# THE OXFORD GUIDE TO ENGLISH USAGE

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Compiled by E. S. C. WEINER



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### THE OXFORD GUIDE TO ENGLISH USAGE

### **PREFACE**

THE Oxford Guide to English Usage is a completely new work of reference. It is intended for anyone who needs simple and direct guidance about the formation and use of English words—about spelling, pronunciation, meanings, and grammar—and who cannot claim any specialist training in these subjects.

This book is designed to answer the questions about English usage that ordinary people are constantly asking; it covers the known areas of difficulty and controversy, leaving aside the parts of the English language that cause most native speakers no trouble. Typical example of the subjects covered are: whether to write forego or forgo, Jones' or Joneses', enrolment or enrollment; where to place the stress in words like contribute, controversy, nomenclature, subsidence; the correct use of data, media, and strata; the difference between deprecate and depreciate, imply and infer, militate and mitigate; whether to say different from or different than; and when shall should be used rather than will. Clear and simple recommendations are given, highlighting correct and acceptable standard British English. Only the minimum knowledge of grammatical terminology is assumed (a glossary of all the terms employed is included), and technical symbols are entirely dispensed with.

This book differs from all other short usage guides in using a large number of examples drawn from the works of well-known twentieth-century writers to illustrate good usage. There are three appendices, dealing with punctuation, the perils of modish vocabulary, and some overseas varieties of English. Distinctive features of American English are pointed out wherever possible in the main body of the book. There are two indexes, one covering all the subjects discussed, and the other giving the location of each of the 4,400 words and phrases mentioned in the book.

This work is based largely on the archives, experience, and resources of the Oxford English Dictionary Department of the Oxford University Press, and has the authority of the Oxford family of dictionaries behind its recommendations. I should like to record my gratitude to my colleagues in the Dictionary Department for their help and support. I am grateful in particular to the Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries, Dr Robert Burchfield, CBE, Miss J. M. Hawkins, and Dr R. E. Allen for their guidance, criticisms, and suggestions; Mr A. J. Augarde, Miss E. M. Knowles, and Mr J. A. Simpson for their numerous contributions; and Mrs P. Lawton

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E.S.C.W.

December 1982

### INTRODUCTION

It is one thing to use language; it is quite another to understand how it works.

(Anthony Burgess, Joysprick)

ENGLISH usage is a subject as wide as the English language itself. By far the greater part of usage, however, raises no controversies and poses no problems for native speakers of English, just because it is their natural idiom. But there are certain limited areas—particularly sounds, spellings, words, and constructions—about which there arises uncertainty, difficulty, or disagreement. The proper aim of a usage guide is to resolve these problems, rather than describe the whole of current usage.

The Oxford Guide to English Usage has this aim. Within the limits just indicated, it offers guidance in as clear, concise, and systematic a manner as possible. In effecting its aims it makes use of five special features, explained below.

- 1. Layout. In the Guide the subject of usage is divided into four fields: word formation, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Each field is covered by a separate section of the book, and each of the four sections has its own alphabetical arrangement of entries. Each entry is headed by its title in **bold type**. All the words that share a particular kind of spelling, sound, or construction can therefore be treated together. This makes for both economy and comprehensiveness of treatment. Note that Section II is in two parts: A deals with the pronunciation of particular letters, or groups of letters, while B is an alphabetical list of words whose pronunciation gives trouble.
- 2. Explanation. The explanations given in each entry are intended to be simple and straightforward. Where the subject is inevitably slightly complicated, they begin by setting out familiar facts as a basis from which to untangle the complexities. The explanations take into account the approaches developed by modern linguistic analysis, but employ the traditional terms of grammar as much as possible. (A glossary of all grammatical terms used will be found on pp. xii ff.) Technical symbols and abbreviations, and the phonetic alphabet, are not used at all.
- 3. Exemplification. Throughout Sections III and IV, and where appropriate elsewhere, example sentences are given to illustrate the

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point being discussed. The majority of these are real, rather than invented, examples. Many of them have been drawn from the works of some of the best twentieth-century writers (many equally good writers happen not to have been quoted). Even informal or substandard usage has been illustrated in this way; such examples frequently come from speeches put into the mouths of characters in novels, and hence no censure of the style of the author is implied. The aim is to illustrate the varieties of usage and to display the best, thereby making it more memorable than a mere collection of lapses and solecisms would be able to do.

- 4. Recommendation. Recommendations are clearly set out. The blob is used in the most clear-cut cases where a warning, restriction, or prohibition is stated. The square  $\square$  is occasionally employed where no restriction needs to be enforced. The emphasis of the recommendations is on the degree of acceptability in standard English of a particular use, rather than on a dogmatic distinction of right and wrong. Much that is sometimes condemned as 'bad English' is better regarded as appropriate in informal contexts but inappropriate in formal ones. The appropriateness of usage to context is indicated by the fairly rough categories 'formal' and 'informal', 'standard', 'regional', and 'non-standard', 'jocular', and so on. Some of the ways in which American usage differs from British are pointed out.
- 5. Reference. Ease of access to the entry sought by the user is a priority of the Guide. The division into four sections, explained above, means that (roughly speaking) only a quarter of the total range of pages need be looked through in order to find a particular entry. But this should rarely be necessary, since there are two indexes: a subject index in which every subject covered by the Guide can be found (and this includes all endings, prefixes, and spellings), and a word index in which every word cited can be found. Within each section there are many cross-references to other entries; these are indicated by **bold type** and followed by the page number if necessary.

In addition to the four main sections described at 1 above, the *Guide* has three *appendices*: I is an outline of the principles of punctuation; II lists some of the clichés and overworked diction most widely disliked at present; and III gives a brief description of the characteristics of the five major overseas varieties of English.

Concise as it is, the *Guide* may be found by individual users to cover some ground that is already familiar and some that they consider it unnecessary to know about. It is impossible for an entry (especially

in the field of grammar) not to include more facts than are strictly part of the question which the entry is designed to answer. Language is a closely woven, seamless fabric, not a set of building blocks or pigeon-holes, capable of independent treatment; hence there are bound to be some redundancies and some overlap between different entries. Moreover, every user has a different degree of knowledge and interest. It is the compiler's hope, however, that all will be instructed and enriched by any incidental gains in understanding of the language that the use of this Guide may afford.

### GRAMMATICAL TERMS USED IN THIS BOOK

WHERE an example is partly in italics and partly in roman type, it is the words in roman that exemplify the term being defined.

absolute used independently of its customary grammatical relationship or construction, e.g. Weather permitting, I will come.

acronym a word formed from the initial letters of other words, e.g. NATO.

active applied to a verb whose subject is also the source of the action of the verb, e.g. We saw him; opposite of passive.

adjective a word that names an attribute, used to describe a noun or pronoun, e.g. small *child*, it is small.

adverb a word that modifies an adjective, verb, or another adverb, expressing a relation of place, time, circumstance, manner, cause, degree, etc., e.g. gently, accordingly, now, here, why.

agent noun a noun denoting the doer of an action, e.g. builder.

agent suffix a suffix added to a verb to form an agent noun, e.g. -er. agree to have the same grammatical number, gender, case, or person as another word.

analogy the formation of a word, derivative, or construction in imitation of an existing word or pattern.

animate denoting a living being.

antecedent a noun or phrase to which a relative pronoun refers back. antepenultimate last but two.

antonym a word of contrary meaning to another.

apposition the placing of a word, especially a noun, syntactically parallel to another, e.g. William the Conqueror.

article a/an (indefinite article) or the (definite article).

attributive designating a noun, adjective, or phrase expressing an attribute, characteristically preceding the word it qualifies, e.g. old in the old dog; opposite of predicative.

auxiliary verb a verb used in forming tenses, moods, and voices of other verbs.

case the form (subjective, objective, or possessive) of a noun or pronoun, expressing relation to some other word.

clause a distinct part of a sentence including a subject (sometimes by implication) and predicate.

collective noun a singular noun denoting many individuals; see p. 142. collocation an expression consisting of two (or more) words frequently juxtaposed, especially adjective + noun.

- comparative the form of an adjective or adverb expressing a higher degree of a quality, e.g. braver, worse.
- comparison the differentiation of the comparative and superlative degrees from the positive (basic) form of an adjective or adverb.
- complement a word or words necessary to complete a grammatical construction: the complement of a clause, e.g. John is (a) thoughtful (man), Solitude makes John thoughtful; of an adjective, e.g. John is glad of your help; of a preposition, e.g. I thought of John.
- compound preposition a preposition made up of more than one word, e.g. with regard to.
- concord agreement between words in gender, number, or person, e.g. the girl who is here, you who are alive, Those men work.
- conditional designating (1) a clause which expresses a condition, or (2) a mood of the verb used in the consequential clause of a conditional sentence, e.g. (1) If he had come, (2) I should have seen him.
- consonant (1) a speech sound in which breath is at least partly obstructed, combining with a vowel to form a syllable; (2) a letter usually used to represent (1); e.g. ewe is written with vowel + consonant + vowel, but is pronounced as consonant (y) + vowel (oo).
- co-ordination the linking of two or more parts of a compound sentence that are equal in importance, e.g. Adam delved and Eve span.
- correlative co-ordination co-ordination by means of pairs of corresponding words regularly used together, e.g. either . . or.
- countable designating a noun that refers in the singular to one and in the plural to more than one, and can be qualified by a, one, every, etc. and many, two, three, etc.; opposite of mass (noun).
- diminutive denoting a word describing a small, liked, or despised specimen of the thing denoted by the corresponding root word, e.g. ringlet, Johnny, princeling.

diphthong: see digraph, p. 102.

direct object the object that expresses the primary object of the action of the verb, e.g. He sent a present to his son.

disyllabic having two syllables.

double passive: see p. 148.

elide to omit by elision.

elision the omission of a vowel or syllable in pronouncing, e.g. let's.

ellipsis the omission from a sentence of words needed to complete a construction or sense.

elliptical involving ellipsis.

feminine the gender proper to female beings.

finite designating (part of) a verb limited by person and number, e.g. I am, He comes.

formal designating the type of English used publicly for some serious purpose, either in writing or in public speeches.

future the tense of a verb referring to an event yet to happen: simple future, e.g. I shall go; future in the past, referring to an event that was yet to happen at a time prior to the time of speaking, e.g. He said he would go.

gerund the part of the verb which can be used like a noun, ending in -ing, e.g. What is the use of my scolding him?

govern (said of a verb or preposition) to have (a noun or pronoun, or a case) dependent on it.

group possessive: see p. 151.

hard designating a letter, chiefly c or g, that indicates a guttural sound, as in cot or got.

if-clause a clause introduced by if.

imperative the mood of a verb expressing command, e.g. Come here!

inanimate opposite of animate.

indirect object the person or thing affected by the action of the verb but not primarily acted upon, e.g. I gave him the book.

infinitive the basic form of a verb that does not indicate a particular tense or number or person; the to-infinitive, used with preceding to, e.g. I want to know; the bare infinitive, without preceding to, e.g. Help me pack.

inflexion a part of a word, usually a suffix, that expresses grammatical relationship, such as number, person, tense, etc.

informal designating the type of English used in private conversation, personal letters, and popular public communication.

intransitive designating a verb that does not take a direct object, e.g. *I must* think.

intrusive r: see p. 59.

linking r: see p. 58.

loan-word a word adopted by one language from another.

main clause the principal clause of a sentence.

masculine the gender proper to male beings.

mass noun a noun that refers to something regarded as grammatically indivisible, treated only as singular, and never qualified by those, many, two, three, etc.; opposite of countable noun.

modal relating to the mood of a verb; used to express mood.

mood form of a verb serving to indicate whether it is to express fact, command, permission, wish, etc.

monosyllabic having one syllable.

nominal designating a phrase or clause that is used like a noun, e.g. What you need is a drink.

nonce-word a word coined for one occasion.

non-finite designating (a part of) a verb not limited by person and number, e.g. the infinitive, gerund, or participle.

non-restrictive: see p. 170.

noun a word used to denote a person, place, or thing.

noun phrase a phrase functioning within the sentence as a noun, e.g. The one over there is mine.

object a noun or its equivalent governed by an active transitive verb, e.g. I will take that one.

objective the case of a pronoun typically used when the pronoun is the object of a verb or governed by a preposition, e.g. me. him.

paradigm the complete pattern of inflexion of a noun, verb, etc.

participle the part of a verb used like an adjective but retaining some verbal qualities (tense and government of an object) and also used to form compound verb forms: the present participle ends in -ing, the past participle of regular verbs in -ed, e.g. While doing her work she had kept the baby amused.

passive designating a form of the verb by which the verbal action is attributed to the person or thing to whom it is actually directed (i.e. the logical object is the grammatical subject), e.g. He was seen by us; opposite of active.

past a tense expressing past action or state, e.g. I arrived yesterday.

past perfect a tense expressing action already completed prior to the time of speaking, e.g. I had arrived by then.

pejorative disparaging, depreciatory.

penultimate last but one.

perfect a tense denoting completed action or action viewed in relation to the present, e.g. I have finished now; perfect infinitive, e.g. He seems to have finished now.

periphrasis a roundabout way of expressing something.

person one of the three classes of personal pronouns or verb-forms, denoting the person speaking (first person), the person spoken to (second person), and the person or thing spoken about (third person).

phrasal verb an expression consisting of a verb and an adverb (and preposition), e.g. break down, look forward to.

phrase a group of words without a predicate, functioning like an adjective, adverb, or noun.

plural denoting more than one.

polysyllabic having more than one syllable.

possessive the case of a noun or a pronoun indicating possession, e.g. John's; possessive pronoun, e.g. my, his.

predicate the part of a clause consisting of what is said of the subject, including verb + complement or object.

predicative designating (especially) an adjective that forms part or the whole of the predicate, e.g. *The dog is* old.

prefix a verbal element placed at the beginning of a word to qualify its meaning, e.g. ex-, non-.

preposition a word governing a noun or pronoun, expressing the relation of the latter to other words, e.g. seated at the table.

prepositional phrase a phrase consisting of a preposition and its complement, e.g. *I am surprised* at your reaction.

present a tense expressing action now going on or habitually performed in past and future, e.g. He commutes daily.

pronoun a word used instead of a noun to designate (without naming) a person or thing already known or indefinite, e.g. *I*, you, he, etc., anyone, something, etc.

proper name a name used to designate an individual person, animal, town, ship, etc.

qualify (of an adjective or adverb) to attribute some quality to (a noun or adjective/verb).

reflexive implying the subject's action on himself or itself; reflexive pronoun, e.g. myself, yourself, etc.

relative: see p. 169.

restrictive: see p. 170.

semivowel a sound intermediate between vowel and consonant, e.g. the sound of v and w.

sentence adverb an adverb that qualifies or comments on the whole sentence, not one of the elements in it, e.g. Unfortunately, he missed his train.

simple future: see future.

singular denoting a single person or thing.

soft designating a letter, chiefly c or g, that indicates a sibilant sound, as in city or germ.

split infinitive: see p. 174.

stem the essential part of a word to which inflexions and other suffixes are added, e.g. unlimited.

- stress the especially heavy vocal emphasis falling on one (the stressed) syllable of a word more than on the others.
- subject the element in a clause (usually a noun or its equivalent) about which something is predicated (the latter is the predicate).
- subjective the case of a pronoun typically used when the pronoun is the subject of a clause.
- subjunctive the mood of a verb denoting what is imagined, wished, or possible, e.g. I insist that it be finished.
- subordinate clause a clause dependent on the main clause and functioning like a noun, adjective, or adverb within the sentence, e.g. *He said* that you had gone.
- substitute verb the verb do used in place of another verb, e.g. 'He likes chocolate.' 'Does he?'
- suffix a verbal element added at the end of a word to form a derivative, e.g. -ation, -ing, -itis, -ize.
- superlative the form of an adjective or adverb expressing the highest or a very high degree of a quality, e.g. brave, worst.
- synonym a word identical in sense and use with another.
- transitive designating a verb that takes a direct object, e.g. I said nothing.
- unreal condition (especially in a conditional sentence) a condition which will not be or has not been fulfilled.
- unstressed designating a word, syllable, or vowel not having stress.
- variant a form of a word etc. that differs in spelling or pronunciation from another (often the main or usual) form.
- verb a part of speech that predicates.
- vowel (1) an open speech sound made without audible friction and capable of forming a syllable with or without a consonant; (2) a letter usually used to represent (1), e.g. a, e, i, o, u.
- wh-question word a convenient term for the interrogative and relative words, most beginning with wh: what, when, where, whether, which, who, whom, whose, how.

### **ABBREVIATIONS**

American Amer.

COD The Concise Oxford Dictionary (edn. 7, Oxford, 1982)

Hart's Rules Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers (edn. 39,

Oxford, 1983)

H. W. Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage MEU

(edn. 2, revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, Oxford, 1965)

The New English Bible (Oxford and Cambridge, 1970) **NEB ODWE** 

The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors

(Oxford, 1981)

The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, 1933) and OED

its supplementary volumes, A-G (1972); H-N

(1976); O-Scz (1982).

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