

BRITANNICA
BOOK
OF
ENGLISH
USAGE

Britannica Books

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**BRITANNICA
BOOK OF
ENGLISH USAGE**

edited by
Christine Timmons
and
Frank Gibney

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Preface

Despite the *Britannica's* reputation as a repository of heavy scholarship (or partly because of it), our editors have given a considerable portion of their waking hours to producing clear and understandable English prose and encouraging the tendency in others. Some of *Britannica's* finest articles over the years have been devoted to explaining how and why the language works. From the first 18th-century article on the involutions of "Philosophic Grammar"—through classics in the 11th edition like Sir James Murray's discussion of English language origins—to notes on the new linguistics in the 15th edition, we have tried to explain the reason and the rubrics governing the use of our English tongue. Now in the *Britannica Book of English Usage* we have taken the more obvious role of teacher. We offer here what we hope will be an authoritative, accessible, and usable one-volume handbook on how any consenting American adult can live with his language and enjoy it with style.

Only a portion of this book consists of *Britannica* excerpts. These have been heavily cut and trimmed to fit a one-volume work. The greater part comprises advice and information over the spectrum of English language subjects, from good style to good spelling. Fittingly, since this has often been a subject at periodic deliberations of the *Britannica* Board of Editors, several board members have made contributions. Other writings include those of contributors to the *Britannica* and scholars who have gained wide recognition in their fields. The impulse behind them all is the desire to encourage the wide use of good English. It is a commodity all too often lacking in our daily lives, or at least in scant supply.

Whether they begin at the beginning, the middle, or the end—or use the book only as a reference—we feel that most readers will either learn something they did not know or confirm knowledge of which they were uncertain. Although written largely by scholars, this is not a scholar's book. It is, by design, a comprehensive, how-to-do-it exercise in how to achieve clarity, style, and forcefulness in contemporary communication.

Frank Gibney, Vice-Chairman
Board of Editors
Encyclopædia Britannica

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PART I

**ENGLISH TODAY
AND HOW IT EVOLVED**

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

English for the Eighties

English Today: Are We Speaking in Tongues?

Slang

Aspects of Linguistic Change

English for the Eighties

At a time when technology almost daily intensifies the flooding of words and images on an already well-inundated public, it is ironic that one of our most pressing national concerns is how to speak, read, and write English. The greatest problem in the schools, we are told, is that students do not learn how to communicate their own thoughts clearly or to understand what others are saying to them. Congress appropriates funds for back-to-basics programs in the high schools, and college deans cringe at the number of students who must master the rudiments of sentence construction before they can hope to move on to a critical study of Hemingway, not to mention Chaucer or Milton. Children's television programs are widely praised today for teaching basic reading and writing skills, but we easily forget that only two generations ago their radio counterparts, confident of their young audience's basic literacy, were recommending good books to read. Businesses advertise wistfully for employees—and executives—who can write and think clearly. One suspects that the long-extinct professional scribe may yet again appear in offices and factories. In government the turgid prose of bureaucrats has become ground cover for ineptness of expression and foggy thinking. In the arts the contemporary tendency is toward oversimplification of expression in an effort to reach the widest possible audience.

How many of us today are grounded confidently enough in our own language to enjoy the works of Shakespeare? To read Fitzgerald or Lawrence, Melville or Thoreau without impatience? To grasp fully the turns of phrase in Churchill's speeches? The current use of poor English transcends age, race, social position, and education. A commonplace of our time, in fact, is the college graduate who enters the professional world unable to write a coherent paragraph.

The irony is doubled when we realize that English has now become an international language. It is estimated that 75 percent of all the technical and scientific literature in the world is written, or at least

circulated, in English. Already the native tongue of 185 million Americans; 14 million Canadians; 55 million English, Irish, Welsh, and Scots; and 13.5 million Australians and New Zealanders, English has become the second language of tens of millions more throughout the world. The *Encyclopædia Britannica's* latest article on the English language notes that one-seventh of the world's population now speaks English, whether as a native, second, or indispensable professional language. The only comparable cases in history of such wide linguistic domination were the spread of Greek under Alexander, the Latinization of Europe and the Mediterranean in Roman times, and the Sinicization of the Far East under T'ang Dynasty China. Thus the editors of the first edition of the *Britannica* were more prophetic than they realized when they wrote in 1770 that English had become "the most copious, significant, fluent, courteous, and masculine language in Europe, if not in the world."

How paradoxical it is that at the center of this worldwide linguistic realm stands the inarticulate American, his speech a mix of canned phrases and slang, awash with breathless parentheses punctuated by repetitions and obscenities. The ability to use language well threatens to become a memory among us. Yet to speak gracefully but with force, persuasively but with dignity, precisely but with wit is as desirable and necessary in the world of the '80s as it was in past decades. Now, however, developing skill with the language demands a greater effort than before. In an era flash-lit by the television screen, it has become progressively easier to see and hear, harder to read and speak. With our language now dominated by the advertising slogan, the bureaucratic memo, and the political cliché, we are increasingly seduced into mimicking the packaged expressions of others rather than tackling the difficult task of thinking something through and articulating what we think.

In this book the editors of the *Britannica* have sought to address this problem and to help redress some of our current national failings in English. The *Britannica Book of English Usage* is a guide to English in the '80s. It is not, however, a textbook. Nor was it planned as a primer for schools, although we hope that English scholars in high school and college will find it a useful supplement to their studies. We have nonetheless included much of what are called "basics," precisely because these basics are so often forgotten or never learned. It is by mastery of these basics that we avail ourselves of the richness and variety of the language.

Among the basics included in this book are the fundamentals of English grammar. Language usage can change with deceptive rapidity, but certain basic rubrics continue to hold true. We have therefore provided contemporary guidelines on the language but have not been

reluctant to point out, where appropriate, the prescribed usages of modern American English. We have been latitudinarian about such prescriptions, acknowledging that usage is often an arbitrary matter and that language is in large part change canonized by custom. Boundaries in English are difficult to define.

In this volume we have also dealt with matters of style as well as substance, since the form of expression is sometimes as important as the content. If style, grace, and forcefulness did not matter, we might already be talking solely by computer with little need for human mediation. Nor have we neglected, among other concerns, such helpful matters as how to use the library to best advantage and compose a good letter. We have also included some of the *Britannica's* classic writings on language, ranging from that on the early history of English to articles on slang and rhetoric. These selections have been edited, where necessary, to fit the confines of a single volume.

If our exhortations to the reader could be summarized in a phrase, it would be, with apologies to St. Paul: "and of all these, the greatest is clarity." Clarity is language's most obvious and elusive virtue. Without clarity of expression, all attempts at style, persuasion, or humor fail. Generally, thoughts are said best and most clearly when said simply. The ornate and complex have their place in language but must be used with care if they are to be effective. Our literature, for example, may be elevated by the emotional power of Keats or Hopkins, the dark profundities of Eliot or Pound, the complicated intellectual imageries of Crashaw or Herbert. But no poetry strikes the heart so quickly as the simple vocabulary and plain speech of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*; Lincoln's farewell speech in Springfield before assuming the presidency; or, for that matter, Edward R. Murrow's descriptions of the London blitz. If we learn the art of simple expression well, the complex will follow naturally. But even the most complicated syntax will collapse of its own weight if its meaning is unclear.

In seeking to promote clarity in language, we face the formidable opposition provided by the circumlocution, euphemism, and jargon that are so prevalent in our language today. We confront the modern legalist burying the simplest information in complex codification; we struggle to comprehend the elaborate, arcane terminologies of the various professions; and we seem increasingly driven to sugarcoat unpleasant thoughts and realities with euphemistic expression. In his book *Enemies of Society*, Paul Johnson refers to the "linguistics of happiness" in which, for example, old people have become *senior citizens*, the poor *underprivileged* or *disadvantaged*, and jail a *correctional facility*. In short, language now often serves less to convey thought than to conceal or manipulate it.

To a degree this has always been true. Yet modern society seems oddly vulnerable to the wiles or confusions of language. Not only are we more exposed than ever to the devices of organized persuasion, but we are perhaps less schooled than earlier generations in language's basic disciplines. Nonetheless, in the arts, in business, in education, and in our ordinary social life, the ability to use language well remains the best index of how clearly we think. Clarity in one can hardly be developed without clarity in the other.

FRANK GIBNEY