likewise critical of the American education system and claims that a high school diploma does not guarantee college readiness. "Higher education institutions across the country are forced to spend time, money and energy to solve this disconnect," she insists. "They must determine who's not ready for college and attempt to get those students up to speed as quickly as possible, or risk losing them altogether." David Steiner, the executive director of the Institute for Education Policy at Johns Hopkins University, does not believe any state has equated its high school graduation standards with a "college-career-starting standard" (Butrymowicz, 2017). He notes that this problem is exacerbated in communities with high poverty rates, such as Baltimore. Indeed, Butrymowicz (2017) posits that many universities have accepted that not all, or even most, of their students will be prepared for their coursework.

The problem is so widespread that students who lack grammar skills often struggle to complete college courses and, in more extreme cases, their degree programs. According to a National Assessment of Educational Progress, "three-quarters of both 12th and 8th graders lack proficiency in writing. […] And 40 percent of those who took the ACT writing exam in the high school class of 2016 lacked the reading and writing skills necessary to complete successfully a college-level English composition class" (Goldstein, 2017). So many students are unprepared for higher education that most universities place them in remedial courses in math or English before they can advance to college-level courses, a process that costs an estimated $7 billion per year. The rates are "so high that there's no question students are getting out of high school without the skills they need to succeed in college," laments Alex Mayer, the director of MDRC's

Postsecondary Education policy area. "The other side of it is these students are not getting out of college, for the most part" (Butrymowicz, 2017). In fact, many students who enroll in remedial courses never advance to classes that count toward a degree. A study by Complete College America (2012) determined that almost half of students entering two-year schools and a fifth of students entering four-year schools were placed in remedial classes in the fall of 2006. The same report found that nearly 40 percent of students entering two-year schools and a quarter of students entering four-year schools did not complete their remedial classes. In more recent years, the rates have not improved. For example, in the 2014-2015 school year, over half of students were placed in remedial courses in the states of Tennessee, Nevada, and Delaware. Along with math, English – and by extension grammar – was the most common area of deficiency (Butrymowicz, 2017).

Beyond the classroom, grammar can make or break a student during the admissions process. Tim Bale, an admissions tutor and professor of politics at Queen Mary University London, stresses the importance of good grammar in a student's application: "Lots of mistakes in a personal statement might give us cause to worry that someone might struggle. Obviously, we look at everything else, too – language tests, for instance – so it's not the be-all and end-all. But best advice to applicants is to check, check and check again" (Minsky, 2020). Pietrafetta (2021) supports this view, noting that "mastery of both grammar and essay composition skills" is an expectation of admissions officers as well as a requirement for college readiness. Doubtless, a student with poor grammar skills will struggle to withstand the admissions process and, even if they are accepted, may be forced to take remedial classes in order to enter credit-bearing courses.

In the professional realm, an employee with poor writing skills is at a comparable disadvantage. "Managers are fighting an epidemic of grammar gaffes in the workplace," writes

Shellenbarger (2012). "Such looseness with language can create bad impressions with clients, ruin marketing materials and cause communications errors, many managers say." She goes on to cite a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management and AARP, which found that 45% of 430 employers were increasing training programs to improve their employees' grammar and other skills. CollegeBoard (2004) estimates that business firms spend as much as $3.1 billion annually to improve their employees' writing skills and concludes that writing is a "threshold skill" for hiring and promotion among salaried employees. "In most cases, writing ability could be your ticket in," said one respondent to their survey, "or it could be your ticket out." In a different study conducted by Brad Hoover (2013) of *Harvard Business Review*, it was found that professionals with fewer grammar errors in their profiles tended to achieve higher positions, fewer grammar errors tended to correlate with more promotions, and fewer grammar errors tended to be associated with frequent job changes.

Rushkoff emphasizes how writing is an essential skill in most jobs. "Only the writer skilled in grammar is entrusted with representing a company in a letter or an e-mail," he alleges. "Only the entrepreneur who can persuasively express a new idea in writing can craft a business plan that will win the faith of partners and investors." He goes so far as to suggest that even a "poorly constructed Tweet" demonstrates a lack of clear thinking. Truss makes similar observations. She is especially critical of how educators and employers have begun to embrace a philosophy of "expressing yourself" over learning proper grammar. "When young people are taught to undervalue literacy as a life skill," she says, "they are being cruelly misled" (Rushkoff, McWhorter, Truss, Challenger, & Haussamen, 2012). Many critics like Rushkoff and Truss agree that it is unrealistic and ultimately detrimental for young people to ignore grammar and

writing instruction, as it can hinder them from getting hired and, in cases where standards are lowered to include them, set a poor precedent for the workplace.

A large number of scholars believe poor grammar education is to blame for the writing epidemic in business. "American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom," concludes CollegeBoard (2004). "Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. Although many models of effective ways to teach writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years." Frederick (2015) concurs that grammar education must change in order to create a more desirable workforce. She argues that public education puts too much emphasis on comprehension and, as a result, propagates the misconception that proper grammar is not needed to convey an idea. Sonja Brookins Santelises observes that the gap between high school and college standards is "like a chasm" and declares that "we've had too low a standard for too long" (Butrymowicz, 2017). Even educators and politicians have banded together to remedy this problem with the Common Core State Standards Initiative, though only time will tell what difference their efforts will make in the lives of students.

Today, grammar education is a controversial subject, and many descriptivists continue to advocate for a system that does not enforce a standard language on its students. However, many critics of the current grammar crisis agree that something must change in order to reinforce a higher standard of writing among students and workers. And so, the question remains: Should grammar be taught in school, and if so, which grammar model is more beneficial and impactful?

Chapter III: Methods

My research project, *The Prevalence of Grammar in Virginia Higher Education*, is based on both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research entailed an examination of grammar philosophy as proffered by modern scholars, and the quantitative research concerned a study of the various writing recommendations and requirements of the top-rated universities in Virginia. My goals in conducting this research were to a) gain a thorough understanding of the current grammar crisis in education, b) identify which writing features are most commonly cited by Virginia universities, and c) compile an in-depth and informative writing guide for high school instructors and students. The result of my research is a handbook that encourages a prescriptivist approach to grammar education so as to better prepare high school students for university (see Chapter V). Many resources exist on how prospective college students can improve their grammar, but none are specifically tailored to Virginia schools. My hope is that the writing guide I have compiled will not only promote prescriptivism, but provide a valuable resource for Virginia high school teachers and learners.

This thesis used qualitative research to collect a number of opinions on grammar education from scholars, including educators, linguists, professional writers, and more. The information on Virginia universities was drawn from official school guidelines and policies, department recommendations and requirements, and university writing resources. Some opinions were more individualized; for instance, this paper quotes multiple educators, some of whom are prescriptivists and some of whom are descriptivists. This thesis collected and analyzed a variety of such scholarly opinions, quotes, and studies to come to a conclusion about the role of grammar in education and the writing standards in Virginia schools.

This paper also relied on quantitative research to determine which writing features are most common among Virginia universities. After I completed research on the top schools in Virginia, I determined which writing features are most prevalent across the board and how many universities use them as a recommendation or requirement for their students. The features that were mentioned by the most schools made it into the writing guide incontestably; this ended up including nine concepts. Ultimately, this research was meant to showcase the writing features that a Virginia student is most likely to encounter in their college campaign.

In addition to the aforementioned methodologies, this thesis was founded on a modified grounded theory model, which involves gathering and analyzing data, then drawing conclusions about the subject. Noble and Mitchell (2016) explain grounded theory as "a research method which uses strict procedures for data analysis and will enable you to search for and conceptualise the hidden social and collective patterns and constructions in your area of interest." Grounded theory allows the researcher to use their own insight to give meaning to the data they collect, whether that insight is inspired by literature, professional or personal experience, or the analytic process itself. In the case of this thesis, I executed a study that involved gathering data from the top fifteen universities in Virginia, analyzing said data for patterns, and forming a conclusion about which writing features are most likely to be valued, recommended, and/or required by Virginia college educators. The grounded theory used in this thesis is "modified" because this study was largely subject to my opinion; thus, the conclusions drawn are not purely objective.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

I was actively involved in the research process, as I performed the reading, data collection, and follow-up analyses independently. All the citations used in this thesis are published primary or secondary sources drawn from online journals, peer-reviewed articles, university websites, and similar resources. Some sources were accessed through online libraries,

such as the Jerry Falwell Library or JSTOR. Most sources of this nature are centered on prescriptivism vs. descriptivism or the role of grammar in education, with partial or total contribution by educators, grammarians, and/or related experts. Other sources include editorial pieces, encyclopedic entries from reputable organizations, reference books, and university resources. All sources were accessed online. With the exception of a few, most were published within the last 30 years, as my aim was to present an argument based on contemporary ideas, opinions, and theories. The older sources were mainly used to represent historical views or to juxtapose traditional and modern grammar discourse.

ANALYSIS METHODS

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods were implemented in this thesis. For the Literature Review, which formed the basis of my understanding of the current grammar crisis in public education, a thematic analysis was conducted on how grammar education has changed over the last century and where most scholars fall on the prescriptivism vs. descriptivism debate. I had several goals in my analyses: a) to find correlations and patterns in my research, e.g. to determine whether prescriptivism or descriptivism is more popular among modern educators and linguists, b) to understand the intentions of prescriptivists and descriptivists, generally speaking, and c) to analyze the consequences of replacing the traditional prescriptivist grammar model with one more akin to descriptivism.

To construct the writing guide, I executed a content analysis on the top-rated universities in Virginia. The goal of this analysis was to identify common themes, specifically which writing features are most frequently recommended or required by Virginia schools. This analysis method allowed me more flexibility, as I was able to sort my data into broad categories and thus provide a rough approximation of how prevalent grammar is in Virginia higher education.

It is important to note that the conclusions drawn in this thesis are not objective facts, but rather based on my judgments. Most sources that are quoted in this paper were written with the intent of critiquing grammar education and so entail preconceived biases. However, since this thesis aims to provide general guidance on which writing features can help students succeed in higher education, the bias in the data does not negatively impact the results.

<div align="center">RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH METHODS</div>

Qualitative research was more appropriate for the research conducted on grammar education and the prescriptivism vs. descriptivism debate because it involved collecting and evaluating a range of professional opinions. Moreover, the data related to practical approaches to improving literacy rates, increasing grammar competency, etc. is not quantifiable. Conversely, quantitative research was effective in determining which writing features are most ubiquitous to Virginia universities, as I had to identify trends and sort the data into categories. This research method allowed me to isolate writing features to be included in the writing guide and therefore provide a more detailed depiction of grammar standards in Virginia schools.

I used a grounded theory model because of its ability to analyze and draw conclusions about complex data sets. Grounded theory can also help researchers apply historical sources; this study examined a variety of sources, some of which are decades old, and evaluated how professional opinion on grammar education has changed over the years. More importantly, grounded theory's method of collecting and analyzing data, sorting said data into categories, and drawing new conclusions about the research subject was an effective way for me to compile a relevant and advantageous writing guide for high school instructors and students.

To collect the data, I had to find objective information on the history of grammar education, the definitions of prescriptivism and descriptivism, the writing recommendations and requirements of Virginia universities, and related topics, while I had to find subjective

information on the competing views of scholars on the current grammar crisis and how to resolve it. To ensure that the views being expressed were credible, I relied on esteemed encyclopedias and organizations for objective information and peer-reviewed articles and published pieces for subjective information. Most of the scholars who are quoted in this thesis have professional backgrounds in English, linguistics, education, or a related field.

I chose to perform a thematic analysis on the debate between prescriptivists and descriptivists in order to fairly measure expert opinion on the subject. Most of the sources involved are opinion pieces and so not strictly measurable. The thematic analysis gave me the ability to identify the purposes, messages, and effects of such sources as well as the two grammar models themselves. Furthermore, I could make inferences about the scholars and audiences of the texts I analyzed, which deepened my understanding of the issue. Particularly in tracking the history of grammar education, the thematic analysis was an appropriate and useful tool.

A content analysis on grammar trends in Virginia universities was chosen because it is one of the best ways to identify patterns in data. I applied a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to the content analysis, as I used counting and measuring to pinpoint trends and presented a subjective interpretation of the results. This analysis method paired well with the research objective, which was to detect patterns in Virginia university writing requirements. Because of the flexibility involved in a content analysis, I was able to access the applicable sources, glean the data in an unobtrusive manner, and draw broad conclusions from the results.

Chapter IV: Research Findings

The research concerning a potential solution to the grammar education crisis called for an in-depth look at which writing concepts are considered most important to Virginia's highest-rated public universities. Though most schools do not have specific grammar standards, they do have rigorous writing requirements that entail a mastery of spelling, punctuation, etc. Furthermore, a fair number of colleges expect students to compose grammatically sound personal statements or letters of purpose in order to withstand the admissions process. A comprehensive look at university resources revealed that certain features are more frequently cited by public universities than others and that, despite a lack of concrete grammar policies, the vast majority of schools have rigid expectations of their students' writing abilities.

Though students will undoubtedly vary in their knowledge of grammar due to differences in location, instructor, and/or personal background, they will all be held to a high writing standard in academia. Based on my study of the top fifteen universities in Virginia (U.S. News & World Report, 2021), the most common and valued writing features in Virginia higher education include brainstorming, outlining, research, sources, citations, quotations, thesis statements, conclusions, and revising. Each of the aforementioned universities emphasizes the role writing plays in a student's academic success, with most requiring high school- and/or college-level writing courses for the completion of their degree programs, even those unrelated to English.

SUMMARY

The top school in Virginia, the University of Virginia (UVA), expects students to take at least two writing classes, the second of which must be passed "with a grade of C- or better" (University of Virginia, 2016). UVA's Writing Center offers an extensive writing resource to its students, with topics ranging from composing theses to mastering various citations styles to

employing proper grammar mechanics (University of Virginia, 2021). Additionally, for students who are involved in advertising or marketing ventures for the university, UVA necessitates a mastery of grammar, with an emphasis on tone, punctuation, and proper referencing (University of Virginia, 2019).

The College of William & Mary (W&M) requires advanced writing skills as well: "A liberal education presupposes certain proficiencies. Foremost among these is the ability to express oneself clearly both in speech and writing, for clear expression goes hand in hand with clear thinking." Like UVA, W&M has two writing requirements, both of which must be completed "with a grade of C- or better" (William & Mary, 2014). The university's Writing Resources Center provides its students a comprehensive writing resource, which breaks down article usage, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and more (William & Mary-a, 2017).

Undergraduate students at Virginia Tech (VT) must pass four units of high school English in order to be accepted as a first-year student (Virginia Tech, 2019). Students are also required to write a personal statement in order to be accepted into their degree program. "Be scrupulous about grammar, spelling, and punctuation," VT warns. "Simple, avoidable mistakes can weaken or derail your application" (Virginia Tech-b, 2020). Based on these requirements, writing is a skill that VT expects its applicants to possess before the admissions process and regards as an "important skill" for its degree programs (Virginia Tech-a, 2020).

George Mason University (GMU) strongly recommends its applicants write a 250-word personal statement on why they want to attend the university (George Mason University, 2021). For its undergraduate students, the school has several writing requirements. Firstly, it charges them with taking a course in written communication: "Students develop the ability to use written communication as a means of discovering and expressing ideas and meanings: in short,

employing writing as a way of thinking." Secondly, it requires them to pass a literature course, with the goal of improving their ability to "read for comprehension, detail, and nuance" and "evaluate a critical argument in others' writing as well as one's own." Lastly, it mandates that they pass a writing-intensive course, regardless of their degree program (George Mason University-g, 2017). To assist its students in their writing ventures, the university's Writing Center provides "concise instruction on a variety of writing skills, tasks, and processes," which includes outlining, writing thesis statements, and employing proper grammar mechanics (George Mason University-b, 2020). Beyond standard university requirements, many GMU degree programs recommend a strong mastery of grammar, such as the college's Philosophy department (George Mason University, 2013).

The Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) core curriculum entails a research and academic writing requirement, which tasks students with learning "academic argument, information retrieval, analysis and documentation," and earning a minimum grade of C (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016). The university provides ample writing resources for its students and includes explanations of numerous grammatical concepts, including citations, active vs. passive voice, quotations, and more (Virginia Commonwealth University-g, 2021).

Hampton University (Hampton U) requires its students to complete four units of high school English prior to admission. In order to apply to the university, new and transfer students must write a 500-word essay on their character, and graduate students must write a personal statement (Hampton University, 2010). Hampton U's general education program includes eight Core Competencies, one of which is written communication, or "the ability to develop and express complex ideas clearly, coherently, and logically in a style appropriate for both purpose and audience and demonstrate mastery of accepted standards of written communication"

(Hampton University, 2009). All students are required to take English 101 and English 102 in order to graduate (Hampton University, 2012).

Shenandoah University (SU) identifies "effective communication" as one of its core tenets and emphasizes the importance of "using standard conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics." The university requires all students to take English 101 or its equivalent (Shenandoah University, 2021). In its official writing resource for students, SU encourages a strong grasp of grammar concepts such as citations, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, sentence construction, and punctuation (Shenandoah University, 2017).

Old Dominion University (ODU) requires its students to take two English courses and earn a minimum grade of C, after which they must pass a writing-intensive course in the major at the upper-division level. Additionally, undergraduates must pass the university's Evaluation of Writing Proficiency. ODU emphasizes writing in its general education goals and objectives, stating that students must "develop written communication skills," regardless of their discipline or field (Old Dominion University, 2012). In its online writing resource for students, the university offers detailed explanations of the grammar issues that most frequently hamper its students, including passive voice, prepositions, conjunctions, modifiers, and more (Old Dominion University, 2016).

At Washington and Lee University (W&L), all students must satisfy a Writing Foundation requirement, which aims to give students "the ability to write clearly, persuasively, and elegantly." Among its many course goals, the Writing Foundation requirement coaches students on how to write in Standard English, implement proper citations techniques, and be precise in grammar, mechanics, and style (Washington and Lee University, 2019). W&L also

offers its students a writing resource that touches on topics like quotations, annotations, punctuation, and style (Washington and Lee University, 2021).

At the University of Richmond (UR), students must take four units of high school English before they are considered for enrollment (University of Richmond, 2012). Furthermore, first-year applicants must compose an essay of 350 to 650 words (University of Richmond, 2020). An optional program for faculty and the student body, called Writing Across the Curriculum, offers students the chance to apply to be writing fellows and/or Writing Center consultants, while instructors can attend an orientation session and implement program elements in their classes (University of Richmond, 2015).

The Virginia Military Institute (VMI) requires students to take four units of high school English, with few notable exceptions (Virginia Military Institute-a, 2016). For the admissions process, it recommends students write a personal statement (Virginia Military Institute-b, 2016). The school considers writing to be one of its core competencies and necessitates students take at least six credits hours in written communication. In addition, students are required to take two writing-intensive courses (Virginia Military Institute-a, 2019). "To ensure the development of strong written communication abilities," VMI writes on the subject, "VMI embraces the philosophy that 'Learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance' […] beginning in first-year composition and extended in writing-intensive courses in the disciplines" (Virginia Military Institute, 2013). The college's Writing Center offers assistance on a variety of topics, including brainstorming, outlining, and formulating thesis statements (Virginia Military Institute-c, 2016). Ultimately, VMI's aim is to equip its students for academic success and opportunities beyond the classroom (Virginia Military Institute-b, 2019).

Hampden-Sydney College (H-SC) expects students to have taken four units of high school English prior to their application (Hampden-Sydney College-a, 2020). The college's writing center, called the Rhetoric Studio, aims to help students design and draft "both informative and persuasive communication projects across all disciplines." Services offered by the center include conducting research, honing thesis statements, outlining, drafting, revising, and more (Hampden-Sydney College-b, 2020).

At Hollins University (Hollins), students must write an essay to be considered for enrollment, with grammar being among the top four elements that counselors judge (Hollins University, 2017). Moreover, writing is a skills requirement at Hollins. All students must pass two writing courses, one of which must be completed in their first year, the other of which must be expository in nature (Hollins University, 2015). According to the Hollins Writing Center, most majors at the college require writing skills (Hollins University, 2014).

Randolph-Macon College (R-MC) suggests prospective students take four units of high school English and notes that "writing skills are especially important" (Randolph-Macon College, 2016). On its required college essay, R-MC comments that one of the essay's purposes is to allow the admissions office to evaluate a student's written communication skills, including the "clarity of [their] thinking" and "[their] ability to convey thoughts in written form." R-MC warns students to not neglect the technical aspects of their essay, e.g. grammar, spelling, and sentence structure (Randolph-Macon College-b, 2021). The R-MC general education curriculum consists of three components, one of which is a course writing requirement that is "devoted to the development and reinforcement of students' writing skills" (Randolph-Macon College-a, 2021). The college also has a major devoted to writing, which was implemented in part because so many modern-day employers regard writing skills as a top attribute among job candidates

(Randolph-Macon College-c, 2021). For writing help, R-MC's writing center, called the Communication Center, provides feedback to students on issues such as organization, topic identification, and more (Randolph-Macon College, 2017).

Roanoke College (RC) requires students to complete four units of high school English in order to be considered for enrollment. Additionally, students must compose an essay on "an experience, activity, or character trait that lets [the college] better know who [they] are and what makes [them] the person [they] have become" (Roanoke College, 2020). RC's core curriculum, called the Intellectual Inquiry Curriculum, tasks students with completing a course dedicated to critical thinking and writing (Roanoke College, 2015).

DATA

Upon gathering the necessary data, I calculated how many schools mentioned certain writing features in their official student resources. Any writing features that were only cited by one school or were included on an auxiliary webpage, such as a specific department's main page, were omitted. Three schools – Hampton U, Hollins, and RC – did not have an online writing resource; instead, they encouraged students to visit their respective writing center for English-related assistance. Some, like VT, did not have an official writing resource but referred to specific grammar features via their writing centers. However, the majority of the universities had an official writing resource in which they listed distinct grammar- or writing-related features that they considered to be the most important for their students to master. These schools constitute the entirety of the data as cited in the rest of this chapter.

Half of the aforementioned universities emphasized outlining, writing thesis statements, incorporating sources into text, employing proper citations techniques, and revising as important writing skills. Five stressed a student's ability to use quotations, construct conclusions, brainstorm, and conduct research. Four provided resources on article usage, paraphrasing,

transitions, prepositions, active vs. passive voice, punctuation, and drafting. Three cited the importance of reading skills, paragraph construction, introductions, abstracts, personal statements, subject-verb agreement, editing, concise language, pronouns, and the avoidance of run-on sentences. Finally, two offered explanations of verb tense, count and uncount nouns, parallelism, topic sentences, style, modifiers, summarizing, note-taking, organization, fragments, plurals, proofreading, and writer's block.

Table 1. Most common writing features in the top-rated Virginia universities.
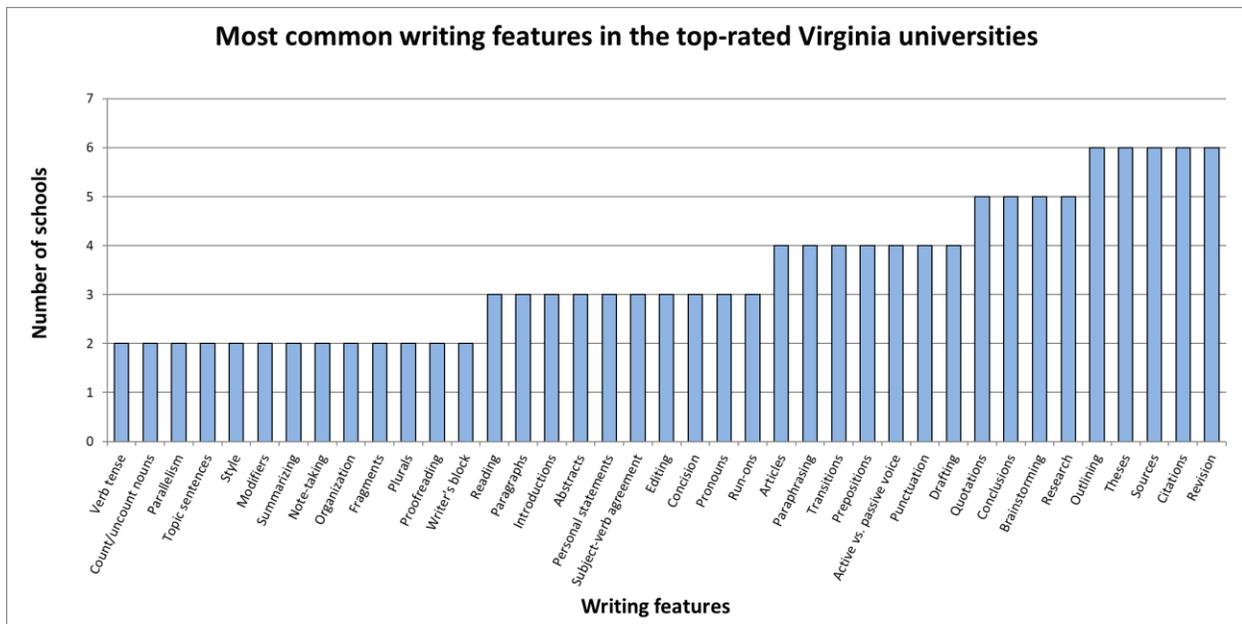
Interestingly, the most frequently mentioned writing features concerned essay construction, such as outlining or revising, rather than specific grammar features or mechanics. However, it is worth noting that many schools had lists of particular grammatical concepts that they expected students to understand and be able to employ; though there was less overlap between these features, they were present on many university writing resources.

DISCUSSION

After a thorough investigation of the top fifteen Virginia universities, I have determined that grammar, and writing as a whole, is one of the most valued skills in academia. Most of the aforementioned schools recommend or require several units of high school English prior to a student's application and necessitate that their students take college-level writing courses in order to pass their degree programs, even if their disciplines are unrelated to communication, English, or writing. Some universities, like GMU and ODU, have implemented program-specific writing-intensive courses for the upper-division level. Perhaps even more significantly, many of these universities consider written communication to be a core competency and so expect their students to possess a high command of grammar mechanics.

With a few exceptions, most of the universities provide online writing resources for their students. These resources gave me insight into which writing features each school regards as the most vital to their students' academic success. In general, most university resources include both specific grammar features, such as dangling modifiers, subject-verb agreement, etc., and essay-writing guidelines, such as drafting, editing, etc. There is substantial overlap between the schools, particularly in features related to essay construction, which suggests that most universities value a student's grasp of the writing process.

Though there is less common ground in terms of grammar mechanics, certain features are more typical than others. For instance, four universities highlight the importance of punctuation and active vs. passive voice, which are both more mechanical in nature. Some schools list grammar features that might be considered more atypical, such as UVA's and GMU's emphasis of count and uncount nouns, which could account for the lack of commonality between universities. The schools that have the most extensive writing resources include UVA, W&M, GMU, and W&L, three of which are among the top five universities in Virginia.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

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Since I isolated the top fifteen universities in Virginia, this study contained a relatively small sample size. Studies with small sample sizes can lead to skewed results or prevent findings from being extrapolated. Faber and Fonseca (2014) note that a small sample size "increases the chance of assuming as true a false premise;" thus, it is difficult to trust the results of a study with a small sample size. Another issue with this kind of study is how one cannot generalize its results because the sample size is not representative of the full set or population. This study does not exemplify every Virginia university, as it sampled only the most prestigious among them, and so its results should not be applied to Virginia higher education in its entirety.

Of the schools that were studied, several did not have online writing resources, so conclusions could not be drawn about the specific features they value. Due to this lack of information, it is possible that the results of this study excluded certain writing features that are more common than this thesis assumes.

Finally, this study was subject to my personal judgments and therefore may have been influenced by research bias. Merriam-Webster (2007) defines bias pertaining to research as "systematic error introduced into sampling or testing by selecting or encouraging one outcome or answer over others." Pannucci and Wilkins (2010) warn that bias can occur at any stage of a study, including research, data analysis, and publication. Since I determined the parameters of the study as well as how the findings were interpreted, its results are highly subjective and should thus be treated as such.

Because of the malleable nature of school policies and guidelines, the results of this study are not fixed. Year to year, universities may add or remove requirements, alter their core competencies, or change their writing resources. Consequently, it is possible that the results of this same study would have been different were it conducted in a past year. Future scholars may

update this research to better reflect the landscape of Virginia academia post-2021. That way, high school instructors and students can better tailor their expectations to fit the present status of Virginia higher education.

<div align="center">**IMPLICATIONS**</div>

Based on this study's research findings, the top-rated universities in Virginia value written communication skills, including a command of grammar. The descriptivist's effort to teach according to dialect, or to neglect Standard English altogether, does not adequately reflect the demands of Virginia universities, which not only presuppose a high school English education, but anticipate further development and progression of a student's writing abilities. Many Virginia universities stress the importance of grammar, essay construction, and written communication; W&L (2019) even mentions Standard English by name. This implies that, whatever a descriptivist's goals or motivations may be, their views are not representative of modern educational or professional standards.

This study indicates that it is prudent to teach students according to conventional grammar rules. A student who has a strong educational background in writing will be at an advantage during the admissions process, in the classroom, and beyond graduation. Grammar skills are highly prized by prestigious Virginia universities and, as many schools indicate, applicable to a wide range of degree programs and disciplines. Therefore, a student is more likely to succeed in Virginia higher education if they have been adequately prepared to meet their university's writing-related demands.

Chapter V: Writing Guide

The following sections will thoroughly define and explain the nine writing features that are most commonly referenced by prestigious Virginia universities according to their resources. It is my hope that high school instructors and students can form expectations based on this guide that can help them better prepare for the writing standards of Virginia higher education. Due to the rigid standards of written communication that are imposed by Virginia schools, it is in a student's best interest to sharpen their grammar skills, master the writing process, and strive to improve their ability to communicate through the written word.

BRAINSTORMING

"Brainstorming" refers to the problem-solving technique in which a student generates ideas for their essay. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which W&M credits in its resource on brainstorming, details why brainstorming is important to the writing process: "Brainstorming stirs up the dust, whips some air into our stilled pools of thought, and gets the breeze of inspiration moving again. […] Brainstorming forces the mental chaos and random thoughts to rain out onto the page, giving you some concrete words or schemas that you can then arrange according to their logical relations." The university goes on to present techniques a student can use to get their mind oriented, such as freewriting, breaking down the topic into levels, listing or bulleting, viewing the subject from a different perspective, and more (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill-a, 2017).

Likewise, GMU suggests several strategies a student can use to stimulate their mind. First, it advises the student to conduct preliminary research, increase their passion about the subject, and/or expand their basis of knowledge. Next, the university suggests they freewrite, which might help them narrow or expand their topic, home in on a main argument, or break their

essay into subpoints. Thirdly, it claims that visual webbing is a good means of expanding a topic into more detail or coming up with fresh ideas. Lastly, the university recommends a student have a conversation with themselves in order to think through, clarify, and develop their ideas (George Mason University-a, 2017).

VCU gives its students three examples of how they might brainstorm. Its first strategy is to pinpoint a topic that has not been overdone so as to engage readers with "an honest or unique perspective." One way to accomplish this, the university suggests, is to reject topics that merely sound academic or controversial and instead focus on a topic that is of personal interest to the student. Its second strategy is to use lingo to discover topics, or to focus on a community's distinctive words and phrases to generate unique topics. As an example, VCU points out how using the term "salary caps" from watching football can lead a student to write a paper on how salary caps relate to team performance. The university's third strategy is to ask questions of the essay's topic. It suggests first asking basic or general questions, then increasing specificity and nuance as the exercise proceeds (Virginia Commonwealth University-c, 2021).

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What is brainstorming?

Brainstorming is the process by which a student formulates ideas for their essay. This can take the form of written words, diagrams, or charts that a student can then convert into an engaging written argument.

Why is brainstorming important?

Whether a student is drawing blanks or overwhelmed by an excess of information, brainstorming can help them put a new writing task into motion. On the former, brainstorming can spark inspiration or passion. On the latter, brainstorming can bring order and structure to an

otherwise chaotic writing process. Either way, it is a technique that stimulates, invigorates, and revitalizes a student to produce ideas, formulate arguments, and kickstart their essay.

What are some useful strategies?

- **Freewriting** – This is a strategy in which a student writes down whatever comes to their mind, with no thought for quality, grammar, or style. A student might set a time limit, such as 10 to 15 minutes, or a space limit, such as four pages of content. After writing whatever comes to their mind, the student can look over their notes and identify the most relevant or insightful comments they made and consider whether their topic is too broad or narrow, whether they need to do more research, whether they want to change their main argument, etc.

- **Clustering/mapping/webbing** – This technique involves creating a web of ideas. First, the student writes the name of their subject in the center of a blank piece of paper. Next, they draw lines out from the subject and jot down any related concepts they can conceive. The student can repeat this process until they have run out of ideas or else have enough content to work with. Once their web is complete, they can circle any ideas that have interesting connections or have potential to become a main point in their essay.

- **Thinking outside the box** – One effective way to brainstorm is to invoke creative thought. For one, the student can pick a topic that has not been thoroughly studied or written about, such as a personal interest, so as to avoid disinterest or fatigue from their audience. For another, they can utilize alternative perspectives to study an issue from another angle, consider related subjects or influences, and more.

- **Asking questions** – The student can ask questions, both of themselves and their readers, to brainstorm their subject. They may start with more broad or general questions and increasingly become more complex and specific in what they are asking. This can be achieved by writing down the questions and answers, thinking out loud, or having a conversation with someone else on the subject.

<div align="center">

OUTLINING

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The term "outlining" is used to denote the process in which a student defines and organizes their topic, typically by making an ordered list of main points. UNC Writing Center (2019), whose video UVA uses as a resource, suggests ways students can use listing to their advantage. For instance, it advises grouping ideas by likeness, ranking them in terms of importance, and arranging them to be orderly and fluid. In UVA's alternative resource on outlining, Meade proposes a process called "reverse outlining," which helps students map out ideas they have already written. While outlining can assist a student in the planning of their first draft, reverse outlining can assist them in the planning of their revisions (Meade-d, 2019).

Kornhaber (2000), the author of W&M and W&L's listed resource on outlining, claims that one of the most useful functions of outlining is its ability to reduce strain on the revision process. He segments the process into four stages: the first steps, during which a student picks their topic, gathers notes and sources, and arranges their ideas in the order that best supports their argument; generalizing, during which the student categorizes their ideas, cuts extraneous content, and gleans themes for their essay; ordering, during which the student arranges their categorizations and converts their list of ideas into sentences; and putting it all together, during which the student uses their outline to construct their essay, taking into account their categories, subcategories, etc.

GMU defines an outline as an essay's "map," which might use numbers or bullet points to arrange information and convey points. The university explains why outlining is an important step in the writing process: "Outlining is a tool we use in the writing process to help organize our ideas, visualize our paper's potential structure, and to further flesh out and develop points. […] An outline provides the writer with a space to consider ideas easily without needing to write complete paragraphs or sentences." GMU instructs its students to establish a thesis statement before they make an outline, as the two can inform one another during the outlining process, and to organize their information with tools such as bullet points, Roman numerals, letters, numbers, or other discernable symbols (George Mason University-d, 2017). Like W&M, GMU provides a resource on reverse outlining, which it deems a "useful skill" that can help writers clarify their draft and/or take notes on a text they are reading (George Mason University-e, 2017).

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What is outlining?

Outlining is the process by which a student maps out their essay and organizes their thoughts, ideas, and arguments in a logical order. It typically occurs during the drafting stage, as it allows the student to arrange their essay's information by section, paragraph, and/or heading. Most outlines use numbers, letters, or bullet points to separate different ideas.

Why is outlining important?

Outlining ensures that an essay is clear, efficient, and well-organized. On a structural level, an outline allows a student to consider ideas without having to write complete sentences or paragraphs about them and to see connections between their main points and their paper's thesis. Additionally, a good outline makes the revision process easier, as it decreases the likelihood that a student will have to rearrange or restructure their ideas.

What are the steps to creating an outline?

1. **Formulate a main argument or thesis statement** – First, a student should figure out their essay's primary argument so they can structure their ideas accordingly. It is worth noting that the thesis might inform the outline and vice versa, which could result in the thesis changing or developing during the drafting process.

2. **Categorize the ideas** – Next, the student should review the ideas they have compiled and assign them to categories, with the goal of stripping their ideas down to a page or so of category listings. At this point, the student should scrutinize their categories and remove any that are repetitive, unnecessary, or off-topic. They may also combine categories that are overly similar. The end result should be no more than three or four large categories for a 7- to 10-page paper.

3. **Order the ideas** – Now that the student has categorized their ideas, they should arrange them in a logical order. They might start by organizing the broad categories, then ordering the smaller ones. One of the best ways to do this is to pair the smaller categories with the broad category that best fits them, i.e. the category whose argument they serve as "evidence" of or "support" for. Depending on what type of essay the student is writing, they could use letters, Roman numerals, numbers, or bullet points to list their categories.

4. **Create the outline** – Finally, the student can construct their outline. The broad categories should constitute the essay's sections, while the smaller categories should represent the paragraphs within each section. The student may rearrange or reorder their essay's sections as they see fit, as an outline is more akin to guidelines than actual rules.

RESEARCH

Research, in relation to writing, is the process by which a student obtains sources, such as books, interviews, or articles, to explain a topic in depth. W&M has an extensive resource on research. One of the handouts it provides is a 10-step plan for writing a research paper, which includes a week-by-week timeline for students to follow. Some of the steps include clarifying information like the assignment's purpose, audience, due date, etc., creating a rough outline, and revising (William & Mary, 2021). Columbus State Library (2015), whose source is listed by W&M, breaks the research process into five steps: 1) choose a topic, 2) locate information, 3) evaluate and analyze, 4) use and organize information, and 5) follow legal, ethical, and moral standards. This resource reminds students to avoid plagiarism and employ proper citations techniques to ensure that the original authors are fairly credited for their work.

GMU lists many resources on research, some of which are specific to IMRaD reports. On the topic of research as it applies to all disciplines, GMU clarifies why research questions are essential to the research process: "Research questions help writers focus their research by providing a path through the research and writing process. The specificity of a well-developed research question helps writers avoid the 'all-about' paper and work toward supporting a specific, arguable thesis." The university posits that a research question should be clear, focused, concise, complex, and arguable (George Mason University-b, 2017). It puts special emphasis on IMRaD reports, which are commonly used for lab reports or planned, systemic research. In its breakdown of the formula, GMU postulates that an IMRaD report must include an introduction, a methods section, a results section, a discussion section, and an abstract (George Mason University-j, 2017).

Like W&M, VCU stresses the importance of breaking the research process into several steps. First, the university advises students to create a plan, i.e. read the assignment, select a

topic, do preliminary research, figure out the necessary materials, and construct a timeline. Next, it tells students to conduct their research using tools like library books or online databases and to take notes as they go. Finally, VCU encourages students to neatly incorporate their research into their paper. To do so, the university explains, students should revisit their notes, organize their sources around their essay's main points, and write several drafts (Virginia Commonwealth University-b, 2021). In another resource, VCU cautions students to not simply treat research as "finding a bunch of facts and quotes to support an opinion that you already have;" instead, they should regard it as a "process of investigation." To accomplish this, the university reasons, a student should ask complex questions, then consult a variety of sources so as to formulate original and reliable answers (Virginia Commonwealth University-d, 2021).

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What is research?

Research is the process by which a student finds and compiles the information they need to write their essay. This can include objective information, e.g. facts, as well as subjective information, e.g. interpretations of or opinions on a certain issue. Some necessary components of research include determining where to look for sources, siphoning out which information is beneficial and relevant, and deciding how to organize said information effectively.

Why is research important?

Research is like an investigation that seeks to answer a question the student has posed. This, in turn, helps the student focus their work so that it is not an "all-about" essay, but one that supports a specific, arguable thesis. Moreover, research does not limit a student to one body of work or a single set of data; rather, it enables the student to draw from a variety of sources and formulate a complex, multifaceted answer to their research question.

What are the steps to conducting research?

1. **Choose a topic** – First, the student should ensure that they fully understand their assignment, such as its purpose, page or word limit, etc. Once they have a full grasp of their task, the student must pick a topic. To do so, they may get ideas from their textbook, news sources, encyclopedias, or other mediums.

2. **Collect information** – Next, a student must collect the necessary data, facts, or opinion pieces that contribute to their argument. Common sources include dictionaries, encyclopedias, books, journalistic articles, peer-reviewed studies, and websites. They may use key words to find what they are searching for or else consult their university library for credible scholarly sources.

3. **Analyze and evaluate findings** – Once the student has collected the necessary information, they should verify that it is valid. For instance, they might consider whether the author is credible or if the source is up-to-date. Afterward, they should study their sources for arguments or interpretations that could factor into their essay and allow their own ideas to emerge through the research.

4. **Organize information** – Now that the student has isolated the sources they want to use, they should organize their information around major points. Notetaking and paraphrasing are two methods that may help a student identify notable concepts, ideas, or points of debate within their subject.

5. **Produce an answer** – The diversity of sources the student has gathered can help them answer their research question. They should consult these sources in order to come to a reliable conclusion about their topic and structure their essay around a

central argument. Recommended strategies include writing a first draft or filling holes in the research.

SOURCES

Sources are where a student gained the information they used in their work. Meade, who pens UVA's resource on incorporating sources, draws a likeness between using sources and having a conversation. He explains that appropriate reasons to apply a source include when the student wants to use its insights to build on a point in their essay, offer criticism of it, or create context for a certain point or topic. Additionally, he discusses several ways that a source can be woven into an essay: summarizing its contents, paraphrasing it, or directly quoting it. Finally, he encourages students to use signal phrases to inform their audience that a source is being incorporated, e.g. "According to research from the NCAA…" (Meade-b, 2019).

W&M has many resources on sources, including how to use secondary sources, how to read scholarly sources, how to document sources, and more (William & Mary-b, 2017). Guptill (2016), whose book *Writing In College: From Competence to Excellence* is cited by W&M, groups sources into tiers, the higher of which are preferrable for citations: the top tier includes peer-reviewed academic publications; the second tier includes reports, articles, and books from credible non-academic sources; the third tier includes short pieces from newspapers or credible websites; and the bottom tier includes agenda-driven or uncertain pieces. "Finding good sources is a much more creative task than it seems on the face of it," she notes. "It's an extended problem-solving exercise, an iterative cycle of questions and answers." She continues by emphasizing how sources are key to a student providing evidence for their argument and that they must strike a balance between their sources and their own original ideas. On one extreme, she warns, students rely too heavily on their sources and do not offer any original or creative thought. On the other extreme, they do not correlate their sources and their opinions well enough,

which can result in a disjointed argument. To remedy this, she suggests, students might use multiple sources to support one central claim, identify areas of underlying agreement between their sources, and/or pinpoint unanswered questions they can explore in their essay.

Rosenberg (2011), another author whose work is listed by W&M, likens reading sources to participating in a conversation. "Academic writers do not make up their arguments off the top of their heads (or solely from creative inspiration)," she points out. "Rather, they look at how others have approached similar issues and problems." On this point, she urges readers to take a rhetorical reading approach, in which they study how texts work and think deliberately about how the writer, reader, and text relate to one another. To do so, she argues, a student should consider elements such as the source's intended audience, title, abstract, and section headings to get a more solid picture of what the author's main argument or idea is.

VCU identifies different types of sources and their uses. Primary sources include material produced during the time period in question, e.g. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Secondary sources were written "after the fact" and may be an analysis of an earlier primary source, e.g. a professor's analysis of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lastly, tertiary sources consist of a plethora of sources or overviews of relevant materials, e.g. almanacs, textbooks, or encyclopedias. VCU urges students to use "scholarly," or academic, sources in their writing, such as those found in journals or books, not informal sources like blog posts or opinion pieces (Virginia Commonwealth University-f, 2021).

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What are sources?

A source is where a student found the information they used in their work. Though sources often bolster or support a student's argument, they may also serve as part of an ongoing

"conversation" between scholars, in which opposing ideas are debated, compared, or contrasted. Some sources are more factual in nature, while others are opinion-based.

Why are sources important?

Sources have many functions. For one, they can add credibility to a student's argument, particularly if they are from a prestigious organization or scholar. For another, they can be used to develop a student's essay, either by supporting a main point, presenting an opposite perspective, or providing crucial context. Ultimately, sources should be used to stimulate a "conversation" among scholars, since no academic has ever made up an argument entirely on their own. Interaction with sources is a deeply social activity and should push the student to not only understand their readings better, but clarify their own stances on relevant issues.

What are some useful strategies?

- **Summarizing** – The student may sum up a large source, such as a whole book, chapter, or article, in one to three sentences.

- **Paraphrasing** – The student may sum up a particular idea in their own words. They should stay true to the author's intent but rephrase how it was originally stated.

- **Quoting** – The student may take language directly from a source. They should not do this simply to fill space; rather, they should only quote material that is particularly profound, interesting, or well-worded.

CITATIONS

Citations are a way to signal to readers that certain content is from another source; they are often used both in the body of the essay and at the end of the essay in a listed bibliography format. Meade, writing for UVA, speaks of citations as a way for students to incorporate another

author's opinion into the "conversation," whether their purpose is to agree or refute what is being quoted. He notes that the most common attributions that must be included in a citation are author, title of work, title of publication, date of publication, volume and issue number, and place of publication or name of publication house (Meade-a, 2019).

W&M breaks down how to use different citations styles, such as MLA, APA, Chicago, and CSE (William & Mary-b, 2017). The university puts particular emphasis on in-text citations, using MLA as the example in its resource. It demonstrates how to cite works by the same author, works where the authors have the same names, etc. Furthermore, it coaches students on how to use footnotes and endnotes, and provides examples where the correct technique has been employed. Ultimately, though W&M tailors its resource to MLA, it cautions that students should "follow the guidelines [their] instructor has set forth" and be cognizant of the variations in citations styles (William & Mary-a, 2018).

The University of Colorado (2014), whose resource W&L lists for its students, guides students through the process of constructing an annotated bibliography, which is a list of citations with a 250- to 500-word annotation for each entry. The university explains that an annotated bibliography can have several purposes, including to gather information on a topic, to provide an overview of preexisting research on the topic, to inform readers of the sources' relevance, and more. The content of an annotation, the university reasons, should include a brief summary of the source's main argument, supporting points, research methods, and conclusion; an assessment of the source that discusses its credibility; and a reflection on how the source fits into the student's paper. Some features the university encourages students to consider include author, date of publication, edition or revision, publisher, and more.

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What are citations?

A citation denotes where information originated. Citations are often used both in the text and as a bibliography at the end of a work. They not only help a reader track the progress of a conversation, but indicate where the information originally came from.

Why are citations important?

Citations are necessary when a student wishes to incorporate another scholar's ideas into their own work, as it affords the proper credit to the original author. Citations may also indicate how current a piece of information is, e.g. if the source reflects an outdated or contemporary stance on an issue.

What are some useful strategies?

- **In-text citations** – In-text citations are used in the body of the student's work. They are used to credit a scholar's ideas or direct quotes, typically by including their surname, the year their work was released, and the page numbers from which the information was retrieved.

- **Bibliography** – A bibliography is the complete compilation of the sources that were used in a given work, which is often positioned at the end. Though there are some variations in style, e.g. MLA, APA, and Chicago, most citations list the author, the title of the work, the volume and issue number, the date of publication, the place of publication, and the name of the publishing company.

- **Annotations** – Some bibliographies include annotations, or short summaries of the source. These are typically 250 to 500 words in length. The purpose of annotations is to document the accuracy, quality, or relevance of a source and to relate the author's point of view on a given issue.

"Quotations" refers to the act of repeating a passage word for word as it was originally written or spoken. Meade, who composes for UVA, draws a distinction between quoting and paraphrasing: "When you quote something, you're saying that the words you've quoted are exactly as they appear in the thing you're quoting. […] When you paraphrase something, you're putting the idea in your own words." He lists several advantages of quoting, which include tying an essay into a larger conversation, lending credibility to an argument, setting up an idea for the student to counter or qualify, and more. He goes on to advise students to consider the context of a quote so that they preserve the author's intent and meaning (Meade-c, 2019).

The University of Wisconsin–Madison (2019), whose article W&M uses as its source on quoting and paraphrasing, asserts that integrating information from public sources adds "credibility and authority" to a student's writing and is "essential to research and the production of new knowledge." However, it warns students to avoid plagiarism, which can occur if a student presents another person's ideas or thoughts as their own. It points out that general information from the public domain, such as a historical figure's birthdate, is acceptable to use without a reference and that this can sometimes extend to common knowledge within a specific field.

Like UVA, GMU contrasts quoting and paraphrasing, though it adds summary and analysis into the equation as well: "The distinction between paraphrase, summary, and analysis is central to academic writing, especially for assignments that require critical responses to sources. Paraphrase, summary, and analysis are important for accomplishing different jobs in the essay." To illustrate its point, the university explains that quotations are used to make full use of the original author's words, while the other methods tend to be less focused and specific. Essentially, quoting is more illustrative and precise (George Mason University-b, 2019). GMU posits that the best times to use quotations include when a student wants to support their own argument,

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contend someone else's opinion, feature a particularly poignant quote, compare or contrast ideas, or reference preexisting research (George Mason University-i, 2017).

VCU encourages students to identify information that is worth quoting and breaks the process into four steps. First, a student should isolate the most important or pertinent information in a quote. Next, they should write an introduction for said quote so as to provide background information to their audience and include the necessary citation. Thirdly, they should explain the meaning of the quote in order to highlight the most critical information. Finally, they should connect the quote to their own argument rather than simply rely on another scholar's ideas to communicate their main claim (Virginia Commonwealth University-e, 2021).

Plotnick (2017), whose article W&L lists in its resources, counsels students on how much they should rely on quotations. "The focus of your essay should be on your understanding of the topic," he cautions. "If you include too much quotation in your essay, you will crowd out your own ideas." He continues by listing four recommendations for when a quote should be used: when the original author's wording is particularly memorable or powerful, when an appeal to authority can help legitimize the student's argument, when a passage deserves more analysis, and when the student wants to parry the original author's position in great detail.

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What are quotations?

Quotations are used when a student repeats a scholar's words exactly as they were originally produced. They should be signaled with quotation marks and include an in-text citation, with a complementary reference in the bibliography. Generally, quotations should not be used to fill space, but rather to showcase a particularly well-articulated, thought-provoking, or impactful statement made by another scholar.

Why are quotations important?

Quotations can reinforce a student's argument by adding credibility to and/or affirmation of their position. They allow a student to participate in a conversation, whether they are agreeing with, disagreeing with, or merely scrutinizing the quote in question. Especially when the original scholar articulated themselves well, quotations preserve intent, meaning, and presentation, which might be lost if the student were to summarize or paraphrase instead.

What are some useful strategies?

- **Set up with a sentence** – One way to smoothly incorporate a quote is for the student to write their own sentence, then use a colon to set up the quote, e.g. Many scholars hold Shakespeare in high esteem: "Shakespeare is indisputably the best writer of the 16th century" (Smith, 2007, p. 96). This informs the reader about who said the quote and why the quote is important, and provides the necessary citation.

- **Precede with signal words** – The student can use descriptive words, such as "explains" or "writes," to introduce a quote, e.g. Smith (2007) argues, "Shakespeare changed the landscape of English literature for centuries to come" (p. 107). Signal words such as these are more interesting than "says" and are thus more likely to ensnare the reader's attention.

- **Incorporate phrases** – Quotes do not always have to be used in their entirety. The student can weave phrases or pieces of a quotation into their own sentence, e.g. Some scholars regard Shakespeare as "brilliant" and "revolutionary" (Smith, 2007, p. 134). This strategy is best used when the whole quotation is unnecessary or when the student wants to draw attention to a particular idea or statement.

A thesis statement is a short statement, usually a sentence, that summarizes an essay's main claim or point. Meade (2020), who pens UVA's resource on theses, iterates that "all genres of academic writing rely to some degree on claims as the engine of arguments." He maintains that a claim is different from a fact or theory because it is a perspective that "can and should" be supported with evidence. He goes on to dispel several misconceptions about claims, such as the belief that they must always appear in the first paragraph, be one sentence long, or adhere to a certain formula. A good claim, he concludes, must be focused, arguable, and revelatory.

W&M offers a similar definition of a thesis in its contention that a good thesis statement "defines the purpose of an essay and unifies a writer's thoughts by making a single claim about the topic." The university suggests breaking the thesis process into three steps. First, the student should devise a "working thesis," which encompasses a subject and a claim about the subject. Next, they should revise their thesis to match the evidence they uncovered during the research process. Finally, they should place their thesis statement in their essay. W&M advises students to put the thesis at the end of their introduction so as to "establish [their] paper's purpose for readers" and "provide a natural transition into the body of the paper" (William & Mary-c, 2018).

GMU helps students discern what a thesis statement is and is not. For instance, it emphasizes that a thesis should represent the author's position on a subject or topic rather than simply be a statement of fact or observation. Additionally, the university illustrates how a thesis can help both writers and readers. For the writer, a thesis frames an essay's focus and serves as a planning tool. For the reader, a thesis helps guide the reader a la a map and incentivizes them to continue reading. GMU also offers guidance to students who are struggling to formulate a thesis, with such suggestions as asking and answering a "genuine, difficult" question of their topic or making an observation and pinpointing why it is important. However, the university points out

that theses may differ depending on discipline, e.g. in English, a thesis is an "interpretive argument about a text or an aspect of a text" (George Mason University-h, 2017).

Procter (2017), whose article is cited by W&L, lists three characteristics of a good thesis statement: 1) it makes a defined assertion that can be expounded upon with further discussion, 2) it justifies one's attention to the argument at hand and explains its methodology, and 3) it demonstrates complexity by acknowledging relevant difficulties or dissenting opinions. Like Meade (2020), she dismisses several myths about theses, including the belief that a student cannot start writing their essay until they have formed their thesis, that a thesis must give three points of support, that a thesis must be one sentence in length, etc.

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What are thesis statements?

A thesis statement is the main claim or point of an argument. This should not be a statement of fact or a wholly subjective opinion, but a nuanced perspective that is supported by sufficient evidence. A thesis statement should be the "lynchpin" of a student's essay, or the culmination of their paper's main points, unified and expressed as a single claim about the topic. Most thesis statements are one to three sentences in length.

Why are thesis statements important?

A concise, arguable, and interesting thesis statement has the ability to motivate the intended audience to read the essay. Furthermore, it can serve as a "map" for a reader; once a solid argument is presented, a reader is more likely to recognize the essay's evidence as support for a singular claim. For the student, a thesis statement can summarize a main argument in a few sentences and thus keep the essay focused and organized. This makes for a useful planning tool, since thesis statements often correspond with a paper's topic sentences.

What are the steps to crafting a thesis statement?

1. **Devise the thesis statement** – First, a student must pick their topic and devise a working thesis, which must constitute a subject and a claim about the subject.

2. **Modify the thesis statement** – Inevitably, as the student conducts research and adjusts their paper accordingly, their argument will change and/or develop. Thus, a thesis statement will have to be modified alongside the essay.

3. **Place the thesis statement in the essay** – Finally, a student must add their thesis statement to their paper. Most thesis statements should be placed at the end of the introductory paragraph so as to establish the essay's purpose and transition naturally into the body of the work. Most thesis statements will be reiterated in the conclusion to tie the paper together and finish on a sound, coherent note.

CONCLUSIONS

A conclusion is the closing paragraph of an essay, which typically summarizes its thesis and main arguments. Nguyen (2019), the author of UVA's article on conclusions, emphasizes how important it is for a student to give their essay a potent ending. "A great conclusion can help the reader to comprehend what they just read, why it matters, and how they can apply it to their own lives," she declares. "The conclusion is the writer's chance to go beyond the prompt and connect their paper to the world around them." She lists several strategies students can employ to give their essay an impactful ending. For example, she urges students to communicate the significance of their essay by explaining why it matters, i.e. answering the "So what?" question.

In its resource on conclusions, W&M poses two approaches students can take: looking backward or looking forward. On the former, W&M describes an ending that summarizes the essay's key arguments to "paint one last picture" for the audience. This can be done by either reiterating the introduction, restating the thesis, or summarizing the main points. On the latter,

W&M describes a conclusion that focuses on the essay's implications. To do this, a student may either predict a future outcome or call their audience to action. Ultimately, the university warns, students should not "leave [their] reader hanging;" rather, they should make a strong impression on their audience that persists after the essay is put down (William & Mary-b, 2018).

GMU is more specific in its breakdown of conclusions, offering techniques for humanities papers and scientific research reports. In its discussion of humanities papers, the university reviews three different goals a conclusion might have: to make a judgment, to provide a culmination of the essay's ideas, or to "send off" the reader. GMU warns students to avoid certain problematic conclusions, such as merely repeating their thesis statement or ending on a cliché (George Mason University-c, 2017). On the subject of scientific research reports, the university notes that conclusions are often incorporated into the discussion section of an IMRaD report. It gives tips to its students on how to word certain ideas; for instance, it suggests a student use the phrase "The aim of the present research was to examine…" or "The purpose of the current study was to determine…" to restate the aims of their study. In addition to sample language, GMU provides an example conclusion, with different sections highlighted to show how a student should summarize their main findings, suggest implications for their field of knowledge, etc. (George Mason University-a, 2019).

VCU frames conclusions as a way to guide the reader. It argues that conclusions have a twofold function: to restate an essay's thesis and to summarize its primary argument. To help its students better understand why a conclusion is necessary, the university compares a paper's conclusion to the end of a phone call; just as a person would not want to be abruptly hung up on, so a reader does not want the essay they are reading to end jarringly and without finesse. Beyond that, a conclusion should leave a lasting imprint on the reader and give them something to ponder

afterward, like a caller would want to encourage their friend to recall what they had discussed on the phone and eventually speak with them again (Virginia Commonwealth University-a, 2021).

Freedman and Plotnick (2017), whose article W&L uses as its resource on conclusions, offer strategies that can help make a student's conclusion more compelling. One such suggestion is to make the conclusion a warning about what might happen if a problem is not addressed or resolved. They also acknowledge how genre can affect a conclusion, as some disciplines do not require conclusions, while others require a specific kind of conclusion, e.g. a book review should conclude with an overall assessment of the text in question.

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What are conclusions?

A conclusion is the final section of an essay that restates the thesis and summarizes the argument. It should synthesize the paper's information in a way that leaves a lasting impression on the reader and reiterates the student's intentions with their work. Being at the very end of the essay, the conclusion serves as the "last impression" a reader will get; hence, it should leave them with a sense of closure and justify the value of the essay's content and subject. A conclusion may "look backward," i.e. combine the essay's main points to paint one final picture for the reader, or "look forward," i.e. point out the essay's implications.

Why are conclusions important?

A well-written conclusion can assist the reader in understanding what they have read, why it is important, and how it can be applied to their own life. In many cases, it determines how the audience receives the essay and how the student's work reaches the rest of the world. Above all, the conclusion answers the "So what?" question: it demonstrates why the essay is relevant and significant, and why the reader should care about its contents.

What are some useful strategies?

- **Summarize the essay's contents** – Often, the conclusion will be a restatement of the thesis or a summarization of the essay's main points. Essentially, the student should capture the entirety of their work in a few paragraphs or less, which helps remind the reader of what they have read and how it all ties together.

- **Raise questions** – If the student raises questions at the end of their essay, it will leave the reader with something to think about. Perhaps the student could encourage their audience to form their own opinions on the topic, apply what they have learned to real-life scenarios, or study how the essay's subject relates to a particular field of study or society at large.

- **Forecast the future** – Conversely, a student may focus on how their essay's argument relates to the future. If the paper deals with a contemporary problem, the conclusion may serve as a warning to the reader. If it is a science or social science paper, the student might predict ways research can be expanded or improved by future scholars. Essentially, this kind of conclusion gives the reader an idea of how a certain issue might play out, perhaps even in their own life.

- **Call the reader to action** – Bold conclusions can challenge the reader to take action. If the essay has presented a solution to a problem, it could advocate for a certain course of action or encourage the reader to be of the same opinion as the student. This will likely leave a strong, lasting impression on the reader.

REVISING

Revision is the process in which a student re-reads and edits their work from a fresh, critical perspective. Meade, who writes UVA's resource on revision, considers reverse outlining

to be a form of revision. "If outlining is mapping out what you're going to write, then reverse outlining is mapping out what you've already written," he explains. "It's a way of making sure you're staying on topic and your ideas are in the most effective order." He warns that, though reverse outlining may feel tedious to a student, it can help them clarify their thoughts and stay focused on their work. In order to reverse outline, he says, a student must determine the purpose of each paragraph and write what each paragraph is about in the margins. This way, they can more easily notice if their ideas are out of order or if some sentences are not in line with the rest of the paragraph (Meade-d, 2019).

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which is cited by W&M as its resource on revision, defines revision as the "ongoing process of rethinking the paper: reconsidering your arguments, reviewing your evidence, refining your purpose, reorganizing your presentation, reviving stale prose." The university makes a distinction between proofreading and revision: while proofreading entails fixing grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors, revision tackles the deeper issues of a paper, such as its structure, thesis, and organization. On the actual revision process, the university encourages students to focus on two or three exercises that can help them improve their work, such as letting the draft sit for a while before they read it again, focusing on large-scale issues, or considering the purpose of their work (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill-b, 2017).

GMU highlights three reasons to revise: 1) to make the paper more accessible to readers, 2) to "sharpen and clarify" the essay's argument and focus, and 3) to improve and develop the paper's ideas. The university juxtaposes editing and revising by explaining that editing involves fixing errors, whereas revising involves "re-seeing" the essay from a reader's perspective and extrapolating on what has already been written. One example it uses to illustrate this difference is

how fixing a comma constitutes as an edit, while describing a quotation in more detail constitutes as a revision. For strategies on how a student might revise their paper, GMU suggests they identify the weakest sections of their essay, create a reverse outline, cut and rearrange sections, etc. (George Mason University-f, 2017). Moreover, the university believes that good academic writing "communicates everything relevant in as few words as possible." For students to achieve this, GMU posits, they can take such measures as identifying and deleting repetitive content, removing wordiness, etc. (George Mason University-a, 2020).

Saltz (1998) of Harvard University, whose article W&L lists as a resource, offers several revision tactics for students. Firstly, she tells them to put their draft aside for a time so as to allow for a more objective analysis of their work. Secondly, she advises them to get feedback from a reader, as an outsider is likely to be a better judge of their essay's clarity. Thirdly, she instructs them to make a "backward-outline" of their paper, which can help them isolate their main points, rank and organize their ideas, and find connections between their thoughts. Fourthly, she counsels them to reconsider their thesis to better reflect the body of their work, since revision often entails a total reconstruction of an essay's main argument. Fifthly, she urges them to rework their introduction and conclusion so that their paragraphs are linked and have smoother transitions in-between. Finally, she encourages them to proofread, with the goal of achieving "precision and economy in language."

Based on these resources, I have compiled the following general guidelines:

What is revising?

Revision is the process by which a student revisits their essay from a fresh, critical perspective. It is more than simply editing or fixing problems; it entails the student putting themselves in the reader's shoes and checking their work for consistency, clarity, and

organization. Some of the most important elements that revision covers include the thesis statement, the main ideas, and the essay's organization. After the large-scale issues have been resolved, the student can focus on fixing grammatical, spelling, or typographical errors.

Why is revising important?

Often, a piece of writing is flawed and messy in its first incarnation. Revision allows the student to reevaluate their work and look critically at what they have written, which, in turn, helps them clarify a) if their argument is of any value, b) if their intents have been clearly communicated, and c) if a reader will comprehend their message. For the student, this process helps sharpen the focus of their argument and further develop their ideas, and for the reader, this helps make the essay more accessible and enjoyable to consume.

What are some useful strategies?

- **Put the draft aside** – After completing their essay, the student should set their work aside and revisit it later from a fresh perspective. This makes them more likely to analyze their work objectively and be honest about its flaws.

- **Reevaluate the thesis statement** – Oftentimes, an essay will change as the student conducts research, alters their argument, etc. As a result, the original thesis statement may not accurately reflect the finished paper. Revision is a way for a student to compare their thesis statement to the main body of their work and make changes so that the two work in tandem.

- **Make a reverse outline** – While outlining can help a student get started on their essay, a reverse outline can help them smooth out the wrinkles in their work. To reverse outline, a student should determine the purpose of each paragraph, write

down their observations in the margins, then evaluate whether their ideas are in a good order, if each paragraph is focused around a central idea, etc.

- **Cut and rearrange** – This method is similar to reverse outlining. It involves the student cutting their essay into individual paragraphs so that they can visually and physically rearrange the draft to their liking. The purpose would be for the student to organize their essay, evaluate the flow of their writing, and position their ideas in the way that best supports their argument.

- **Get feedback** – One of the best ways to revise involves getting an outsider's opinion. A reader can judge a student's work from an unbiased perspective and catch errors that the student may have missed. Additionally, since the reader will be coming into the process with no prior knowledge of the essay's argument or structure, they can discern whether the information is fluid and understandable in a way that the student simply cannot.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Despite the descriptivist's claim that language should not have rigid rules, it is undeniable that success in academia and the professional world often hinges on a student's ability to articulate themselves through writing. If a student has poor grammar, they are put at a significant disadvantage during the college admissions process, job applications, resume reviews, and similar ventures. Conversely, a student is more likely to be admitted to the college of their choice, succeed academically, and be lauded and valued by their employer if they have strong written communication skills, which includes a mastery of grammar. Therefore, it is the responsibility of public school instructors, particularly those of high school students, to adequately prepare their students for the demands of higher education and beyond.

The top universities in Virginia expect students to take high school- and/or college-level writing courses in order to graduate, even if their fields are unrelated to English, communication, or writing. For certain schools, such as GMU, the expectations are remarkably high, as the university requires several writing courses in its core curriculum, including an advanced writing-intensive. Beyond the classroom, many opportunities at university depend upon a student's ability to write properly, such as involvement in marketing, web development, assistant teaching, etc. Because of this, the more knowledge a prospective university student has about the writing process and grammar mechanics, the better prepared they will be for their college campaign.

While the small sample size of universities limits the generalizability of this study's results, my approach provides insight into the writing standards one can expect of the more prestigious schools in Virginia. Between the stress of withstanding the admissions process and succeeding at college-level work, students should make every effort they can to prepare themselves for the next step in their education, and instructors should take note of university

trends to better assist their students. By reading *The Prevalence of Grammar in Virginia Higher Education*, students and teachers alike can orient their thinking, planning, and behaviors according to what will result in the highest likelihood of a student's success in higher education.

To better understand the implications of these results, future studies might include a larger pool of schools in its sampling. Inevitably, as time passes, universities will change their writing standards and requirements, which might alter the conclusions drawn in this thesis. Future scholars could update this thesis's research to reflect modern grammar trends in Virginia higher education so as to give a more accurate depiction of college writing standards post-2021.

Ultimately, the aim of *The Prevalence of Grammar in Virginia Higher Education* is to encourage instructors to not abandon the philosophy of prescriptivism. By showcasing the value of grammar education, I hope to not only improve the comprehension, reading, and writing skills of Virginia students, but better prepare them for what they will face in their future educational and professional pursuits. As education evolves and different universities rise to prominence, this research can be altered and added upon to best reflect the landscape of academia in Virginia and thus keep students continuously pointed toward a brighter future.

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