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Contemporary
Usage *and* Style

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AMERICAN HERITAGE®

Guide to Contemporary Usage *and* Style

Have you ever *honed in* on a problem, and wondered if you should have *homed in* on it instead? If you were *nonplussed* by it, were you overwhelmed, or were you unimpressed? You may have been *reluctant* to take it on, but could you be described as *reticent* to take it on?

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With clear explanations, elegant examples, and the discerning judgments of the Usage Panel, this book provides authoritative and sensible advice on language use for writers in every field of endeavor.

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We regret that the following members of the Usage Panel, who participated in the program for this edition, have died:

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Introduction

This book discusses current problems in English usage in an attempt to explain the effects that particular expressions are likely to have on readers of serious prose. The Guide covers the entire range of usage issues: traditional bugbears, emerging controversies, confused words, distinctions of meaning, differences between scientific and lay usage, words with controversial pronunciations, conventions of punctuation and style, and more.

The Guide examines the canons of traditional usage in light of the practice and attitudes of distinguished contemporary writers. Notions of beauty and decorum change over time, and the Guide shows how particular expressions are used in prestigious publications and how accomplished writers respond to these expressions in context. At the same time, the Guide looks back at the distinguished literary tradition of English for inspiring models, citing examples from exemplary writers to demonstrate effective usage and to clarify semantic distinctions among words. Citations of contemporary usage take their place against this background.

Many notes in this book also examine usage problems under the lens of linguistic and historical analysis. A number of tenets of traditional grammar were formulated in the 18th and 19th centuries by people who had little understanding of how language works and who saw Latin as the proper model for English grammar. The rationales for their directives often make little sense today, and writers confronted with making decisions about the correct form of words, grammatical agreement, parts of speech, and extensions of meaning should consider how the modern study of language can help them write more clearly and communicate more effectively. Many controversial usages can sometimes be justified by analogy with other words and grammatical constructions, that is, controversial usages sometimes function in much the same way as words and constructions that have been accepted as standard for many years. Arguments like these require some explanation of how words actually work, and linguistic analysis comes into play here.

Many other controversies reflect the conflict between ongoing language change and the conventions of publishing. English today, regardless of where it is spoken, sounds and looks different from the way it did even a hundred years ago. New words are constantly being created, and existing words are sometimes used in new and unexpected ways. Certain longstanding expressions, for reasons no one understands, fall out of use. Words with similar sounds or spellings get confused. The grammar of English has changed as well, slowly but relentlessly. People now use certain grammatical constructions (such as progressive tenses and attributive nouns) far more frequently than they did just two hundred years ago. Like words, some grammatical constructions simply drop out of the language, while others rise to take their place.

Publishing conventions, by contrast, are meant to be uniform and unchanging in the interest of clarity and decorum in expression. Today, writers take standardized

spelling for granted, but English readers and writers of the past were accustomed to wide variations in spelling. The notion of “correct” spelling was unthought of. In contemporary publishing it is virtually impossible to write without using or being forced to use standardized spelling, and deviations from this practice are viewed either as errors or as deliberate breaks in convention. Similarly, the use of standard or traditional rules of punctuation and grammar are meant to make communication easier across a variety of communities and subjects and to enable a piece of writing to take its place as a serious contribution to the exchange of ideas in an open society. Ignoring these rules entails certain risks and has unavoidable consequences.

In some ways, the task of writing today is more complicated than it was in the past. Since the potential audience for most public discourse is so varied nowadays and encompasses a complex and dynamic society instead of a relatively small group of the educated and privileged, it is important for writers to be aware of the social sensitivities of readers (whether they share them or not) and to understand the hazards involved in dealing with gender in language and in discussing social groups. This book devotes many notes to words in these areas.

The Usage Panel and Usage Ballots

To help adjudicate controversies and to gauge how readers may react to specific words, the opinions of the American Heritage Dictionary Usage Panel, a group of about two hundred prominent writers, scholars, and scientists, are often invoked. The Usage Panel has been in existence since 1964, with new members taking their place beside longstanding veterans. Members of the Panel are periodically sent surveys containing questions on usage. The examples included in the questions are citations of actual usage or are adapted from citations of actual usage. Most questions are posed in a number of examples, so that a specific usage appears in a variety of different linguistic environments, and the Panel must cast judgment on each. Many usage issues have a number of faces, and experience has shown that the Panel’s opinions about a usage can vary considerably depending on its setting and phrasing.

The surveys have become a valuable collection of information on many usage issues, covering more than forty years, and they provide a way of judging whether a controversy continues to have strength or is fading away, and whether a new linguistic development is likely to become incorporated into standard practice.

Acceptability

Most survey questions ask the Panelists whether they find a particular word or construction to be acceptable or not in formal Standard English. Acceptability does not mean that the Panelists necessarily use a particular usage in their own writing, but that the usage does not violate the propriety that the Panelists consider inherent to formal Standard English. Certain questions on the survey include the option of indicating acceptability in informal contexts. Sometimes Panelists are asked to indicate their own preferences or to provide alternative ways of saying something. When an overwhelming percentage of the Panel accepts a usage, this indicates that it has

become standard and that it is likely to remain so. Usages that become standard may eventually fall out of use, but they are unlikely to return to nonstandard or unconventional status.

Acceptability is thus not really a matter of grammaticality but rather a broader notion of appropriateness. Judgments about acceptability can be based on aesthetics, as when a Panelist rejects a grammatical sentence for faulty parallelism. Judgments may also be influenced by a concern about pretentiousness, as when a Panelist rejects a term that has been borrowed from the technical vocabulary of a particular field of science. In some cases, a desire for social justice may motivate the Panelists' decisions about the acceptability of a word or construction, as when Panelists allow the pronoun *their* to refer to a singular noun in order to avoid using the masculine *his* to stand for both men and women. In this instance, these Panelists choose to supersede the dictums of traditional grammar in order to avoid perpetuating sexism in the language.

Levels of Usage

This book uses a number of terms to indicate different levels of usage and to provide guidance about the circumstances under which a given usage will be appropriate.

Standard English The term Standard English refers to both an actual variety of language and an idealized norm of English acceptable in many social situations. As a language variety, Standard English is the language used in most public discourse and in the regular operation of American social institutions. The news media, the government, the legal profession, and the teachers in our schools and universities all view Standard English as their proper mode of communication, primarily in expository and argumentative writing, but also in public speaking. As a norm, writers and editors look at Standard English as the model of language in which they work. Their decisions both are based on and help shape the rules and conventions of Standard English.

Standard English is thus different from what is normally thought of as speech in that Standard English must be taught, whereas children learn to speak naturally without being taught. Of course, Standard English shares with spoken English certain features common to all forms of language. It has rules for making grammatical sentences, and it changes over time. The issues of pronunciation discussed in this book mainly involve how to pronounce specific written words or written letters, such as *ch* or *g*, in different words. The guidance to pronunciation is not meant to standardize or correct anyone's naturally acquired form of spoken English.

Nonstandard English There are many expressions and grammatical constructions that are not normally used in Standard English. These include regional expressions, such as *might could*, and other usages, such as *ain't* and *it don't*, that are typically associated with varieties of English used by people belonging to less prestigious social groups. In this book an expression labeled *nonstandard* is thus inappropriate for ordinary usage in Standard English.

Formal English On many occasions it is important to adhere to the conventions that characterize serious public discourse and to avoid expressions that might be appropriate in more casual or intimate social situations. Formal writing and speaking are characterized by the tendency to give full treatment to all the elements that are required for grammatical sentences. Thus formal English will have *May I suggest that we reexamine the problem?* where both clauses have a subject and verb and the subordinate clause is introduced by the conjunction *that*. Of course, formal English has many other features. Among these are the careful explanation of background information, complexity in sentence structure, explicit transitions between thoughts, and the use of certain words such as *may* that are reserved chiefly for creating a formal tone. Situations that normally require formal usage would include an article discussing a serious matter submitted to an edited journal, an official report by a group of researchers to a government body, a talk presented to a professional organization, and a letter of job application.

Informal English This is a broad category applied to situations in which it is not necessary, and in many cases not even desirable, to use the conventions of formal discourse. Informal language incorporates many of the familiar features of spoken English, especially the tendency to use contractions and to abbreviate sentences by omitting certain elements. Where formal English has *May I suggest that we reexamine the manuscript?*, informal English might have *Why not give this another look?* Informal English tends to assume that the audience shares basic assumptions and background knowledge with the writer or speaker, who therefore alludes to or even omits reference to this information, rather than carefully explaining it as formal discourse requires. Typical informal situations would include a casual conversation with classmates, a letter to a close friend, or an article on a light topic written for a newspaper or magazine whose readership shares certain interests and values of the writer.

Of course, these functional categories are not hard and fast divisions of language; rather they are general tendencies of usage. People use language over a spectrum that shifts from intimate situations to public discourse, and a given piece of writing may have a mixture of formal and informal elements. It is important to remember that *formal* and *informal* refer to styles of expression, not standards of correctness. Informal English has its own rules of grammar and is just as logical as formal English. One can be serious using informal English, just as one can be comical using formal English. The two styles are simply used for different occasions.

As the ancient rhetoricians stated so compellingly, writing and public speaking are art forms that require close attention to one's subject, audience, and purpose. Each occasion presents a different set of challenges to the person choosing and arranging the words for it. This Guide is intended to make this often overwhelming task more manageable and less intimidating. My colleagues and I hope that readers approach this book critically and thoughtfully, in much the same spirit with which it was written.

Joseph P. Pickett
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Pronunciation Key

ä	pat	t	tight, stopped
ā	pay	th	thin
ār	care	th	this
ä	father	ü	cut
är	car	ûr	urge, term, firm, word, heard
b	bib	v	valve
ch	church	w	with
d	deed, milled	y	yes
ě	pet	z	zebra, xylem
ē	be, bee	zh	vision, pleasure, garage
f	fife, phase, rough	ə	about, item, edible, gallon, circus
g	gag		
h	hat		
hw	which		
ĩ	pit		
ī	pie, by		
îr	dear, deer, pier		
j	judge		
k	kick, cat, pique		
l	lid, needle		
m	mum		
n	no, sudden		
ng	thing		
ö	pot		
ō	toe		
ô	caught, paw		
ôr	core		
oi	noise, boy		
oō	took		
oōr	lure		
oō	boot		
ou	out		
p	pop		
r	roar		
s	sauce		
sh	ship, dish		

œ	French	feu
	German	schön
ü	French	tu
KH	German	ich
	Scottish	loch
N	French	bon

The symbol (ə) is called *schwa*. It represents a vowel with the weakest level of stress in a word. The schwa sound varies slightly according to the vowel it represents or the sounds around it.

Stress is the relative degree of emphasis with which a word's syllables are spoken. An unmarked syllable has the weakest stress in the word. The strongest, or primary, stress is indicated with a bold mark ('). A lighter mark (') indicates a secondary level of stress. The stress mark follows the syllable it applies to. Words of one syllable have no stress mark, because there is no other stress level that the syllable is compared to.

A high price has to be paid for the happy marriage with the four healthy children in the large white gardened fence.

And they were paying it, willingly, knowing what they were doing. . . .

And here is an example from “Envy,” a narrative essay by Kathryn Chetkovich. Note how the *and* starting the new paragraph intensifies the tension building through four *and*’s in the previous sentences.

At home bad things might be happening, and no expert, no breezy young man with a stethoscope, was there to take charge. There was only my mother with her fraying nerves, and later a willing but underqualified aide and a nurse who visited a couple of times a week. In the hospital there had at least been the grim herd comfort of other ill people and other worn-out families.

And of course the hospital was a place you could always leave. In the hospital my father was someone else’s responsibility. At home, he was ours.

But even in nonnarrative discourse, starting a sentence with *and* or another conjunction can add to its rhetorical punch. A final example comes from the concluding paragraph of Elizabeth Loftus’s essay *Memory Faults and Fixes*, in which she rounds out a list of deleterious effects stemming from myths about memory with a clincher:

The mental health profession has also suffered from a proliferation of dubious beliefs about memory. The ridicule of a subgroup with questionable memory beliefs drags down the reputation of the entire profession. And finally there is one last group that is harmed by a system that accepts every single claim of victimization, no matter how dubious. That system dilutes and trivializes the experiences of the genuine victims and increases their suffering.

See more at **both**, **but**, and **try and**.

and/or

And/or is widely used in legal and business writing. Its use in general writing to mean “one or the other or both” is acceptable but can appear stilted.

See more at **or**.

anesthetist

The pronunciation (ə-nēs’/tī-tĭst) is an example of *assimilation*, a phonological process that involves one sound being influenced by another sound, usually a following sound, so that the sounds become more alike or identical. In the case of *anesthetist*, the (th) becomes (t) by assimilating to the following (t), with the result that the sound segment (tĭ) occurs twice. In careful speech the word should properly be pronounced (ə-nēs’thĭ-tĭst).

See more at **assimilation**.