

Grammar Curmudgeon Reflects on 40 Years



Phil Schmidt is a self-admitted curmudgeon when it comes to grammar.

Fortunately, he says, none of students are likely to call him that—the majority of incoming college students have vocabularies that don't stretch to include words not in the common vernacular. And that, according to Phil, includes the word "curmudgeon."

During Homecoming weekend, friends celebrated Dr. Schmidt's 40th year teaching at Southwestern, a tenure that has seen this

history professor evolve into one of SC's most legendary grammar and writing sticklers. While Southwestern would like to claim that all of its students are outstanding, Phil admits that the majority of today's incoming students have the same bad English habits of their counterparts in colleges throughout the nation.

"I can't prove it, but my fear is that technology has given kids so much more to do that they don't read any more," Schmidt says. "At an unconscious level, they don't develop an idea of what a good sentence is."

That, he says, combines with a movement away from teaching grammar in elementary and secondary schools and leads to 18-year-olds who are "almost clueless about grammar."

He's seen it all: The bogus apostrophe in a plural noun; the confusion of "they're" with "their" or "there"; the inability to distinguish between a comma and a semicolon; the complete unfamiliarity with common English words such as "ubiquitous."

But all is not lost. As Schmidt pointed out in comments during the 40-year celebration, Southwestern College can be a place where the motivated student learns to overcome these deficiencies.

And that pleases even a grammar curmudgeon such as Phil Schmidt.

Introduction by Sara Severance Weinert

What Have You Learned in 40+ Years of Teaching at Southwestern College?

Response by Phil Schmidt

So the question is, what have I learned in my 40+ years now of teaching at SC?

I've learned what an immense privilege this job represents, because it has allowed me to remain a student for 10 times the usual length required for an undergraduate degree! Even if at times I am a "slow learner," for 40 years I've had the privilege of being allowed to continue my own education in an exciting academic environment. Not many people get to have that sort of chance, but it is an important benefit of being a faculty member. In my early years on the faculty, once I was finished writing the Ph.D. dissertation, I actually got to take a series of courses at the college for a grade and thus academic credit, to the point where by credit hours I am now a second semester freshman at Southwestern.

As I was mulling over the years I've taught here I realized (without taking the time to count them) that by now I've taught something well over a thousand students at the college. When Carl (Martin) first approached me about doing this I thought to myself, what students I would most like to invite to share this experience with us. I very quickly thought of Kim Moore '71, Mike Medina '72, and Scott Hecht '90 in one group, and of Joe Sherman '72, Sharilyn (Hogue) Hill '87, and Rose (Mans) Steichen '02 in the other group. They are great representatives for all the other thousand plus students whom I also have had in class.

With respect to Kim, Mike, and Scott, what is clear to me is that these are absolutely the three best students I've ever had! It's a positive joy to get to work with such people in an academic environment, and to know (just in passing) that the papers I was going to get from each of them were going to be either clean copy or so close to the same that grading their papers was always done quickly, while the papers also were interesting reading.

Joe, Sharilyn, and Rose were in a different situation versus that of Kim, Mike, and Scott because—while they were good students when they got to SC—their command of the grammar and mechanics of standard written English was *not* what it needed to be. That situation is true for most of my SC students, but these three people, of all my thousand plus SC students over the years, were the ones who worked the hardest at overcoming their problems with grammar by working diligently with me on these matters.

As college faculty members know, many people by the time they enter college are generally unable (the bad habit ruts are too deep to overcome) to make substantial improvement in their writing abilities. There are, however, some exceptions. Joe, Sharilyn, and Rose showed profound willingness to continue with me in striving for improvement in their mechanics of written English. They finally came to the point of being able to produce clean copy. They just had to work at it a lot harder at Southwestern than did Kim, Mike, and Scott.

I think of the film that many of us perhaps saw sometime in the decade of the 1990s, *Mr. Holland's Opus*. I never have had a baton in my hand, but nonetheless it has been my pleasure and joy to have been the "conductor" of this tremendous ensemble of over a thousand students. So to Kim, Mike, Joe, Sharilyn, Scott, and Rose (all six in graduation sequence), I thank you (and all the other students whom you symbolize) for being my orchestra.



Photos by Michelle Boucher



Friends and co-workers gathered at The Barns at Timber Creek to celebrate Phil Schmidt and his 40 years of teaching at Southwestern College. Hosted by Carl and Mary Lou Martin, the gathering brought together former colleagues (top, l. to r.) Wallace Grey, Ralph Decker, Schmidt, Ed Foster, Lewis Gilbreath, and Jeannine Foster. The lower photo shows Martin assisting former student Sharilyn (Hogue) Hill '87.



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— Phil Schmidt