



Roadrunner English

Steven Donahue introduces his monthly series of literacy exercises designed to be used as a supplement to existing programs to kick-start students' progress

Learning English is not easy.

As the U.S. population surpasses the 300 million mark, this special *Language Magazine* series, Roadrunner English, is an attempt to address the burgeoning "knowledge gap," widely and direly reported by researchers, including E.D. Hirsh, Jr. in *The Knowledge Deficit*.¹ Hopefully, it will provide ready materials which may positively impact the literacy implosion. An implosion which is increasingly dividing the "have's" from the "have-not's" in this diverse land.

Reading and writing are inextricably intertwined. And reading scores are tragic in our nation with 59 percent of white students reading at a level below proficient; 85 percent of Hispanic students; and 88 percent of black students.² Writing is a "gatekeeper" to finding quality employment, yet according to the recent report "The Neglected R," — "writing is clearly the most neglected" skill.³ The literacy news gets even worse — perhaps, even cataclysmic for the American way of life.

In December 2004, the once-a-decade National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) found that, "Fewer than one-in-three college graduates can successfully perform tasks such as understanding and comparing the viewpoints of two newspaper editorials, interpreting a table with data about blood pressure and physical activity, or computing and comparing the cost per ounce of different food items."⁴

The clarion calls emanating from the Spellings Commission Report's⁵ conclusion that "unseemly complacency" has led the nation to an unprecedented crisis in education fueled by "[...] a troubling number of undergraduates [who] waste time [...] mastering English and math skills that they should have learned in high school" has led to an even more compellingly urgent reports calling to America to virtual educational warfare.

Tough Choices or Tough Times, the report by the National Center on Education and the Economy predicts that the U.S. will be

eclipsed by India and China within a generation unless revolutionary action is taken in the education sector.⁶ The report characterizes the U.S. system of education as "America's Leaky Education Pipeline," where only 82 out of every 100 ninth graders make it through college and where "one-third of foreign-born adults, and 44 percent of Hispanic adults, do not have any high school credential." The report concludes that the U.S. will go the downward way of Britain which lost the industrial race with the U.S. over a century ago, but this time it will be in the high-tech realm.

Roadrunner English is a metaphor for the cross-cultural communication between the speedy avian and clueless coyote. It is also symbolic of the urgency and speed by which we need solution to our literacy/communication problems in this mosaic-tiled land. The fill-in-the-blanks are not merely delete every Nth word cloze activities, but rather clusters

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Roadrunner English Secrets

1 VARIETY OF TENSES

- Can't all be in present tense.
- Don't use "being."
- Don't use past perfect without a reason.
- Vary between progressive.
- Use some subordination.
- Use some sentences which begin with participles.
- Some short some a little long.

2 TRANSITIONS

- Sentences need beginning and internal transitions.
- There are about 880 transitions.
- First, Next, Last — transitions should be in logical order, and not always baby ones.

3 ADJECTIVES

- On the second pass of your paper, look for opportunities to plug in adjectives which describe what you are writing about.
- It was a good experience.*
- It was the best experience I ever had in my life.*
- It was a better experience at Disneyland than two years ago.*

4 ADVERBS

- Every essay should contain at least three to five adverbs.

5 RELATIVES

- Words such as "who," "that," and "whose" should be plugged into the essay on the second or third pass.
- The factory whose pollution was the worst was finally closed down by the authorities.
- The word "whom" — my advice is to avoid using it, except for "To Whom It May Concern" letters. Notice Capitalization.

6 MODALS

- It is surprising to see a paper that does not have a single modal such as "Can, Should, Would, Might," etc.
- Look for opportunities on subsequent passes to plug in some modals, where appropriate.

7 VOCABULARY

- Know that this is your weakness as ESL students.
- Improve your chances of getting the right word by using AND or OR. For example, The student was effective and energetic.
- (Here you are using two words to describe, so at least one will be correct and clearer.)

8 ORGANIZATION

- Use titles.
- Use subtitles if the teacher allows.
- Grammar and Spelling come last.
- Neatness does count.

9 PROOFREADING

- Last and least: Grammar and Spelling.

RULE 1 Draft with your heart; Edit with your head.

RULE 2 Grammar, spelling, proofreading come last.

RULE 3 Know the grammatical functions of words.

No.	Word	Part of Speech	Pronunciation	Definition
1	mascot	Noun	MAHS-KOT	The guide or cheerleader like at a football game.
2	slim	Adjective	SUH-LIM	Not fat.
3	striking	Adjective	STR-EYE-KING	Important characteristic.
4	cactus belt	Noun	KAK-TUS BELT	Area where cactus grows.
5	witless	Adjective	WIT-LESS	Not smart. Stupid.
6	swift	Adjective	SWIF-T	Quick. Fast.
7	humorous	Adjective	HU-MUR-US	Funny. Like a joke.
8	clever	Adjective	KLEV-UR	Smart. Intelligent.
9	fast-as-lightning	Helper. Simile.	FAH-ST AH-Z LIE-T-NING	As fast as light.

The speedy Roadrunner is the student's **1** _____ or model guiding the way to fast writing and English skills-building. The Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) is a **2** _____, long-tailed bird and one of the most **3** _____ characters of the **4** _____ of the Southwest. The Roadrunner, along with Wile E. Coyote, were the models for Warner Bros. cartoons where the **5** _____ coyote never managed to catch the **6** _____ bird. Many times, the characters would communicate by holding up **7** _____ signs. In the 1979 film, *The Villains*, actor and second-language learner Arnold Schwarzenegger played the **8** _____ bird. So get ready to learn English like the **6** _____ Road Runner!

of related vocabulary and parts of speech which have been warmly, even enthusiastically, received by second language learners in actual classrooms. One student recently commented, "Professor, for the first time, I really feel like I am in a university class and making progress about what I really need to learn. Thank you!"

Many of the activities revolve around Americana, with a bit of a twist on our complex foreign relations. Just the facts, of course, but good fodder for conversation and linking content to grammar, vocabulary, and speech: the building blocks of reading and writing. The web site www.writenowabc.net offers special features, such as a talking robot or avatar and an experimental essay, paragraph repair program to help students make that great leap forward in English literacy. Foreign language versions are also planned for the future.

In many of the exercises, we have simplified English grammar. For example, with the parts of a verb, such as SWIM: (1) SWIM, (2) SWAM, (3) SWUM, (4) SWIMMING, we characterize (3) and (4) as "Verbals," but also mean that they can function as ADJECTIVES. From classroom experience, the only reason to introduce confusing gerunds is to show that whatever comes before a gerund should be in the possessive case — and it is actually fairly rare. However, for the four principle parts of a verb, when we express the idea: "He

has swum the channel plan," "Jack has a swollen ankle" or "She has a flying plan," in many cases (3) and (4) simply are adjectives, with nuances of course. Alternatively, they are part of a verbal: with have or be.

Each exercise can be used to scaffold an actual writing assignment, where the words and patterns are modeled. The series will continue with sections on major writing modes: narrative, description, argument, and so forth. In fact, this first series is a sort of jump-start on being a Speedy Gonzalez.

Answers will appear in consecutive issues and be available online. After all, it is not the answers that count, but the effort or journey in reaching them.

In the exercise above, all of the words are sequentially arranged as in the table. So there is nothing to do but fill in the blanks in order. Of course, students should be probed on whether they understand "wit," "witless," "swift," "clever," and so forth. This first exercise serves as an example how additional exercises (which are scrambled as to answers) are organized.

Teachers who use or create similar exercises will bask in the warm appreciation of your brood of Roadrunner English learners. **X**

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References

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