Is There Really Such a Thing as Writing Right?

Is there really a right or a wrong way to write? That is, is there really such a thing as writing right? The answer to this question may not be as obvious as it seems.

The French Academy, or Académie Française, is an elite association of 40 accomplished men and women of letters. Originally established in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu, the Academy is still going strong today. From the start, its main purpose was to preserve the *purity* of the French language and establish standards for *proper* French usage. Since then, the Academy has taken on many other functions, but it has never abandoned its initial undertaking.

The French Academy as it looks today

Under the auspices of the Academy, virtually every year since its founding, the French have debated, decided on, and published an official list of words that are permitted to be used by authorities, scholars, and other French authors when writing and speaking the French language. They also have established other acceptable elements of the French language, such as proper French usage. Once published, these dicta are considered pure and correct French; only they may become part of the official, accepted language.

Clearly, French authorities believed and still believe that there is a right way and a wrong way to write and speak their language. But it has not proven easy for them to convince the French public of the merits of this view. The French people speak and write everyday French the way you and I speak and write everyday English. It is fair to say that efforts to enforce standard French have failed among the general population.

For centuries, the idea of a pure language has proven difficult or impossible to achieve and sustain in France, and today we see a massive incursion into the day-to-day French language of words, phrases, usage, and styles conceived by Frenchmen or imported from foreign shores. The French are a free people.

Perhaps it was relatively easy to enforce a standard language when the Academy was born, but today its objective of a pure language is more difficult to achieve than ever before. France is a modern country with many links to other nations. It is a full-fledged, participating citizen of the Communications Age. The rise of competing economic powers and the worldwide growth of technology, commerce, and communications have challenged their ideal of a pure French language as never before.

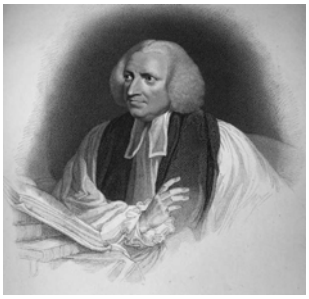
Of all the nations in the world that have affected the way the French speak and write—and there are many—the impact of the English language on French probably has been the greatest. This development, which is especially ironic on several counts, is in part the outcome of a linguistic tug of war that arose between two theories of language. One of these theories was espoused by an English-speaking bishop, who advocated a conservative approach to language consistent with the one championed by the Academy, a French institution; the opposing theory was espoused by a French-speaking scientist, who advocated a *libertarian* approach consistent with the relatively uncontrolled way English has evolved.

Lowth vs. Priestley

Historically, the debate over whether to control language grew in large measure out of certain differences in social perspective. These differences may be characterized by examining the work of two famous and influential men, Robert Lowth (1710-1787) and Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), whose viewpoints on grammar and language were almost diametrically opposed.

Lowth was a Bishop of London. In 1762 he published a book called *The Principles of English Grammar*, a treatise so important for

its impact on language it was continually reprinted until 1787. In it, Lowth put forth what may be termed the *prescriptive* view of language. In his work, he states, "Language should describe what is right and wrong in linguistic behavior in speakers and writers."



Bishop Robert Lowth

Lowth defined grammar as the art of right expression. He believed it is possible to establish grammatical principles that define what is right and wrong. He wrote, "Grammar explains the principles which are common to all languages."

Lowth's outlook was authoritarian. For Lowth, the correct way to speak and write was the one that grammarians prescribed. The citizen's responsibility to speak and write correctly and effectively could be met by learning the prescription and putting it into practice.

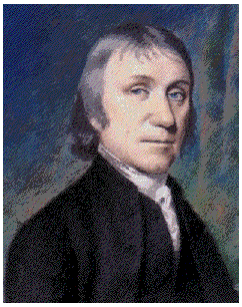
A page from Robert Lowth's A Short Introduction to English Grammar - 1762

In contrast to Lowth, Priestley (most famous as the discoverer of oxygen) was a product of The Enlightenment, a philosophical movement of the 18th Century which was characterized by belief in the power of human reason and by innovations in political, religious, and educational doctrine.

Priestly was an English scientist and experimentalist who embraced the French Revolution because it called for change. Like many other sons of The Enlightenment, he ascribed to the philosophy of the British Empiricist philosophical movement, which taught that the only truth about nature that can be known is the truth that can be observed.

In his time, it was natural for Priestly to believe in and follow the then-developing ideas that eventually led to the doctrine of The Rights of Man. For him, church doctrine was not the source of truth; only nature could be trusted as the source of truth. It was in nature that the hand of God could be discerned. Since man was a product of nature and since the only truth about nature was that which can be observed in nature, it followed that what counted linguistically was the way man actually used language to communicate.

In 1761, Priestley published a text book called *The Rudiments of English Grammar* which, like Lowth's book, was very influential and was reprinted many times. In it he espoused what may be termed the *descriptive* view of language. In essence, he believed that the principles of grammar are not absolute laws but are discovered through observation of nature; they could be verified much like a scientific hypothesis can be verified, by linguistic experiments that observe language as it is actually used by people.



Joseph Priestley

In other words, Priestly believed that grammar is not an essential quality of language; it is an hypothesis formed by analyzing a collection of observations of nature. Grammar is a collection of statements—principles or axioms—which describe how people actually use language, not how they should use it. He wrote: "Language is a method of conveying our ideas to the minds of other persons, and the grammar of any language is a collection of observations on the structure of it, and a system of rules for the proper use of it."

Notice Lowth's use of the word *principles* and Priestley's use of the word *rules*. Both men seem to place weight on the same underlying idea although they name it differently and come at it from opposite directions. They both seem to believe that it is possible to identify valid linguistic rules or principles that describe the way men speak and write, but

they differ somewhat in their idea of how to originate rules or principles and how strictly the rules and principles should be enforced.

Society's Failure to Control How You Write

Undoubtedly, Lowth's work makes a valid point: grammar is *prescriptive*. Yet the French attempt to control their beautiful and expressive language, however well motivated, seems to have failed on the whole.

The French experiment is only one example of many similar failed attempts by other countries. Many of these attempts date from the rise of nationalism in the 19th Century. Nationalistic movements typically seek to characterize, identify, and promulgate the essence of a national spirit partly by establishing a national language.

Nation-building is still going on. It's a powerful agent for change, but even the spirit of nationalism seems not to be up to the challenge of protecting and preserving the purity of a national language. New nations have consistently shown themselves inadequate to the task of quelling foreign linguistic influences. Linguistic protectionism has proved itself to be a failed and failing undertaking.

Few nations try to control their language anymore, the way France does. Indeed, today many language experts argue strongly that control is and should be an impossible task. They assert that there is no such thing as a *pure* or *correct* language; the concept itself is fallacious. They take the position that the effort to control how a people speaks or writes is counterproductive because it stifles creativity and restricts society's ability to adapt to changing conditions.

Too busy to bother with writing rules?

A variety of different theories of language lead to this conclusion. Perhaps one of the most popular is summarized by the following chain of reasoning:

- Obviously, proper or accepted language use varies by locale, period, academic specialty, industry, career field, ethnicity, subculture, tribe, and a host of other factors.
- English or any other modern language isn't what it was fifty, or even twenty, or ten, years ago. Obviously, language is in constant flux. Grammar (language rules) and other accepted language practices are in effect but they evolve. Words—their meaning, spelling, and application—also evolve.
- Given that language changes so often in so many ways, if there were such a thing as a correct way to speak or write on one day, it would be wrong the next. Therefore, there can be no such thing as a right or wrong way to speak or write in any absolute sense.

Sometimes this view of language is referred to as *the theory of language in use*. In connection with Lowth and Priestly, the theory of language in use can be summarized concisely as:

- In terms relevant to Lowth, grammar is not prescriptive.
- In terms relevant to Priestley, grammar is descriptive.

Is Lowth wrong and Priestley right?

Society's Failure to Decontrol How You Write

Undoubtedly, Priestley's work makes a valid point: grammar and the other aspects of language are *descriptive*:

- Virtually no laws are enforced anywhere that require people to speak and write the way they do. Even in France, almost no one from the population at large takes the Academy's rulings to heart or is even aware that they exist.
- Language is free to evolve and does.
- There is no linguistic right or wrong; France's great language experiment has, for all practical purposes, failed.

Is Priestly completely correct and Lowth completely wrong? Is language truly and wholly *free to be*?

Priestley's work gives us other ways to state this question:

- Can we say that the system of rules for the proper use of language (grammar, usage, and the rest) is nothing more than what we observe when we read or listen to a writer or speaker?
- Can language become whatever it wants to be?
- Can people speak and write any way they darn well please?

In other words, is language wholly and utterly descriptive?

Priestley's answer to this question is yes, He argues that a particular grammar is not an essential quality of a language, that grammatical rules are little more than a collection of arbitrary *truths*, experimental results applicable to a specific language at a specific time and place. He postulates that a grammar is an hypothesis that, like all scientific hypotheses, is subject to continual revision as more data are collected by experiment; it is the outcome of a scientific process. The linguistic behavior of speakers and writers is a natural phenomenon much like a geological formation or a process like photosynthesis; we study it to learn its nature. We learn grammar by observing speakers and writers while they speak or write.

Priestley's is a persuasive hypothesis with many convincing arguments, but not all the facts of language seem to agree with it. Here are just two that don't:

- Clearly, people tend to speak and write differently at different times and in different places. Yet some force must keep people speaking and writing alike even while language is changing; otherwise a particular language like English or French would become a Tower of Babel. If language had no rules or had rules that were completely arbitrary, how could speakers of a particular language decipher each other's utterances?

Concerned about getting it right?

- Languages differ greatly around the world. At the same time, many different languages are amazingly similar, regardless of immense social, cultural, and historic differences among their speakers. Even peoples isolated from each other by seemingly unending stretches of history or geography employ language in strikingly similar ways. If language rules are wholly arbitrary, how are we to account for these similarities?

These examples illustrate how, in some sense and to some degree, grammar prescribes principles which are held in common, as Lowth claims. He writes, "The principles which are common to all languages—the grammar of any particular language—applies those common principles to that particular language according to the established uses and customs of it."

Lowth's conclusions about language seem to be in direct contradiction to Priestly's conclusions, and they appear to be valid. Grammars of the various nations and times are not completely arbitrary. Language is not completely *free*. In other words:

- In terms that apply to Lowth, grammar is prescriptive.
- In terms that apply to Priestley, grammar is not descriptive.

Prescriptive or Descriptive?

Undoubtedly, Priestley makes a valid point: language is descriptive. Elements of grammar can and do change; they evolve to keep up with changing circumstances.

But Lowth makes an equally valid point: language is prescriptive. The basic elements of grammar—its principles—do not change. They are the same for all people everywhere.

Well, which is it? Is language prescriptive or descriptive? In our view, both positions are valid in one sense or another and to some degree. Furthermore, these apparent differences can be reconciled.

Yes, there is a sense in which language rules are both prescriptive and descriptive:

- We subscribe to the view that there is no such thing as inherently right or wrong

language in any absolute, moral, ethical, or religious sense (Priestley's view).

- At the same time, we assert that there are language rules that describe the best way to write expository English prose (Lowth's view). This best way is determined and measured by two factors: 1) language practices that inherently make for effective communication, and 2) cultural pressures that make people more comfortable or better understood if they speak and write like the next guy.
- We claim that there are writing rules one can, must, and should follow to write expository English correctly and well.

Which way do I go?

- In accord with Priestley, some of these rules are arbitrary, that is, they are not an essential aspect of language but are specific to circumstances of time and place. Lowth might well agree that these kinds of rules depend on "established uses and customs," customs that are specific to a culture, nation, or time.
- Other rules are not arbitrary. As Lowth says, they are "principles which are common to all languages," rules that are shared by all peoples everywhere.

Where Do Writing Rules Come From?

In creative writing, anything goes if it's good. When art is at stake, the creative impulse leads the way.

But creative writing is one thing, non-fiction expository prose another. When the job at hand is to write expository prose that communicates effectively and efficiently, few would deny that there are rules for writing well. We recognize poor speech or writing when we encounter it and it makes our skin crawl, even if we are unaware of the precise reasons for our discomfort. We sense when a writer violates a writing rule even if we can't put our finger on the precise reason.

We all know that well-written words, sentences, and paragraphs that conform to writing rules are better than those that don't, but why they seem to have more power over us than poorly written words is often something of a mystery. Where do they come from and why do they make a difference?

In a way, the answer is as plain as the nose on your face. Many writing rules are enunciated in text books, style guides, or other language resources. Usually, these books are clearly written. The rules in them are thoroughly explained and well reasoned, and the explanations they give are backed up with sensible, cogent examples.

So far, so good. People sense writing rules at work in practical writing situations. They know from experience that clear, concise, and effective language is language that obeys the rules of writing. They find rules enunciated in text books, style guides, and in other authoritative sources. Their teachers explain these rules. Students follow the logic of their teacher's reasoning; they see how and when to apply the right rule in practical situations. Through trial and error, they apply rules to their writing with varying degrees of success.

Writing rules go back as far as writing itself. They're essential to comprehension.

But why should people believe in the objective reality and efficacy of these rules?

- Do the rules have an inherent validity of their own? Or do people accept writing

rules merely because their teachers told them to do so when they were in school?

- Who invented or discovered all these dusty rules in the first place? Can we trust them to be right? What or whose authority gives them validity?
- Are grammar books merely restatements of arbitrary rules that originated in other grammar books? Or is there some absolute power or agency that makes one language rule right and another wrong?
- Are rules we consider *holy* actually just statements of alternate, arbitrary ways of speaking and writing that we have become accustomed to?

In short, what is the origin of rules and what makes them right or wrong?

The Genesis of Rules

To help answer these questions, let's consider the case of Koko, the famous lowland gorilla who communicates with people using sign language. Koko is cared for by her human friends at the Gorilla Foundation in Woodside, California, with whom she has been *speaking* American Sign Language (ASL) for over thirty-five years.

An anecdote about Koko will help bring us closer to the answers we seek. From time to time Koko receives a mild analgesic for mouth pain. Recently Koko was given a pain medication she was accustomed to, but the pain wouldn't go away. Without coaching, to indicate that her usual medicine wasn't enough this time, she pointed to a particular molar, the source of her pain. She also pointed to a place on a pain chart that indicated a high degree of pain. In this way, Koko made it clear that the pain she suffered was excessive and unusual and that her malady needed special treatment, not just the usual symptomatic pain relief. She was right. Follow-up dentistry cured her.

Is pointing to a molar and then to a place on a pain chart communication? We think so. Is it an indication of intelligence and linguistic ability? How could it be otherwise? Is it a use of language in the sense that humans employ language? No.

But don't go away; there's more to Koko's story.

Koko's education in ASL started in 1971 when she was very young. As of 2005 she had an ASL vocabulary of over 1,000 words. In addition, she understood over 2,000 words of spoken English. She uses these signs and the spoken words she hears to conduct meaningful *conversations* with her human friends in which she expresses her current situation and desires, as well as abstract ideas like her feelings, the feelings of others, the past, and the future.

Note that Koko's use of ASL is homologous to speaking, reading, and writing in humans. An ASL gesture expresses an idea and ideas, of course, are expressed by words. She has signs for words like *on*, *pick*, *cold*, or *fruit*. When she displays an ASL sign like these she is displaying what amounts to a word. She *speaks* and *writes* by forming signs with her hands or fingers in the air, touching parts of her body, or touching the body of her communicant. She *reads* by interpreting ASL signs made by others.

Koko talks, reads, and writes in other ways, as well. She is an avid television and movie watcher. When signing, she responds to English spoken by her communicants with relevant signs or vocalizations of her own device. She asks and answers a question or series of related questions that express emotions and communicate ideas as would a human of corresponding intelligence. She listens and responds to others who say things to her and she uses ASL to *talk* about what she sees on TV and in photographs or magazines. She likes to look at TV images and pictures in magazines and touches relevant objects or images as she comments on them, using gestures like touching, pointing, scratching, or hugging to get her ideas across. She also eavesdrops on conversations, adopts pets, and paints an occasional picture. Koko may not read or write

Meet Koko, the talking gorilla. Here she signs the word, love.

in the way humans do, using vocal chords and good penmanship, but she reads and talks nonetheless.

When Koko wants to express an idea and can't find a suitable word in her ASL vocabulary, she will sometimes invent a new signed word that covers the situation in a conceptually sound manner. Thereafter, the new word may enter her active vocabulary. Sometimes the new word is a completely new gesture or hand formation in her vocabulary; sometimes it is a compound word made up of more than one of the other words she already knows.

Here are some examples of words she has invented.

English language word	**Koko's word**
A batman mask	an eye hat.
A ring	a finger bracelet.
A game of hide and seek	a quiet chase.
A toy zebra	a white tiger.
A magnet stuck to a metallic object	stuck metal.
A pipe that smells like tobacco	a grass bottle.
A frozen berry	cold hard.
A frozen banana	fruit lollipop ice cream.
A caramel apple on a stick	lollipop food tree apple
Tweezers	pick face (a sign executed on the face).
Pineapple	potato apple fruit.
Tapioca	milk candy.
A Pinocchio doll	elephant baby.
Ice cream	my cold cup.
A large brown envelope	stamp bag.

Those who study Koko's behavior note that the sounds humans make when they speak to Koko (phonetics) seem to play a part her choice of signs.

Over the years, Koko has shared life with two companion gorilla friends named Michael and Ndume, whom she has taught sign language. She and Michael used language to tell jokes, lie, and communicate without human intervention.

Controlled experiments show that not only is Koko able to use ASL sign language to carry on sensible conversations about her paintings, her pets, or other routine matters, she reads and interprets groups of signs grammatically while she does so. That is, she makes sense of sequences or combinations of signs as well as of individual signs, even in cases where the order in which the signs are signaled affects the meaning of her message. This fact suggests that she understands and uses grammatical structure.

American Sign Language (ASL)

As well as recognizing signs, Koko hears and understands many of the words her friends speak, although she doesn't posses the biological requisites to speak herself. Even in the absence of a verbal apparatus of her own, she has learned to express herself through signs and vocalizations. Koko's language behavior suggests that she might even be able to speak intelligibly in the literal sense, in the manner of a human, if only she possessed speech organs and the brain centers to control them.

Michael, the artist, with paintbrush in hand. He talked verbally and graphically using paint.

Note that Koko has never had the benefit of a formal course in grammar; never read a grammar text, style guide, or indeed, a book of any kind. She never had a formal grammar lesson from a teacher. Nevertheless, she successfully communicates with her human friends who do employ grammar and who do

utter speech. She possesses only a small subset of their communication abilities, but that subset is enough to support effective, meaningful linguistic communication. She and her friends use that subset to communicate with each other successfully. In a sense, Koko and her friends speak the same language.

How does Koko come by her linguistic skills? The answer can't lie in her ASL instruction because technically ASL is not a language. Strictly speaking, ASL is a semaphore system, a collection of signs that represent ideas, emotions, or things. To be a language, ASL would have to have rules of syntax, which it lacks.

Then how does Koko understand and use grammar? Clearly, the grammar of the language she speaks and reads is in her head; it was there before her ASL instruction began. There is no other place it could have come from. ASL simply gave her the means to express it.

More ASL

How does Koko compare with other animal species as far as her linguistic abilities are concerned? The fact of animal communication is not itself either new or remarkable; it is well established. Scientists have long realized that animals of a given species communicate with other animals of the same species, as well as with animals of different species.

The animal kingdom employs many different kinds of communication. For example, bees communicate by *dancing*. Dancing is a form of non-verbal communication.

Body language behaviors such as dancing are not the only way animals communicate non-verbally. Ants and other, more complex animals communicate by means of odoriferous chemicals called pheromones. Other such means used by animals include other kinds of odors, postures, and sounds.

Humans employ these sorts of techniques as well. In some cases, humans send non-verbal messages that are equivalent to (or virtually equivalent to) those sent by other animals. In other instances, the messages they send are more complex. For example, have you ever seen two humans glare and frown at each other in a staring contest? Have you ever seen two humans butt heads?

However, it is important to realize that Koko's use of ASL is different from other kinds of communication that take place among the lower animals. Unlike the communication techniques demonstrated by these other animal species, Koko exploits and employs grammar, semantics, symbols, and logic. The inevitable conclusion: Koko is an intelligent, verbal creature who uses language to communicate ideas, much as humans do.

More ASL

How does Koko's use of language compare with that of humans? This question is more difficult to answer. It is clear that, though similar in some ways to human linguistic faculties, her language abilities do not approach those of a human in degree, extent, precision, or scope. Her *speech*, as far as it goes, expresses the range of ideas and emotions lodged in her mind. Her *conversation* seems to reflect a fundamental world view resembling that exhibited by humans. But, of course, her brain does not equal that of the human brain for its ability to deal with abstract ideas, to reason, or to experience sensations. If it did, who knows whether her use of language would expand to keep up with her thoughts.

One observer has appraised Koko's linguistic abilities as roughly comparable to those of a normally-developed ten-year-old human being. Such an appraisal is difficult to judge because there is no accepted scale for precisely rating or comparing the verbal abilities of humans and animals. While little scientific work has been done to quantify this kind of assessment, a common-sense evaluation would seem to suggest that Koko's verbal abilities fall somewhere between those of a young child and those of a pre-teen.

- You can learn more about Koko and her companions by visiting The Gorilla Foundation web site: click here.
- Send email to Koko at: koko@koko.org.
- Write The Gorilla Foundation, Box 620530, Woodside CA, 94062-0530

Are People Really So Different from Other Primates When It Comes to Language?

Observation of creatures like Koko provides us with objective, scientific grounds for at least a tentative answer to some of the central questions raised by this essay. What is the genesis of language rules? Are they prescriptive or descriptive? Are they relative or absolute? Are they essential for speaking, reading, and writing?

In Koko's case, at least some of the language rules she employs when communicating with her friends with ASL seem to originate within her brain; they seem to be innate, untaught. The ability to learn more rules after birth, such as ASL itself, also seems to be innate. It is as though she were born with a brain that possesses a natural ability to process language and to continue learning after birth.

But there must be more to verbal communication than innate abilities. By its nature, communication is an interchange between two or more parties. Unless both parties in a conversation share a common set of linguistic rules (that is, linguistic conventions), verbal communication is not possible. All parties to a communication must be on the same wavelength.

Koko cradles her kitten, All Ball

Before receiving ASL instruction, Koko and her human and gorilla friends could not communicate with each other verbally. Absence of rules was a major impediment. Once trained in ASL, Koko and her companions possessed a common repertory of linguistic rules (the ASL rules for signing) that enabled them to *talk* with one another. Linguistic rules were essential; mastering ASL was a prerequisite for inter-species communication.

Three things seem to have been necessary for verbal intraspecies and interspecies communication to take place. All parties to a conversation had to:

- Be born with the potential capacity to process language.
- Be born with the capacity to learn a language after birth.
- Have learned the same language or set of conventional symbols and rules for processing and conveying information.

No doubt, people shine when it comes to verbal communications. But the primate research described above demonstrates that, where language development is concerned, people are not fundamentally different from primates in many ways. People can be legitimately thought of as primates who resemble gorillas in some respects but who have carried their language and other abilities to the next plateau.

Man is the most developed of the primates in many areas and in many different ways. But when it comes to language, he carries these differences to an extreme. No other animal is as verbal; that is, no other animal reads or writes as symbolically or articulates as complexly. He exploits the techniques and technologies of communication to their utmost degree.

But man's innate linguistic ability, the one he is born with, does not relieve him of the need to work hard to acquire language skills after birth. Speaking, reading, and writing don't come easily or automatically. His innate potential faculties for language are a gift, but by themselves they are insufficient; they don't carry him far enough. His innate faculties must be developed through the continuing exercise of his language abilities if he is to learn to speak, read, or write effectively or at all. People come into this world—like Koko—with a brain wired for language, but they must develop and grow if they are to learn eventually to master language.

Learning to speak, read, or write is a process of adding to and rearranging the wiring in the brain. Acquiring such skills involves mastering a set of language rules and applying them successfully to communicate verbally. The more rules mastered and the better the mastery of each rule, the more perfected the skill. In this regard, man and the other primates seem to be fundamentally

the same. Let's see how this process of acquiring language works in humans.

As already pointed out for other primates, verbalization among humans could not result in communication without the availability of symbols and rules for processing symbols that define what and how to articulate.

But human communication is more complex than gorilla communication; and as a result, the rules for human communication are more complex. Instead of ASL, humans employ what linguistic experts call *natural language*.

To communicate observing the rules of natural language, a human speaker or writer will generate statements into standard or conventional sounds or written symbols by transforming letters into words, words into phrases, phrases into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into utterances such as conversations or documents such as articles, newspapers, magazines, speeches, and books. Each of these language units is a conveyer of intelligible or comprehensible ideas.

So far in this description of how humans communicate, no description of communication has taken place. Communication requires two parties, a sender and a receiver.

Thus far, we have considered how people send information via language, not how they communicate. For communication to take place, a second party must read or hear the statements produced by a first party and then must interpret and understand them.

Notice that the second party in this story will only be able to interpret the first party's statements if he knows and uses the same or similar linguistic rules. Without a common set of rules, communication between them could not take place. Without a repertory of common linguistic rules, a speaker like the soccer coach in the picture would not be able to explain to the eager, attentive young players on his team how to execute a play.

Go far right

Without conventional rules for processing linguistic symbols like words or sentences, language won't work. Without a common set of rules, a reader would not be able to decipher what was written by a writer. A passage of text would be a puzzle a reader could not unscramble, a jumble of meaningless symbols strung out along a page. Just as with other species, a common set of linguistic rules is a sine qua non for human linguistic communication.

More about Human Communication

Although some people communicate well and others do not, almost without exception people are able to acquire and apply linguistic rules in the normal course of daily affairs. They have a unique facility for it. Even individuals not particularly skilled at verbal communication can get along in the world. How can humans do this?

Studies of infant behavior have amply demonstrated that:

- The infant comes into the world possessing a faculty for both verbal and non-verbal communication.
- The infant brain knows at least some of the rules it will need for verbal communication, even before it learns to speak. It knows how to process language well enough to teach itself to talk by listening to others talk.
- The ability to employ language rules for speech develops spontaneously after birth as the infant gains experience by listening to its surroundings. Much of this growth is self-taught, but some comes from parental encouragement and tutoring. Learning to read and write is usually an outcome of formal instruction at school.

These and other studies have stimulated a variety of interpretations. Some language experts conclude that rules of grammar resemble rules of logic, and that these rules emulate the rules of thought. Others claim that brain processes, including linguistic ones, intrinsically mirror the way nature behaves.

What lies ahead for this child?

Others assert that the brain is pre-wired before birth—that the wiring expresses and follows the rules of logic, rules such as cause and effect. Some carry this idea further; they believe that at least some linguistic wiring is inborn—accompanies the infant into the world

Driving by the rules, French style

at birth—and that more wiring develops afterward, as the child gains experience with language and the world.

These various interpretations have led some linguists to propose the concept of a universal linguistic grammar, common to all humans everywhere, that is embedded in the psyche, probably in the form of wiring in the brain, and communicated genetically from one generation to the next.

In this view, there exists a set of pre-wired, inborn, innate linguistic rules that guide the formation of utterances when humans communicate verbally, no matter where, when, or how. This universal grammar is the same for all humans because it is inherited through genetic mechanisms.

Insofar as the foregoing observations are valid, the following generalizations seem reasonable:

- That man's brain seems to innately possess at least some of the rules for processing language suggests that at least some grammar rules are pre-wired into human brains. These fundamental linguistic rules must be genetically acquired. They're in the genes.
- But genes are not enough. Many rules are not innate; they are learned. After birth, humans must learn how to employ their verbal machinery to process language as it is practiced in the world. They must be trained in how to apply innate rules and they must learn more rules—rules which are presented to them in and by their environment.
- Language learning is at its peak during a child's formative years, until about age thirteen, yet language learning is a life-long proposition. New rules must be learned, practiced, relearned, and unlearned continually.
- The fundamental rules for communicating by means of language do not depend on who or what is communicating. Barring brain damage from accidents of birth or accidents after birth, the rules are wired into the brain. The process of learning to use language is fundamentally the same for all. The innate ability to exercise verbal machinery may differ between one person and another, but the potential to learn to speak or write resides in the brain before birth. What's needed to realize this potential is language training, that is mastery of linguistic rules. The better or more thorough the training, the better the result.

So far we have seen how genetic mechanisms may account for at least some of the linguistic rules shared by humans. It stands to reason that these rules, being in-born, are inherent and perennial in the human psyche. They must have been manifest in all places around the world and at all times in history since modern humans and language began. Although they are ancient, we employ them here and now in our day-to-day speech.

At the same time, many linguistic rules are undeniably arbitrary. Different languages employ different linguistic conventions—differing rules for saying the same thing in a variety of ways:

- Different languages may employ completely different words for the same things.
- Different languages use different word order to express similar ideas.
- Different languages use different sets of sounds (phonemes) to express meaning.

When equally acceptable grammatical options for expressing an idea are allowed by the psyche, the linguistic option taken by a language becomes a matter of societal convention; its genesis is an accident of history.

The accidents of history are wide-ranging. For example, it has been estimated that there are about 6,000 spoken languages in the world, of which only about 200 have a writing system. They all have language rules. Some of the rules are the same in many of these languages; other are different.

- Amazingly, some languages possess only a handful of verbs by which to express action—all action, any action. Speakers express all ideas involving an action by combining a large number of nouns or modifiers with just these few verbs. They form sentences like, “He go fish" or "He go good" to express the idea "He is fishing" or "He is fine."
- Other languages, like the famous click languages of southwestern Africa, combine clicking sounds with words to form new words. One such click language has a vocabulary of 48 different kinds of click.
- Many languages—Chinese is just one well-known example—manufacture many words from a single word by varying the word's pitch in speech. The same word spoken with a different intonation means something completely different.

Language elements like clicks and tones are arbitrary. The rules for putting them to work are laid down within a society by convention. All such language variations have to be acquired by members of the society before they can communicate with other members.

Not only can rules differ between societies; they can differ between subcultures within a single society or at different times within a single society. Political documents that come to us from 18th Century America, for example, follow different language conventions and have a different style, tone, and structure than do their 21st Century American counterparts. 21st Century Americans have trouble reading them.

Further, no two people who speak the same language use it in exactly the same way, even when they meet on the street.

Prescriptive and Descriptive

So, which is it? Are the rules of language absolute or are they arbitrary? Are they prescriptive or descriptive? The answer is both. Both Lowth and Priestly are correct.

- There are absolute grammatical rules that are the same for all (or the vast majority of) humans, as many psychologists and grammarians insist. Absolute rules for processing language result from the way the human brain is formed; they never change. Absolute rules are promulgated via genes.
- There also are arbitrary rules. An arbitrary rule is one that has been selected by custom or personal preference from among valid linguistic options for expressing equivalent thoughts in different ways. Arbitrary rules are decided by custom, personal preferences, or other factors. What is an acceptable rule at one time or place may not be acceptable at another; it all depends on convention.

Here's how to meld these two apparently opposing linguistic philosophies:

- Absolute grammatical rules are innate and wired into the brain at birth by genetics. They do not change. Language learning (brain wiring) is completed during the early developmental stages of childhood. Accordingly, absolute language rules are not a matter for debate; they are in-born; they must be adhered to from birth to death, whether by an individual or a society.

  A grammarian who sets down absolute rules is being *prescriptive*.
- Arbitrary rules are language rules that have been adopted by social convention. To speak or write correctly and well in a specific language, one needs to have a command of these rules. Arbitrary rules are learned and perpetuated when an infant, child, developing adult, or mature adult interacts with its environment. Arbitrary rules evolve or vary with changes

or differences in social custom, tradition, societal conditions, era, locale, culture, geopolitics, personal, ethic, or other factors. Institutions such as the French Academy may resist changes to rules they do not approve of, but language evolution is unstoppable and beyond their control.

A grammarian who sets down arbitrary rules is being *descriptive*.

Language Rules in the Real World

Theoretically, as long as you can make yourself understood, the linguistic rules you employ to communicate with others shouldn't matter. Unfortunately, the real world is a long way from theory in this regard; rules do matter. Why?

First, according to the concept of prescriptive and descriptive language, you must be conversant with the right rules—the currently accepted rules— if you are to speak, read, or write effectively and if you want others to understand and respect what you say or write. To speak, read, or write well in any language you must be in command of the prescriptive and descriptive rules used by its proficient speakers.

Second, if you do not speak, read, or write well, native speakers tend to discount or ignore what you have to say. They may incorrectly interpret your failure to speak, read, or write by the rules as a form of social rebellion, an indication of a serious learning deficiency, or a sign of mental debility. Potential or current employers may see your failure as an indication of your inability to interact effectively with others. You may be unfairly excluded from certain social circles or barred from certain lifetime advancement opportunities.

Although speaking, reading, and writing correctly is vital, learning language rules can be a daunting task at which many fail. Here are just a few of the reasons:

- Most high school students find grammar rules complicated or confusing and grammar classes and textbooks boring or irrelevant.
- Many rules are not recorded in books. You must learn them by having living encounters with speakers or by reading extensively.
- Many youngsters learn to speak, read, or write from elders who are poor role models because they follow non-standard or incorrect language practices.
- Rules change all the time. Some of the rules you learned in school may no longer apply; others may be new.
- After leaving school, most people never think about grammar again. They get rusty.
- Growing up in one region of a country and moving to another is a little like growing up in one country and emigrating to another, Before you move, you probably will learn some rules that don't work in your new surroundings; after you move, you find it hard to master the new rules that are in effect.

Why Is It Easy for Kids to Learn Language?

Studies show that most kids readily learn to speak a language if they are exposed to it in the first two years of life. The process is easy and natural. Some kids brought up in multi-language environments even find it a simple matter to learn more than one language at the same time. Brain scans show that the brain dedicates a different area to each language and that the two areas are automatically kept separate from one another.

Typically, adults who speak, read, and write well begin their language learning at birth and continue into young adulthood. Starting young is the best way to learn a new language; people who follow another course are at a distinct disadvantage. As cited above, once a person reaches the age of thirteen, nature's window for mastering a language starts to close and language learning gets much, much tougher.

How do kids do it?

According to modern ideas about the genesis of rules, new brains are in a stage of formation, ripe for learning almost any subject, ready to absorb new information and to accept new ideas. Newborns learn language the easy way—subconsciously—by listening to the people around them speak. At first they discern only sound; but eventually the sound begins to make sense, and by about the age of two most toddlers have spoken their first words. Since language rules are implicit in the speech they hear at this stage, they learn the rules of language without being aware that rules govern their speech.

Emulation is a vital factor in this language learning process. In the majority of cases, native born speakers who write well in adulthood were surrounded by family members who spoke well. Without trying—even without realizing—they absorbed the language rules observed by the adults they overheard as infants and toddlers.

Kids like these, who are put on the right rack early, have a triple advantage. Learning to speak well makes it easier for them to learn to read; speaking and reading well make it easier for them to learn to write.

As such kids grow older, they may move from one place to another with their families. For one reason or another, they come into contact with a variety of language rules that are new to them. These kids tend to learn rules more easily because of the prior language experiences they bring to each new situation.

Starting young

Contrary to the adage, when it comes to language, youth is not wasted on the young. All but the physically or mentally disadvantaged are born with a golden opportunity to learn language, and many profit from it

However, you're only young once. If you don't learn to speak correctly at an early age, it's likely you will struggle to learn to read or write correctly later.

Many children lose this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity through no fault of their own. Circumstances rob them of their inalienable right. There is no end of different ways this can happen.

Children in family environments where the family members do not speak correctly learn incorrect language practices just as readily as do other kids who are lucky enough to be surrounded by correct speakers.

Sadly, this is the case even with many native-born American adults. They speak, read, and write English poorly today because, as infants, they followed bad examples set by the adults who raised them. Perhaps they were raised in immigrant households where a foreign tongue was the principal language and where little or no English was spoken. Or perhaps their family members were American born but spoke incorrect English because they were raised in households with poor role models.

Some youngsters may have encountered handicaps to learning outside the family when they grew older. Maybe they attended a grammar or high school with a deficient curriculum or teaching staff. Maybe they associated with influential peers in school or on the streets who didn't know how to speak correctly and who didn't care. Some may have circulated in gangs that embraced lingos and sneered at standard English. Emulation is a phenomenon that perpetuates language misuse just as surely as it fosters good use.

Ironically, kids who arrive in the U.S. in their formative years suffer because they have mastered a foreign language prior to their arrival. Once linguistic rules are embedded in the psyche, they are hard to shake. If the rules of a youngster's native language are very different from those of English, managing the differences can present quite a challenge. After the age of two or three, juggling two opposing ways of expressing oneself can be daunting.

The Wild Child and Language Development

Children with normal brains who are deprived of their hearing, speech, or other faculties due to physiological maladies tend to have severe language learning problems. Cases like these are well understood and have been thoroughly studied and documented by medical and psychological experts.

But there exists a different kind of language learning victim, one who has been less studied by medical and psychological professionals than the physically handicapped, namely children whose brains and bodies are perfectly healthy but who cannot speak, read, or write because they have been deprived of social interaction in their early developmental years.

These physically sound but isolated children have not been as thoroughly studied as their physiologically handicapped counterparts because there are relatively few specimens. Although no one wants to see children suffer in this way, this lack of subjects has proved to be an unfortunate outcome for scientific investigation. Although rare, such cases are distinctive; they can shed a great deal of light on how people learn to talk, read, or write.

One such case, famous in the 18th century, is typical of the few cases on record. It involves a so-called *wild child* who was found living by himself in a French wood near the town of Aveyron in southern France. As far as anyone knows, he was abandoned by his parents as an infant and grew up in isolation, without human contact.

Very little was known about the boy. Facts about his early life could only be surmised. From his earliest years he had lived alone in the woods like an animal, naked, eating whatever he could scavenge.

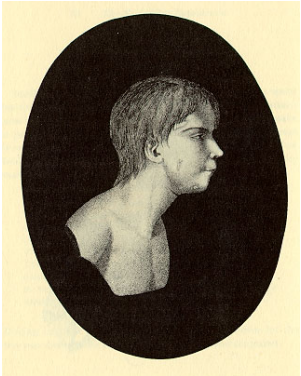
No one was sure of the boy's exact age when he was discovered; investigators estimated that he was in his pre-teens when he emerged from the wilderness. Although efforts were made to uncover the identity of his parents, they ended in failure. No one could explain how or why the youth had been lost to society or how he had managed to survive on his own.

Four things were certain, however: 1) he was of normal general intellect, 2) he had no significant physiological impairments, 3) he had heard little or no human speech prior to being found, and 4) as a result of this deprivation, he couldn't speak, read or write a word of French, or indeed any other language. His complete lack of language ability was not surprising considering the circumstances of his upbringing.

How ironic! Here was a boy of school age living in France, where speech and writing are so prized they are controlled by the state, who could not speak, read, or write a word of French.

To communicate, the best the lad could do was bark like a dog, utter strange meaningless sounds, and make wild, confused gestures. He was inarticulate and excitable when called on to speak, probably because of his frustration and fear at not being able to express himself.

A prominent local doctor named Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard, who happened to be interested in language learning and in how the mind worked as a whole, heard of the case and intervened. The astute doctor took advantage of what he recognized as a rare opportunity for scientific investigation and took the child under his wing. For the child's good and for the benefit of science, he undertook to teach the child to speak, read, and write French.



Sketch of Victor, the Wild Boy of Aveyron, found in 1799 at age 11

Itard gave the boy the name Victor. To Itard, Victor was more than a laboratory subject; he was a human being. The good doctor did his best to make up for the child's lost years by nurturing him in every way possible. Under the man's watchful eye, the boy was never at a loss for food, shelter, or other necessities and comforts.

Teaching the child to speak proved much more difficult than clothing or feeding him, however. Many frustrating years passed with little language progress. As the boy matured into manhood, all efforts to impart a formal education proved disappointing.

The years passed. No matter how long and how hard his tutor worked, the unfortunate youth could do little more than blurt a few gruff, although intelligible sentences, enough to get by in simple dealings with others but not enough to make himself comfortable in society. His emotional development remained arrested, too, no doubt hindered by his

inhibited speaking and other difficulties. He resisted and resented all efforts on his behalf, and at his death decades after being found he remained a social outcast, a perennial *child of the woods*.

From this experience, Itard concluded that there is a door of opportunity for learning language for humans. There is a time when the door to language learning is open, and thereafter the door closes. If a human misses the opportunity to learn to speak, read, and write, he never gets it back. The unfortunate *wild child* was simply discovered too late to acquire the language abilities required for a normal life.

Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard

Other cases of children who missed the opportunity to learn how to speak demonstrate the same general results and tend to reinforce Itard's conclusions. Learning to speak and write is relatively easy and virtually automatic if you have the opportunity to learn at an early age. After that, learning language becomes an onerous—all but impossible—chore.

What We Learn From The Wild Child

Up to now we have shown that primates like Koko have an in-born linguistic capacity which can be developed provided they are taught a suitable language at an early age. Now, with the case of the wild child, we have shown that language development that starts in the cradle is vital for human beings if they are to acquire speech and the ability to read and write. Humans who do not develop their native language skills early in life face handicaps to learning a language their whole life through.

The case of the wild child also illustrates the way in which language is both prescriptive *and* descriptive. We must suppose that the wild child was born with a normal capacity for language. His brain was wired to learn, but he failed to realize his potential to learn a language through no fault of his own.

Like the wild child, all healthy humans are born with a capacity to learn a language and use it effectively throughout life. Like the wild child, their brains are wired to learn a language at birth. But the prescriptive and descriptive rules for a specific language are set by custom. To speak, read, and write a language correctly, its rules must be learned and mastered starting soon after birth. If a human can't begin learning early and continue into his teens, it's not likely that he will ever fully master his language. What happened to the wild child could have happened to any of us.

Further, the case of the wild child shows what can happen to a person's life in the real world if they don't or can't step up to the challenge of learning a language.

With all the communication going on around us, the consequences of a second-rate ability to speak, read, or write are even more severe today, in the 21st Century, than they were in the 18th Century. The negative impact of even a small deficiency in one's ability to speak, read, or write can be enormous. Lives can be damaged or destroyed.

The Wild Child Brought Up to Date and Down to Earth

Itard was a brilliant pioneer. Much has been learned since his time, but nothing that contravenes his major findings. In some ways Itard's work with the wild child is as fresh today as it was 300 years ago, but today we might express his ideas differently.

From a modern perspective, some might say that language ability is a kind of process. The process is defined by a set of rules that describe how to convert or transform ideas into coherent words, phrases, and sentences. To speak, write, or read, the processor (a brain) begins with ideas and, using linguistic rules, transforms the input into an output (a spoken or written statement).

In this view, an undeveloped infant brain is a potential language processor. Before it can turn into an actual language processor, it must receive and incorporate the logic of

linguistic rules by which it can process language data. Normally the child brain discovers and develops rules by having early-life language experiences and by experiment—hearing others talk, reading primers, being read to by parents, listening to stories and fairy tales.

If the child touches a hot stove and is burned when the parent says, *No*! it is likely that the child will learn what *no* means. Not only will the child stop or hesitate when it hears *no* again; it will take a step toward learning to read or write *no* when the time for reading and writing comes.

Clearly, there is a time in personal development when a normal, healthy newborn brain can be converted from a potential language processor into an actual language processor. When that happens, the brain is able to process language according to the transformation rules cited above, but if it is not nurtured in that direction at the right time, it will never fully develop that ability.

Because of the *wild child* incident and other research in this field, child psychologists today understand that there is an ideal age at which to learn to process language. It so happens that the ideal age begins soon after birth, well before the age at which writing and grammar are taught in schools. Learning language rules informally before starting school helps people make progress with formal language studies in school and for the rest of their lives. Not learning the rules before school hinders them for life.

Without realizing it, many native-born Americans know many of the rules of English before they start school because they have been exposed to them from birth. For them, learning rules before starting school was an easy, natural, and automatic process. When they entered school, they had a favorable base on which to begin their studies and this base made it relatively easy to perfect their language skills. They enjoyed a head start compared with foreign-born children or with other American children not so fortunate.

Writing and speaking well is not just a matter of learning to exploit innate rules of grammar. Any specific language is a set of conventions—a matter of accepted cultural, ethnic, and national norms for what and how to speak and write correctly. Not only is it important that children be exposed to inherent language rules early, it is critical that they are exposed to, absorb, and become fluent in the set of language conventions accepted by their society.

By *accepted language conventions*, we mean the absolute and arbitrary rules dictated by society that specify what to say or write when the brain makes a choice—rules for vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, pronunciation, choosing words, style, and more. These conventions amount to accepted rules that stipulate how one is to use the elements of a language if one is to use it properly.

Each of the 6,000 languages in the world has developed its own set of these kinds of conventions. Conventions that work in Mexico or Sweden or Germany may not work in America. Rules may be specific to a subculture, that is a social group that is a small part of a larger culture.

Native English speakers may not be comfortable when visiting Amish areas or in the Western or Southern U.S. Rules for writing expository English prose may be the wrong ones to use when speaking or writing on radio, television, or in advertisements.

It's not easy to master all this language variability if you don't start young. Language learning is a lifetime proposition.

So-called Standard American English (SAE) is the language common to all Americans and all America; it’s the lingua franca of American English, the language you’re expected to speak when you want to be understood, no matter where you go or to whom you speak. It’s the language spoken on TV and written in magazines. It’s the language that is (or is supposed to be) taught in American schools.

For some, SAE is a second language. Children of every nationality or subculture learn their own language best. In their land of birth, they may have received good language training abroad; but when they arrive in America they get a late start. They have to relearn or unlearn the old rules. They have to learn SAE.

Many children growing up in America are not exposed to the rules of Standard English early enough. These kids labor under a handicap when they enter school. There's a gap between the way they speak and write English and the way social customs say they should speak and write English. If this language gap is not closed in grammar school or high school, chances are it will never be closed.

Speaking or writing well can be tough for anyone, even an educated adult American with formal language training who studied English in school. Perhaps this American didn't master all the rules in school as he should have. Perhaps he failed to keep up with changing language conventions after graduation. Anyone can grow rusty.

Is There Really Such a Thing as Standard American English?

We've just described a thing called Standard American English. Unlike the situation in France, there is no United States government agency that attempts to regulate SAE; At first glance, it would seem that there is no such thing as Standard American English.

In such a circumstance, one may well ask how it is possible to identify standard rules for writing that are acceptable in America. How is it possible to distinguish acceptable rules from unacceptable ones? How does one identify right writing and distinguish it from wrong writing? Let's zero in on the answer by steps.

Consider the mass media. Most radio and television announcers today sound and speak alike. They speak a dialect of American English we call *Media Speak*.

An early radio of the 1940s

Media Speak is a kind of standard speech used by American broadcasters. It was developed early in the history of radio. How it got started is a story in itself.

For no special reason, many pioneering U.S. public radio stations began broadcasting in the 1920s in the Midwest. Perhaps the fact that radio began in earnest there has something to do with the wide stretches of land that separate Midwesterners. Radio helped bring them together.

Not surprisingly, announcers on these radio stations, who lived near their antennas, spoke the way Midwesterner's speak. Listeners all over the nation soon became accustomed to hearing a Midwestern dialect as their nightly radio fare. Partly for this reason, Media Speak today resembles the dialect of American English spoken in the Midwest in the 1920s and 30s.

The vocabulary spoken by Midwestern announcers consisted of relatively few words. It was large enough to get their points across and no larger. The vocabulary words were simple and direct. They did not challenge the intellect of listeners, yet they were up to the task. Perhaps the nature of the personal vocabulary of the Midwestern announcers had something to do with the number of the words and their size. For whatever reasons, Media Speak caught on.

Media Speak was born out of a desire to speak a language that all radio listeners could recognize and feel good about.

Media Speak developed like a force of nature. It was the right thing for the time and place because it did what was needed. Today, in the world of broadcasting, Media Speak is the de facto standard, the way to speak if you want to be heard. Because people all over the U.S. hear Media Speak on radio and TV, it has greatly influenced the sound and shape of American English.

Like slang, Media Speak has its place. Used for what it was intended for—effectively reaching masses of Americans by means of radio and television broadcasting—Media Speak is the right language to use. So long as Media Speak is restricted to the mass media, it is an acceptable way to speak English—the right way to speak on the airways.

There is no such thing as Standard American English in the sense of *standard* intended by The French Academy for French. No official standards body publishes rules for speaking and writing American English in America, and no laws dictate a right way to speak or write. The closest one comes to an SAE are scholarly manuals promulgated by

professional language societies such as the Modern Language Association and the University of Chicago Press, and style manuals and grammar texts by English experts such as H.W. Fowler John E. Warriner, and William Strunk. These publications are guides only; they are not obligatory.

Nevertheless, there are a variety of different conventional ways to speak and write American English, each of which is a de facto standard in its own right. Linguists use the word *jargon* to refer to these different ways to speak and write. They also call them styles.

There are styles—de facto standard ways of speaking and writing American English—for talking on radio and TV, everyday, ordinary conversation, formal and informal speech making, dialects, slangs, formal and informal prose writing, argots, and more.

Some of the things that can be said of Media Speak can also be said about SAE styles in general:

- Each SAE style evolved and is still evolving.
- Nobody designed the styles; they just developed naturally.
- The styles have prescriptive and descriptive rules. The rules exist to allow and promote effective communication—to achieve each style's intended purpose.
- A style's rules change as the need for language change develops in the culture.

About Formal Expository Prose Writing

One of the most important de facto style standards is the one for writing formal American English expository prose. It deserves special mention here because it embodies the core rules for speaking and writing grammatically correct, well-styled formal and informal American English sentences and paragraphs.

Rules for expository American English prose have been established by trial-and-error over many years in many places by many people. The authors of text books and writing guides that purport to teach sound, expository prose writing did not invent the style; they only observed it in use and wrote down its rules.

There are many factors that go into deciding what makes writing good. The key criterion is that the rules that are used result in effective communication. Trial-and-error and endless observation, study, and thought established how to write effective formal expository American English prose and how to write it correctly and in a pleasing, lively, attention-getting manner.

The rules for effective prose writing were perfected through a continuous, evolutionary cycle of descriptive and prescriptive rule-making. They continue to evolve at a slow but relentless pace.

Linguists have a term for the principle that governs the growth and evolution of languages that develop in this way: they call it *language in use*. According to the principle of language in use, what is right in a language is what is generally accepted as right by language experts, knowledgeable opinion leaders, and professional writers. Most of all, what is right is what is written by everyday people who write with care and who care about what they write. Because formal American English expository prose is the de facto standard in use today, everyone should strive to write according to its rules when they want to write prose right.

About Writing Right

If you're looking for an electronic writing assistant that can help you write better, more correct, well-styled formal standard American English expository prose, check out the eBook called *Writing Right*©.

Why break the rules when there's no need to? *Writing Right* incorporates the rules for writing de facto Standard English expository prose. It's unique design shows you how to write by the rules and makes it easy for you to catch and correct all sorts of writing mistakes and improve the style of what you write or edit.

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