

# Garbled Grammar

The curious history of the English writing system –  
and what happened to it after it came to America !

by

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In response to public complaints about the poor quality of government writing, Congress passed, and the president signed into law, the **Plain Writing Act of 2010**. Under the law, agencies of the federal government — the nation’s largest employer — are required to communicate with the public in “writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience.” Most of us would agree, I think, that these attributes should apply to good writing in general, not just to communications from the government.

But what, exactly, is the meaning of “best practices”? Does the term refer to the accepted standards practiced by the best writers and editors in America’s publishing industry? If so, what are these standards, and where did they come from? Is there a rule, for instance, that we can’t end a sentence with a preposition (as I just did)? Or that we can’t use a contraction in formal writing? (Whoops, I did that twice.) Or are these just a couple of “language legends” that the self-appointed language police have perpetuated — and that actually **interfere** with the demanding task of developing a reader-friendly writing style?

These questions necessarily lead to deeper a question: How did the standards that define the English writing system come about in the first place?

## Literacy Means Letteracy

Historians generally trace the tradition of literacy in Western civilization to the ancient Greeks, who invented the term **gramma** (meaning *letter of the alphabet*) about 2,500 years ago. You may have learned in elementary school that the English word *alphabet* comes from the Greek letters *alpha* and *beta*. In the strict sense of the word, then, **literacy** means **letteracy**.

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Not coincidentally, both **gramma** and **graphic** are derived from the same root word, **graphein**, which can mean “to draw” or “to write.” From **gramma** came the word **grammatiké** — writing — a system for organizing letters into words and words into sentences. The Greeks didn’t invent **grammatiké**. They copied it from their rivals, modified it to suit their own purposes, and used it to create one of the most brilliant civilizations the world has ever known, producing the likes of Homer, Aesop, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, and Alexander the Great.

It took the Greeks a few centuries to reconcile the differences among the various regional dialects and to agree on a standard writing system, based on the dialect of Athens. The Greeks were careful to make a distinction between the **sound** of the spoken word (*epos*) and the **letter** (*gramma*) that represented the sound. What’s more important from a 21st century perspective is that they did not confuse the **skill of writing** (*téchne grammatiké*) with **talking** (*lalia*), the everyday language used by the educated and uneducated classes alike. By applying the term *téchne grammatiké* to writing — as opposed to talking — the Greeks recognized that their **alphabetical writing system** was a remarkable **technology**, an organization of **visual language** symbols and patterns serving as the **basis of all literacy**.

The *téchne grammatiké* was prescriptive. That is, the form and spelling of the words determined their grammatical function in a sentence, as well as the correct pronunciation of the words when read aloud. (**All languages are prescriptive**. Some linguists use the term “descriptive” in reference to an objective analysis of a prescriptive language system.)

When Greece became part of the Roman Empire, Greek culture and language had a profound influence on the conquerors: Zeus became Jupiter, Aphrodite became Venus, and *téchne grammatiké* became **ars grammatica** — the **art of writing**, not the art of grammar! In Latin, the dominant language of that era, *art* was a synonym for *craft* or *skill*.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Latin lived on as the language of religion, scholarship, and diplomacy throughout most of Western Europe, but many other languages flourished as well. When wave after wave of West German invaders began attacking and settling in the territory then known as Briton about 1,500 years ago, they brought their language with them. Two of the invading tribes, the Angles and the Saxons, lent the collective name “Anglo-Saxon” to the culture and the language that materialized. Over the next four centuries, that language was further influenced by a series of assaults mounted by other groups of Germanic invaders — the Vikings — from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

By the time of the reign of Alfred the Great (871–899), a more or less uniform written language had emerged, complete with its own complex and highly inflected grammar. In that language, which we now refer to as Old English, the ordinary activities of English society were conducted, including government, law, literature, historical records, and basic education. (See *King Alfred’s Grammar Book* by professor Michael D.C. Drout. <http://people.umass.edu/sharris/in/gram/GrammarBook/KAGrammar.html>)

## French Becomes England's Official Language

But a little more than 150 years after King Alfred's death — at the famous Battle of Hastings in 1066 — an army led by the Duke of Normandy (a province in northern France) defeated the English, and the Normans took over as the rulers of England. In the years that followed, as Wayne State University professor Goldwin Smith recounted in his *History of England*, **French replaced English** as the country's official language:

French became the language of the court, the law, the government. Educated men spoke and wrote both French and Latin.... English remained almost entirely a spoken language for about three centuries.

English as a medium of written communication did not disappear completely, but the standard, highly organized language that had existed under King Alfred did. English survived primarily as the language of the oppressed classes and broke into a number of regional dialects.

Over time, though, the Normans became “Anglicized,” and after Henry V came to power in 1413, English once again became the government's language of record. But unlike the Old English, this “new” English had no clearly established structure — that is, no generally agreed-upon grammatical principles. When young William Shakespeare began attending school about a century and a half later, not a single book on English grammar had been published for more than 500 years.

Under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, Latin grammar and classical studies dominated the curriculum of the educational system. One of the requirements Shakespeare and his friends had to satisfy by age seven, before being admitted to the local school in Stratford, was to memorize and demonstrate an understanding of Latin's eight parts of speech.

When academics and literary types finally got around to developing a formal framework for English, they looked to the structured language most familiar to them: Latin. Even during the centuries of Norman domination, Latin had remained the language of scholars and the church. Although English and Latin are alike in some respects, there are also vast differences. To understand the underlying patterns of English, we need to consider some of those differences.

### Mix of Germanic Languages + Latin + Greek + French = English

In Latin, a word's inflection — the sound of the word, represented in writing by the form of the word or its spelling — dictates the word's grammatical function or role. For example, Julius Caesar's detailed history of the conquest of Gaul (or *Gallia*, which comprised much of what is now France, Belgium, and Switzerland) began, “Gallia est omne divisa en partes tres....” Translated literally into English, that clause tells us that “Gaul is all divided in parts three.” Doesn't seem quite grammatical, does it?

But because the word endings — the inflections — establish the grammatical relationships in Latin, people reading Caesar’s words in ancient Rome would have quickly grasped the sense of the statement as a whole: “All Gaul is divided into three parts...” If I wanted to write, “My brother teaches at a school in London,” I would have to use the Latin word *frater* (Latin for *brother*) because *brother* is the subject of the sentence. Suppose, instead, that I decided to write, “A school in London hired my brother.” The roles have changed; *school* is now the subject, and *brother* is the verb’s complement (or object). In Latin, I would have to **change the spelling** of the word from *frater* to *fratrem*.

English doesn’t work that way. The word endings change very little, often not at all. Most of the so-called rules of English grammar are based on word order, not word endings. As Robert Graves observed in *The Reader over Your Shoulder*, a book he coauthored with Robert Hodge in the 1940s, “English ... tends to ambiguity in any but the most careful writing....” Consider the following:

My brother a teacher hired to edit the manuscript.

To most of us, this word order wouldn’t meet the standard of “careful writing,” but students of Latin run into thousands of sentences similar to this one. Is my brother hiring a teacher, or is a teacher hiring my brother?

In Latin, the inflection would remove any doubt about the intended meaning; if *frater* — *brother* would be the subject of the verb; if *fratrem* — *brother* would be the complement (or object) of the verb. The word endings for *teacher* would also change, depending on the gender of the teacher (*magister* or *magistra* as subjects; *magistrum* or *magistram* as objects). But in English, word order runs the show. The problem of expressing ideas in “plain” English (meaning “uninflected” English) is largely a matter of making sure that you put your words in the right place — that they fit into logical and recognizable patterns:

My brother hired a teacher to edit the manuscript.

**or**

A teacher hired my brother to edit the manuscript.

Let’s look at another example: “A school in London gave my brother a job.” I would have to change the form of the word *brother* again, this time to *fratri*. In Latin and many other languages (including Old English), inflection is the mechanism that enables people to understand one another. Latin nouns are not “plain”; they have multiple endings (*frater*, *fratris*, *fratri*, *fratrem*, *fratre*, *fratres*, *fratrum*, and *fratribus*). The **endings of the words**, not the order of the words, determine the grammatical relationships in a sentence — and consequently its meaning.

Over the centuries, the influence of Latin on English has been, quite literally, a mixed blessing. On the down side, there are many Latin “rules” that don’t apply to English: you can’t end a sentence with a preposition, you can’t split an infinitive, you can’t make contractions out of verbs, etc.

At the same time, it would be foolish to ignore the reality that more than half of the words found in an English dictionary are derived either directly or indirectly from Latin. And in the study of **English as a communication system**, as in the study of many other disciplines, we use thousands of Latin (and Greek) terms to identify certain characteristics or conditions.

So although English grammar may use Latin-based terms such as *sentence* (derived from the Latin *sentencia*), we need to be aware that from a grammatical perspective, the two languages are distant relatives. In Latin grammar, for example, a basic principle is that the subject and the predicate (from *predicare*, which means *to announce*) are separate entities. The predicate “announces” something — that is, it makes a statement — about the subject. In addition to the verb (or verbs), the predicate may include a “direct” object (accusative case), an “indirect” object (dative case), a predicate nominative, a predicate adjective, and/or everything else in the sentence, with the exception of the subject and those words directly related to the subject. If you find that this approach to understanding how to write an English sentence is a bit confusing, you have lots of company. (See <http://painintheenglish.com/posts/search.>)

## Comyn Englysshe

William Caxton, the great English printer who first published Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and the legends of King Arthur, noted shortly before his death in 1491 that the “comyn Englysshe” (common English) used by people in each region of the country was unintelligible to the people in other regions. And since there were no generally accepted standards of English usage, the “langage now used varyeth ferre” (the language now used varies far) from the language used just a few decades earlier. As a result, there was much confusion about how a person should “in thyse dayes now wryte ... by-cause of dyversite and change of langage” (in these days now write ... because of diversity and change of language).

Without realizing it, the English (like the Greeks) were about to embark on a centuries-long journey in quest of a uniform language system — a *grammatiké*! A hundred years after Caxton’s death, a well-written English sentence looked like this:

And certainly there be not two more fortunate properties, then to have a litle of the foole,  
and not to much of the honest... — *Sir Francis Bacon*

What we might regard as errors in usage and spelling today were commonplace in Elizabethan England. Because there was no *grammatiké* — no fixed set of prescriptive practices — writers could choose to use either *be* or *is* as the main verb in a sentence, and there were as yet few established spelling rules. The title page of a famous book of poetry looked like this:

SHAKES-PEARES  
SONNETS  
Neuer before Imprinted.

So pervasive was the uncertainty about how to devise a workable framework for English that most of the grammar books published before 1700 were written in Latin. One of the dominant literary figures of the time, John Dryden, was apparently the inventor of the “rule” that ending a sentence with a preposition was bad English because it violated a “rule” of Latin. But Jonathan Swift looked at things from a different perspective. Unlike Dryden, he did not see English as an inferior language, but as one sorely lacking in standards. He observed that classical Greek and Latin works could be read and understood centuries after they had been written because those languages were “fixed”: they had clearly defined language standards. Although they allowed “many enlargements,” each language followed a prescribed grammatical structure, not one that was in constant flux. Echoing Caxton, Swift proposed finding “some method” for creating stability in the language, rather than struggling with one that was “perpetually changing....”

His petition to Parliament in 1712 to establish an academy to regulate English, similar to the *Académie française* in Paris, was rejected. But his effort coincided with the publication of a succession of books on grammar and usage, which eventually led to the more or less standard English that has now become the world’s dominant communication system.

A year earlier, a schoolmaster named James Greenwood had published *An Essay towards a Practical English Grammar*, which numbered among its readers many Americans, including Benjamin Franklin. “I was intent on improving my language,” Franklin recalled in his *Autobiography*, and he made specific reference to Greenwood’s book. Although Greenwood’s approach followed the format of most Latin textbooks, his down-to-earth presentation undoubtedly appealed to the unpretentious Franklin. “Grammar,” declared Greenwood, “begins with the letters, which are the foundation of words.” He compared the craft of the writer to that of the carpenter, who distinguishes “one tool from another, calls one a hammer, another a chisel, another a saw.”

Franklin had attended Latin school for three years before going to work full time as a printer’s apprentice at age 10. He disagreed with the idea that “it is proper to begin first with the Latin” and proposed an educational system in which “the English Language might be taught by Grammar....”

Greenwood’s *Practical Grammar* remained popular for many years after his death in 1737,

but in the latter part of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th, two other books captured an even larger audience: Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) and Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* (1795).

Lowth's approach to English as a language "most simple in its form and construction" apparently appealed to people more than a somewhat more complicated text published around the same time, Joseph Priestly's *Rudiments of English Grammar*. Of even greater significance was the ready acceptance of Lowth's *Short Introduction* on the part of publishers and the reading public.

Although he is often accused of being the father of "prescriptive" grammar, Lowth was just one of dozens of grammarians (including Noah Webster) who attempted to work out a system that was not wholly bound by the rules of Latin, but that acknowledged the English language's indebtedness to certain Latin concepts. (Priestly, whose *Rudiments* is often labeled a "descriptive" grammar, agreed with Lowth on almost all matters of substance regarding grammatical forms.) Unlike Dryden, Lowth did not absolutely condemn the practice of ending sentences with prepositions, but he encouraged changing the likes of "Horace is a writer whom I am much delighted with" to "Horace is a writer with whom I am much delighted." His opinion was that the latter form was "more graceful" and more appropriate in the development of an "elevated style."

Anyone who takes the time to look closely at the *Short Introduction*, rather than accepting the current academic rant about "prescriptivism," will see that Lowth had to struggle with conventions over which he had no control. At the time, for example, printers had adopted the practice of capitalizing virtually all nouns (not just proper nouns) and writing the letter s in two different ways. Here are Lowth's first two sentences under the heading of GRAMMAR:

GRAMMAR is the Art of rightly expreffing our thoughts by Words.

Grammar in General, or Univerfal Grammar, explains the Principles which are common to all languages.

Although these practices were in vogue in England and North America during the years when the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution of the United States* were published, printers abandoned them in the early 19th century.

Lowth objected to the use of certain verb forms (*has chose, has saw, has wrote*) as not true to their Anglo-Saxon roots. Many of the inflections he "prescribed" are still with us:

choose chose chosen

see saw seen

write wrote written

Many of the so-called prescriptions attributed to Lowth were already in existence, and some of his “correct” forms have fallen out of favor:

sit sat sitten

help helped holpen

Lowth, like Greenwood, objected to the double negative, arguing that from a mathematical point of view, two negatives would cancel each other out. Thus, a common expression such as, “I don’t want no trouble” would actually mean “I want trouble.”

Lindley Murray, a Quaker with pacifist convictions, was born in America but relocated to a Quaker community in England after the Revolutionary War. He originally wrote his *English Grammar* for students at a girls’ school near his home, borrowing liberally from both Lowth and Priestley — but simplifying their presentations in an effort to appeal to the immature minds of youngsters. The popularity of his *English Grammar* grew rapidly, especially in America, where the sale of his book, along with another titled *The English Reader*, numbered in the tens of millions.

Often scoffed at as another “prescriptivist” by 20th and 21st century critics, Murray — even more than Lowth — developed an organizational structure that met with the approval of American book publishers, magazine publishers, and newspaper publishers. It was the publishing industry that collectively agreed upon and established standard practices of grammar, punctuation, and usage in this country, not the grammarians. (Ironically, virtually all of the proponents of “descriptive” grammar adhere slavishly to the conventions of “prescriptive” English in their own writing.)

Other popular works of the time included the book that Abraham Lincoln spent countless hours studying, Samuel Kirkham’s *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures* (multiple editions published between 1800 and 1830); and William Corbett’s *A Grammar of the English Language* (1818). Corbett, who was said to have memorized Lowth’s *Short Introduction*, prepared his book for use in the schools, but “especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys.” To the 21st century reader, the books by Murray, Kirkham, and Corbett appear to be pretty much the same. They differ in the organization of the material and the method of instruction, not in the content of the subject matter itself.

## Common English

After the Civil War and throughout the latter part of the 19th century, the number of students attending high school in America increased dramatically, and the Land Grant College Act of 1862 (or Morrill Act, named for the Vermont senator who sponsored the legislation) created an entirely new kind of higher education. The emphasis in these colleges, most of which were located in rural areas, was on agricultural and mechanical

studies, not on history or classical literature. Through higher education, the sons and daughters of farmers and tradesmen could now take advantage of opportunities that had not previously been available.

As the number of high schools grew, so did the challenge of finding qualified English teachers, and the attention paid to the quality of grammatical instruction apparently waned. According to Virginia Tech professor Katie Dredger, “After 1870, only a few more than a third of all high schools deliberately taught grammar in English classes....” The private academies and many of the public high schools in relatively affluent cities and towns offered Latin and Greek, as well as a growing list of other subjects, but admission standards at what we now refer to as “selective colleges” varied widely. Among other concerns, there was a consensus that the writing skills of the students entering these colleges were shaky.

Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University in the post-Civil War era, decided that it was time for a radical makeover. In 1876, he hired a no-nonsense newspaper writer and editor, Adams Sherman Hill, who was charged with the responsibility of improving the quality of undergraduates’ writing. In an essay titled *An Answer to the Cry for More English*, Hill described what was at the time a revolutionary innovation in the college admissions process:

Each candidate will be required to write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, division of paragraphs, and expression....

In his review of the exam papers, Hill noted that most of them displayed an “utter ignorance of punctuation” and that they “were deformed by grossly ungrammatical or profoundly obscure sentences, and some by absolute illiteracy.” He also berated the instruction of high school teachers, urging them to “give more time to the mother tongue, and to employ the time thus given to better advantage.”

Harvard’s new emphasis on clear, concise writing — what Eliot once described as a fundamental requirement if America hoped to produce “competent chemists, engineers, artists, architects” — had an enormous influence on other colleges, and on the nation’s secondary schools as well. Even more influential was Eliot’s 25-year advocacy of standardized admissions examinations, which came to fruition when the first College Board Examinations (precursors to the SATs) were administered in 1901.

The original College Boards were written examinations — no multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank questions. There was a specific section on grammar, and students had to write essays that demonstrated their knowledge, and their writing skills, in subject areas besides English, including history, mathematics, chemistry, and physics. Here’s an example from the 1901 physics exam:

Describe a method of finding the specific gravity of a solid heavier than water; of a liquid.

At first, only a small number of private colleges in the northeastern states required students applying for admission to take the College Boards, but the influence of the exams grew rapidly over the next decade. Although Eliot had achieved his goal of using a set of written examinations as the basis for admission to college, not everyone agreed with the premise that standardized testing was a good idea.

One of the most outspoken opponents to the new examination system was Fred Newton Scott, a professor at the University of Michigan. A scholar of the first rank, with a working knowledge of half a dozen languages, Scott saw the approach to writing subscribed to by people like Eliot and Hill as elitist. He argued that English grammar should be a reflection of the language as it was actually used, not as a “prescriptive” set of rules.

In her *Concise Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (2009), Purdue University professor Margie Berns provided a thumbnail sketch of Scott’s role in the emerging debate over “prescriptive” vs. “descriptive” grammar:

[O]ne of the earliest deliberate attempts to apply ... linguistics to language teaching ... was spearheaded by Fred Newton Scott, the founding president of the National Council of Teachers of English.... Scott and his students ... at the University of Michigan sought to replace this prescriptive grammar with a descriptive grammar of American English based on actual usage.

In *A Brief English Grammar*, a book coauthored in 1905 by Scott and his former student, Vassar College associate professor Gertrude Buck, the authors presented their advocacy for “descriptive” grammar in occasionally ambiguous — and sometimes contradictory — language. On the one hand, we are told: “Written language is not essentially different from spoken language; it is spoken language translated into a more universal and more permanent form.” And “language ... has grown from the simple efforts of simple people to convey their thoughts to one another....” On the other: “Its fundamental postulates of the social function and the organic structure of language have been long familiar to advanced students of philosophy and linguistics.” It’s all quite simple, Scott and Buck appeared to be saying, but it’s also complicated.

After the introductory chapters, Scott and Buck proceeded to lay out prescriptive rule after prescriptive rule, just as Lindley Murray had done 100 years earlier. A reader in the 21st century would encounter the usual consideration of the subject and the predicate (a remnant of Latin 101); the sentence types (declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory); the parts of speech; numeral and ordinal adjectives; transitive and intransitive verbs, complete with an explanation about intransitives that take cognate objects; construction of phrases and subordinate clauses; and the conjugation of verbs, (including the irregular past participles) and the admonition to avoid the split infinitive.

<http://archive.org/details/abriefenglishgr01buckgoog>

In support of their approach to grammar and composition, the authors offered the following argument:

The rules of grammar are like the laws of any physical science, such as chemistry, physics, astronomy, or physical geography. These sciences are not a collection of rules telling the winds and tides, for instance, what they must do, or prescribing how a certain acid and a certain base shall unite. They only report and explain what happens. And so grammar does not say to us directly, “You must speak thus and so,” but only, “English people at the present time do speak thus and so, for the following reasons.” Knowing this fact, we shall undoubtedly choose to speak so too, in order to be easily and precisely understood by others, or to avoid the appearance of eccentricity or ignorance....

You may or may not find the comparison between the “rules of grammar and the laws of any physical science” persuasive. What’s more important is to recognize that the spelling and placement of every word in every sentence follows the accepted “prescriptive rules” of English writing — not just for the year 1905, but for 2005 as well.

Even the punctuation is consistent with current professional practices. The style may seem a bit ornate to 21st century eyes (“English people at the present time do speak thus and so....”). Still, by 1900, virtually all of the questions that Caxton had raised more than 500 years earlier had been resolved. Viewed from this perspective, any disagreement between Sherman Adams Hill and Fred Newton Scott about what method to use in the teaching of writing in general, and grammar in particular, is of secondary importance.

True, there have been some little changes in spelling: *to-day* became *today*; *to-morrow* became *tomorrow*; *co-operation* became *coöperation* and finally *cooperation*, etc. But about 90 percent of the words in American English are spelled now as they were then. To be sure, there are a few differences between the English spellings employed in the United States and those preferred in the countries of the British Commonwealth: *neighbor* vs. *neighbour*; *judgment* vs. *judgement*; *catalog* vs. *catalogue*, *ton* vs. *tonne*. Likewise, there are some differences in punctuation.

The consistencies, though, far outweigh these minor differences. At last, the English language had its own *grammatiké*. And because of this remarkable accomplishment, people living in the 21st century can readily understand the work of people writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Here is the introduction to William James’s description of the human nervous system in his *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890.

If I begin chopping the foot of a tree, its branches are unmoved by my act, and its leaves murmur as peacefully as ever in the wind. If, on the contrary, I do violence to the foot of a fellow-man, the rest of his body instantly responds to the aggression by movements of alarm or defence. The reason of this difference is that the man has a nervous system whilst the tree has none; and the function of the nervous system is to bring each part into harmonious co-operation with every other.

In Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899), the author described a mildly flirtatious conversation between an unattached young man, Robert Lebrun, and a married woman, Mrs. Pontellier.

Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was very young, and did not know any better. Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason. Each was interested in what the other said. Robert spoke of his intention to go to Mexico in the autumn, where fortune awaited him. He was always intending to go to Mexico, but some way never got there.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois recalled his experience teaching children in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Tennessee.

There they sat, nearly thirty of them, on the rough benches, their faces shading from a pale cream to a deep brown, the little feet bare and swinging, the eyes full of expectation, with here and there a twinkle of mischief, and the hands grasping Webster's blue-back spelling-book. I loved my school, and the fine faith the children had in the wisdom of their teacher was truly marvellous.

The preference for unadorned, straightforward grammatical sentences had taken hold on both sides of the Atlantic. In one of his last Sherlock Holmes stories, *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange* (1905), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gave the following description of Lady Brackenstall, whose husband had just been murdered and who had apparently suffered some injury to her face as well:

Lady Brackenstall was no ordinary person. Seldom have I seen so graceful a figure, so womanly a presence, and so beautiful a face. She was golden-haired, blue-eyed, and would no doubt have had the perfect complexion which goes with such colouring, had not her recent experience left her drawn and haggard. Her sufferings were physical as well as mental, for over one eye rose a hideous, plum-coloured swelling, which her maid, a tall, austere woman, was bathing assiduously with vinegar and water. The lady lay back exhausted upon a couch, but her quick, observant gaze, as we entered the room, and the alert expression of her beautiful features, showed that neither her wits nor her courage had been shaken by her terrible experience.

What we are witnessing here is the answer to Jonathan Swift's plea for a fixed language; or, if you prefer, the **absolute triumph of prescriptive grammar**. The spelling and meaning of the words, the syntactical ordering of the words in the sentences, the arrangement of the sentences in each paragraph, the punctuation — all follow generally accepted standards that have been with us for well over a century. I doubt that many American readers would even notice the variant spelling of colouring and rose-coloured.

The process of creating the grammatiké of what we now call classical Greek (and later of Latin, which underwent substantial changes as a result of the Greek influence)

necessitated eliminating many nuances of regional dialects. That didn't mean everyone had to speak a certain way; as we have seen, people of all classes used the popular language (*lalia*) in day-to-day activities. It meant making difficult decisions in an effort to achieve a standard method for forming written words and sentences — a universal language that could be readily employed by all literate users of the language. The Greek prescriptive grammatical canon also served as a template for formal spoken discourse, which would be employed in scholarly or philosophical discussions, epic poetry, political debates, and legal matters. So it is with 21st century English.

Critics who grouse about “prescriptive” grammar invariably trot out *ain't* as an example of a word that should not be frowned upon; or that it should be okay to say “me and my friends” instead of “my friends and I”; or that we should ignore Lowth's objection to the double negative. But when they are preparing their research papers for publication, these critics don't write, “Me and my colleegs ain't got no beef with nobody about where Wilam Caxton was borne at.” They obediently write, “My colleagues and I do not disagree with those who maintain that William Caxton was born in the town of Tenterden.”

Achieving a standard *grammatiké* is one thing; figuring out a practical method to teach it — a method that is relatively simple and that will appeal to people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds — quite another. In 1906, an article published by Franklin S. Hoyt, an assistant superintendent of schools in Indiana, sparked a war of words (sometimes referred to as the “Grammar Wars”) that has not yet ended. Using several complex stanzas from a poem written 150 years earlier, Thomas Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, Hoyt attempted to show that the way grammar was being taught in the early grades was of little benefit in improving young children's writing and speaking skills. For example:

Save that, from yonder ivy-mantled tower,  
The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Give the voice, mode, tense, and number of the verbs in stanza 3; also tell whether they are transitive or intransitive and why.

Hoyt concluded that this approach was all wrong:

But even admitting that there is some spread of training in mental activities, more or less allied, it is difficult to conceive of such general training being gained to any considerable extent from the study of an abstract, formal subject like grammar as ordinarily taught in elementary grades.

Many academics today say that the study of grammar is a waste of time, and they often offer Hoyt's article as evidence to support their position. They invariably fail to mention his carefully worded qualification: “**grammar as ordinarily taught** in the elementary grades.”

Hoyt was opposed to the **rigid lecture method of classification and identification in the teaching of** grammar to young children, not to the teaching of grammar itself. Toward the end of his article, he offered a list of the grammatical concepts that children should be familiar with before entering high school:

1. Classification of sentences:
  - (a) As to form: simple, compound, complex.
  - (b) As to use: declarative, interrogative, imperative, exclamatory.
2. Phrases and clauses. [independent, relative, adverbial, and noun clauses; prepositional, infinitive, participial, and gerund phrase]
3. The parts of speech, with only such classifications of them as are actually of use; e.g., proper noun for the use of capitals.
4. Inflections:
  - (a) Singular and plural forms of nouns, pronouns, and verbs.
  - (b) Declension of pronoun. (Case and person developed in connection with personal pronouns.)
  - (c) Possessive forms of nouns.
  - (d) Comparison of adjectives and adverbs.
  - (e) Principal forms of verbs, with little regard to conjugation, mode, voice, tense, etc.
5. The more useful rules of syntax; e. g., “A pronoun used to complete the sense of an intransitive verb is in the nominative case.”

Hoyt’s list could have served as a rough draft for the **Common Core’s** “Conventions of English Language Standards” for grades 2–8: <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/8> Incidentally, Hoyt and his coauthor, Harriet Peet, went on to write a successful series of books on basic arithmetic, many of which have gained renewed popularity via the Internet in recent years.

### **“Prescriptive” vs. “Descriptive” Grammar**

When *I* use a word,” Humpty-Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.” — *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872)

A “fixed” English grammar was in its infancy in the early 1900s, but the adjective *traditional* had already been hung around its neck. And according to some educators, traditional grammar was “prescriptive,” not “descriptive.” (I put quotation marks around “prescriptive” and “descriptive” because these terms, when applied to considerations of generally accepted standards of writing, have become academic clichés. They are most often used in ways that distort any meaningful understanding of the role of the English language in shaping today’s world.)

Although some linguists have linked “descriptive” grammar to the Sanskrit of ancient India, which predated the Greek *grammatiké* by perhaps a thousand years, there were few applications of the term to English grammar until about 150 years ago. A “descriptive” grammar, in fact, is no more than a way of looking at the “prescriptive” language of a certain group of people in a certain place at a certain time. The grammar books used to study foreign languages (for example, Latin, Spanish, or Arabic) may properly be called “descriptive” because they offer objective explanations of the generally accepted forms of those languages.

The generally accepted forms, of course, are “prescriptive.” In Spanish, it’s *el banco* (*the bank*) not *la banco*; *la ciudad* (*the city*), not *el ciudad*, etc. Anyone who disregards these basic “prescriptive” usages risks being labeled a semiliterate — or worse.

One kind of “descriptive” grammar was developed by 19th and 20th century ethnologists and linguists, who wrote down the spoken languages of Native American tribes. Those languages, like all languages, displayed countless idiomatic expressions and other “prescriptive” usages. The purpose of these “descriptive” grammars — the most famous of which was the explorer John Wesley Powell’s *Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages* (1880) — was to capture for the first time a written record of what had previously been solely spoken languages.

The work of the English linguist Henry Sweet (1845–1912) provides an interesting example of another kind of “descriptive” grammar. Sweet prepared an analysis of ancient Norse and Old English texts, explaining to a scholarly, 19th century audience how the “prescriptive” elements in those languages worked. To suggest that Sweet himself was not a prescriptivist would be at odds with reality. While claiming in a later work, *A New English Grammar* (1891), that his approach to the subject would be strictly “scientific ... without attempting to settle the relevant correctness of divergent usages,” Sweet offered, on page after page, highly subjective opinions on a range of grammatical questions. It is worth noting that Sweet’s primary occupation was giving instruction on correct English pronunciation. (George Bernard Shaw used elements of Sweet’s personality in developing the character of Henry Higgins, the outspoken linguist in the play *Pygmalion*, later adapted into the musical comedy *My Fair Lady*.)

In educational circles, questions about how to teach grammar — or whether to teach it — continued throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. During that time, both the meaning of grammar (i.e., a writing system based on the letters of the alphabet) and its function (the organizing principles that allow us to turn letters into words and words into sentences that other people can readily understand) have taken a beating. Those academics who chose to reduce grammar to the study of everyday speech patterns — what the ancient Greeks called *lalia* — managed to pin a meaning on the word that was the exact opposite of the painstakingly developed *grammatiké*. Without realizing it, they were turning their backs on the 2,500-year tradition of literacy in Western civilization.

The good news is that, with the exception of a small but vocal segment of educators — who were persuaded by the arguments of Scott, Buck, and many other academics — the “descriptive” grammar approach never succeeded in attracting wide popular support among the rank and file of American teachers. We should bear in mind that between 1900 and 1950, most public school teachers were graduates of teachers colleges. They were third grade teachers or sixth grade teachers, not English teachers or math teachers, and they dealt with all subjects in the grades they were assigned to teach. Even at the high school level, English teachers might be teaching history or French as well as English, and the pros and cons of “descriptive” vs. “prescriptive” grammar often came across as intellectual hairsplitting.

So most teachers continued to employ the tried and tested approach to teaching English grammar, which normally included repetitive exercises and diagramming sentences. Since a high percentage of college-bound students also acquired an understanding of English grammar and composition by studying Latin — which involved the daily task of translating Latin sentences into English — the number of Americans needed to fill the jobs requiring strong writing skills kept pace with the demand. That number, of course, was considerably smaller than it is today.

### **Mixed-up English Becomes America’s Official Language**

What happened next? The '60s happened. And along with huge changes in social attitudes (“sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll”) came changes in education. One of the movers and shakers of the decade was M. I. T. professor Noam Chomsky, who — before he became known for his controversial political views — proposed a series of revolutionary theories on the subject of GRAMMAR.

Like so many things that flourished in the '60s, the “Chomskyan grammar” movement actually got its start in the '50s. In his book *Syntactic Structures*, published in 1957, and in other books on language — among them *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965), *Cartesian Linguistics* (1965), and *The Sound Pattern of English* (with coauthor Morris Halle, 1968) — Chomsky expounded on concepts of language and language acquisition that many academics found at once perplexing and appealing.

The ideas that Chomsky proposed in *Syntactic Structures* and elsewhere were often misconstrued by the academic community, but here is a summary of some of the things that people **inferred** from reading — or, more often, simply hearing about — his early work:

Like a computer, the brain is a hard-wired mechanism, and one of its organs (dubbed the language acquisition device, or LAD) is pre-programmed to acquire the grammar of a language. Within the LAD resides a Universal Grammar, which contains subconscious grammatical rules (the “deep” structure) at work beneath the “surface” in all languages. Thus, children translate sound patterns into sentences and learn the grammar of a language intuitively, without the imposition of formal instruction.

This misguided oversimplification of Chomsky's **transformational grammar** (which eventually became **transformational-generative** grammar and then simply **generative** grammar) sparked a kind of pop-psychology cascade within the academic community. Since children have the ability to recognize and produce sound patterns without formal instruction, according to the loony logic of this doctrine, they intuitively “know” the grammar of their language, so there is no need for educators to teach it. In fact, teaching grammar actually interferes with the natural learning process and inhibits creativity.

In an essay titled “Nine Ideas about Language,” professor Harvey A Daniels, a writing teacher at the National College of Education, maintained that “school children of primary age have already learned the great majority of the rules governing their native language” and that they accomplish this feat largely through “hypothesis-testing.”

[Children] observe certain grammatical patterns in order to convey messages. It takes thousands of such rules to make up a language. Many linguists believe that when each of us learned those countless rules, as very young children, we accomplished the most complex cognitive task of our lives.

Really? The next time you see a child dozing off in the middle of the day, remember that the little tyke needs lots of time to rest up after a busy morning of “hypothesis-testing” and learning all those “countless rules” of grammar.

Whether we are inclined to agree or disagree with Chomsky, let's at least make sure that we understand where the guy was coming from in the '50s and '60s. (I use the past tense, *was*, because he has changed his mind on several points since then, but that's another story.) As Waterloo University professor Randy Allen Harris pointed out in *The Linguistic Wars*, which examined the currents and countercurrents in linguistics from the late '50s to the early '90s, Chomsky has consistently supported the idea that **traditional grammar** is “on the right track.”

Chomsky's main complaint with traditional grammar has been that it doesn't go far enough; that it is (according to John Maher in *Introducing Chomsky*) “fine for its purpose,” but that it does not go “beyond the basic steps.” So anyone interested in Chomsky's linguistic theories had better start by acquiring a thorough understanding of traditional grammar first.

But while Chomsky was supporting traditional grammar as the “basic steps” along the path to understanding the human capacity for language, the National Council of Teachers of English — the organization that Fred Newton Scott had headed 50 years earlier — was moving in the opposite direction. In 1962, the NCTE funded a report claiming not only that the formal study of grammar was a complete waste of time, but also that it had a “harmful effect on the teaching of writing.” [Full disclosure: I am an NCTE member and once served as an officer of the organization's Washington, D. C., affiliate.]

The “grammar ... harmful” message to English teachers came across loud and clear — stop teaching grammar. And they did (at least, most of them did), not only in grade school and high school, but in college and graduate school as well. It was the '60s: different strokes for different folks, do your own thing, the dawning of the Age of Aquarius....

### The “Grammar ... Harmful” Fallout

By the mid-1970s, obvious deficiencies in writing began showing up on test scores and in the workplace. Over the ensuing years, articles and editorials in publications as diverse as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Wired*, and *Fortune* expressed apprehension over what was generally recognized as a nosedive in American standards of literacy.

Among the major publications, the *Times* has been the most consistent and vocal critic. A 1978 piece by Susan Jacoby, subtitled “Illiteracy Invades the Middle Class,” focused on predominately white, middle-class teachers in a master’s degree program “who obviously need help with spelling, grammar and punctuation.” As an example, Jacoby quoted the first sentence from one teacher’s paper:

As a teacher, children whose mother and father are dead or divorced are often angry and are hurt and are expressing themselves.

This sentence, Jacoby added, “was easier to figure out than the rest of the paper.” The concept of “creeping illiteracy,” she confessed, was something she had filed “in a sector of my brain for phenomena too distant to be alarming.”

Eighteen years later, in an editorial titled “How Not to Write English,” the *Times* took the NCTE and the International Reading Association to task for issuing a bloated set of guidelines that failed “to recommend national standards for instruction so that, at the very least, American high school students can become more polished users of their own language.”

A curriculum guide for teaching English has just been released in a tongue barely recognizable as English ... by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association.

Given their professional credentials, these two groups could have produced a clear, candid case for greater competence in standard English, with its ample vocabulary and its simple yet supple grammar. Instead, the guideline writers quickly vanished into a fog of euphemism and evasion.... The rules ooze with pedagogical molasses, as in No. 5: “Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.” ... The authors talk about “a variety of literacy communities” and “word identification strategies.” Who can differ with them, since nobody can know what they mean?

By 2006, the message had become more urgent:

Large numbers of college graduates ... lack what should be basic skills in writing, problem solving and analytical thinking — the minimum price of admission to the new global economy. The most recent findings from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy revealed distressing declines in literacy, especially among those with the most education.

Other publications have articulated similar concerns:

An article in *Fortune* magazine stated bluntly that most “MBAs lack the ability to speak and write with clarity and conciseness.... In skills such as writing, the B-schools are forced to compensate for the many sins of American high schools and colleges, in effect supplying remedial instruction.”

*Wired.com* editor Tony Long compared the writing of most Americans to “a siren song of incompetent communication, a virtual hooker beckoning to the drunken sailor as he staggers along the wharf.... Grammar skills have been eroding in this country for years and that has a lot more to do with lax instruction than it does with e-mail or instant messaging.”

A financial services recruiter quoted in a *Wall Street Journal* article complained that “many seemingly qualified candidates [with graduate degrees] are unable to write even the simplest of arguments.... In my business, that means death.”

And a “dramatic decline in SAT scores” prompted the *Washington Post* to question “whether there is something wrong with the new test or ... with the lessons being taught in high schools.... College Board officials say ... students aren’t being taught grammar and composition as much as in the past. Anyone concerned with education, national competitiveness and the prospects for the next generation should also take to heart the board’s worry, that high school students’ skills aren’t moving in the right direction.”

The trouble is that most of America’s teachers and administrators, the people responsible for making sure that students are “taught grammar and composition,” couldn’t teach more grammar even if they wanted to — for the simple reason that they don’t understand much about grammar. You can’t teach what you don’t understand.

Many 21st century educators have such a shaky grasp of fundamental language concepts that they cannot apply them to their own writing, let alone teach them to others. Consider, for example, an announcement that appeared on the website of the Rhode Island Council of Teachers of English, inviting members to attend an event featuring writer and radio host Marc Levitt:

Mr. Levitt will question the current trend in government mandated education that takes, in his opinion, a narrow view of what constitutes proficiency and in fact cruelty and cynically promises ‘advancement’ and possibility for urban youth in schools that successfully follow this approach.

Following Mr. Levitt's discussion round tables will be formed (along with refreshments) to further discuss but are not limited to:

- Using the Neighborhood as a Textbook
- Site Specific Education
- Making the Ordinary, Extraordinary

Unfortunately, this example is far from "extraordinary." Read on.

As professionals who work with other people's children, the public inherently entrust us teachers to educate their children and protect them of all harm. But when harm is perpetrated by the teachers themselves ... the public views us in a negative light and don't take us seriously as professionals. We can't demand respect unless you command it first.

These insights, which appeared on the blog of a teacher requesting anonymity, were accompanied by a suggestion to heed the advice of another educator, who compared her own writing skills (in a March 2010 article for [counterpunch.org](http://counterpunch.org)) with those of her students:

While they took freshman composition in their 10th grade, I have first finished all my high school classes in 11th and 12th grade English and history before taking freshman composition at UC Berkeley. At a Fairfax High public school I had taken in 11th grade American history, American literature, and an introduction to British Literature; in 12th grade I took Advance Placement European history, Senior Composition, and then a choice in my last semester to take World Literature class in high school or at UCLA but I choose UCLA.

And a couple of paragraphs later...

Let me explain. Universities want students who can write essay. I learned in my 12th grade Senior Composition class. UC gives students an English placement test, and for all of the 20th century about 60-70% percent pass, taking freshman composition, while 30-40% fail, taking "remedial" composition.

The "grammar ... harmful" movement spawned what can best be described as a form of **verbal anarchy**. To be fair, I do not mean to suggest that all educators are grammatically incompetent, but a lot of them are. As the National Council of Teachers of English now acknowledges, many K-college teachers ...

wonder what to do about grammar — how to teach it, how to apply it, how to learn what they themselves were never taught.

The NCTE is not the only educational organization that has adopted a "grammar ... harmful" agenda. For 40 years, the National Writing Project, which originated in Berkeley, California, where I taught English at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in the late '60s and early '70s, has alternately criticized the formal study of grammar or simply ignored it.

The recipient of millions of dollars in grants from the federal government, foundations, and corporations, the NWP has consistently claimed that the systematic study and application of grammatical relationships “fail to improve student writing.” In the index of the NWP’s 2003 book *Because Writing Matters*, the heading “Grammar, usage, and punctuation” begins this way:

failure of, to improve writing 21–22, 37–38;  
failure to incorporate in writing-as-process approach, 36–39

While paying lip service to the “instructional needs of minority students” — those who would benefit most from specific instruction in grammar and usage — the NWP ducks the issue of how to teach standard English and is content to mouth clichés about “building on the literacy skills and expertise that minority students bring to the classroom.”

A longtime favorite of the NWP, University of Massachusetts (Amherst) professor Peter Elbow, offered the following advice in his 1981 book *Writing with Power*:

For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar.

## Where the Jobs Are

The conventional wisdom for many years has been that economic opportunities in the 21st century are wedded to the STEM disciplines — science, technology, engineering, and math. But as is so often the case, the conventional wisdom is wrong. In a 2012 article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, prizewinning science writer Beryl Lieff Benderly set the record straight: “The conventional wisdom ... that we are failing to produce a sufficient quantity of scientists and engineers ... turns out not to be true,” she wrote. “In fact,” she continued, “according to the National Science Board’s authoritative publication *Science and Engineering Indicators 2008*, the country turns out three times as many STEM degrees as the economy can absorb into jobs related to their majors.”

Reports in other publications confirm the reality of relatively high rates of unemployment among people with all of the right degrees from all of the right schools. So what’s the problem? In annual surveys conducted between 2000 and 2010, the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that communication skills — writing and speaking — top the list of what business and government organizations are looking for in prospective employees. In its 2008 survey of “the skills that employers prize most,” the association found that a significant percentage of college graduates “lack writing skills.”

In another survey — conducted jointly in 2006 by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management — employers rated the “applied skills” of college graduates in 11 categories. Which skills were most frequently deemed “deficient”? Written communications.

The percentage of college graduates whose writing skills were regarded as “adequate” or “excellent” ended up near the bottom — 10th out of a possible 11.

For high school graduates who did not go on to college, the findings presented an even bleaker picture. More than 80 percent received scores of “deficient” in written communications, and “excellent” registered a paltry 0.3 percent.

These dismal numbers had nothing to do with creativity or self-expression or discovering one’s inner voice. A third report, this one prepared by the U. S. Merit Systems Protection Board, included the following comments on the quality of the writing produced by the federal government — the nation’s biggest employer:

grammatical mistakes ... spelling errors ... poor organization, poor writing ... unintelligible ... disorganized presentation ... misspelled words and grammatical errors ... vague, confusing ... sloppy writing....

We should all be glad that the guidelines accompanying the Plain Writing Act of 2010 call for massive retraining of the federal workforce. But we should also expect that the people responsible for overseeing that training have the expertise in writing necessary to ensure positive results. In recent months, I have received a fair number of requests from government agencies for Plain Writing training. Here’s one of them:

Packages will be written in an active vs. passive voice.

Contractor will prepare and deliver a total of four (4) 2 day, 6 hour per day interactive educations sessions for approximately 15 students each session, on the topic of high-level executive correspondence during the months of February and March, 2013. These will be the same curriculum for each 2-day session.... The contractor’s quality control program is the means that the work complies with the requirement of the contract.

I have changed certain names and numbers to protect the identity of the persons and organizations that initiated these requests. The idea here is not to single out any particular government agency, but to illustrate that the effort to improve the quality of government writing — as is the case with the quality of writing in all segments of American society — must begin with the educators themselves. Here’s another example:

Each topic area must include an example from an actual XYZ Report (draft or final report) to illustrate the principle being discussed In order to effectively deliver this course, the instructor(s) must familiarize themselves(s) with XYZ’s reports, procedures and the XYZ Style Guide The estimated number of participants in the course will be 12-22

At least four (4) writing exercises shall be incorporated into this course writing exercises may include an assignment to be completed between the end of the first day of the course and the beginning of the second and final day

I have not had the opportunity to review the *XYZ Style Guide*, but I strongly suspect that, among other things, it recommends putting a period at the end of a sentence. One of the most poorly written requests was as confident in tone as it was careless in construction:

I am doing market research on a writing course we are seeking to offer our employees. Our requirements and pertinent information is included in the attached document.

Good ideas can be obscured by bad prose, and that a productive response to miscommunication is to learn ways to communicate more effectively. The course shall approach good writing as a study of readers not as a sterile grammatical exercise or as a collection of arbitrary rules.

The government official who wrote these ungrammatical sentences could benefit by studying the *Guide to Grammar and Style* (<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/>), one of the resources recommended in the Plain Writing Act's guidance. People who are serious about improving the quality of their organization's writing need to recognize that most professionals in America's publishing industry — whose "best practices" could provide useful models for government writers — are among the most vigorous defenders of traditional grammar. As Brian S. Brooks and James L. Pinson pointed out in *Working With Words: A Concise Handbook for Media Writers & Editors* (2010), "the publishing world is dominated by traditional grammar...." Since 2003, the venerable *Chicago Manual of Style* has included a chapter on grammar and usage by Bryan A. Garner (whose books are also on the Plain Writing Act's recommended reading list). Reflecting the general practice of every major publishing company in the country, the *Manual's* editors have continued to adhere to "the main lines of English grammar using traditional grammatical terms." And in the online *U. S. Government Printing Office Style Manual*, the principles in the chapter on "Punctuation" are based mainly on an understanding of traditional grammar.

In the private sector, there is growing impatience with the lackluster performance of employees whose slovenly writing is a by-product of the "grammar ... harmful" dogma, which has been a prominent theme in the academic community since the 1960s. Although employers in years past may have been willing to spend "\$1.3 billion a year to teach basic writing skills," as *Newsweek* reported in June of 2008, tougher economic times have given rise to tougher attitudes. In a July 2012 *Harvard Business Review* article, titled "I Won't Hire People Who Use Poor Grammar. Here's Why," CEO Kyle Wiens delivered a simple but uncompromising message:

Everyone who applies for a position at either of my companies, iFixit or Dozuki, takes a mandatory grammar test.... Yes, language is constantly changing, but that doesn't make grammar unimportant. Good grammar is credibility, especially on the internet. In blog posts, on Facebook statuses, in e-mails, and on company websites, your words are all you have.... Writing isn't in the official job description of most people in our office. Still, we give our grammar test to everybody, including our salespeople, our operations staff, and our programmers.

## A New Game Plan

The English writing system has reached a critical turning point in its curious history. In 21st century America, we find ourselves faced with the task of making up for a half century of well-intentioned but counterproductive educational experimentation, during which time all measurable standards of literacy have plummeted. The question now is not whether we must adopt a new game plan — clearly, we must — but how we should go about it.

The **Common Core State Standards** and the **Plain Writing Act of 2010** offer tangible opportunities to improve the communication skills of our students, educators, and federal government employees. And the growing demand for crisp, coherent writing in the business community is a promising sign. (After his “I Won’t Hire People Who Use Poor Grammar...” article appeared on the Internet, Kyle Wiens reportedly received scores of requests from business managers for information about his grammar test.)

But these efforts won’t amount to much if we don’t return to our roots. We need to recognize that what we call *literacy* began as *letteracy* in a distant land and a foreign language; that developing an understanding of how to translate utterances into letters, letters into words, and words into meaningful sentences (as opposed to “BTW i hope u r nt l8 4 r d8!!!”) is a complex and time-consuming process; and that the English language has its own *grammatiké* — a visual communication system based on the generally accepted standards and practices of our best professional writers and editors.

There are rules, of course. Yes, languages — like games — do have rules. And as is the case with games, some rules may change over time. Games and languages are, after all, human inventions. But once established — or “fixed,” as Jonathan Swift would say — the rules for games and languages change very little. Just as reasonably literate 21st century sports fans could watch and understand a movie of a baseball game played on July 4, 1900, so they could read with relative ease a newspaper article written about that game and published the following day.

Applying the rules is a lot easier if we think of English **sentences as games** (or **puzzles**, if you prefer) and the skill of writing (the *téchne grammatiké*) as a method for putting the pieces together. What’s even more important than learning the rules is **becoming familiar with the patterns** of English sentences, clauses, and phrases. The players on winning basketball teams aren’t necessarily people who spend a lot of time memorizing the rule book; they are people who learn certain patterns, practice them, and execute them. The same could be said of people who are good at playing a musical instrument or composing a melody.

A baseball game has nine innings; a football game, four quarters; a hockey game, three periods. The **Write Smart**® **System** focuses on 12 fundamental English language patterns — patterns that are present in virtually all professionally written and edited

sentences currently published in print or online. As you progress through each step of the system, you will observe hundreds of models of these patterns. And by playing a series of easy (and not-so-easy) games, you will learn how the elements in the language work together to create meaning. The simplified approach to traditional grammar — including some common-sense terms to explain certain concepts that many people find confusing — will show you how to apply your knowledge of grammatical relationships to solving writing problems.

The first set of games will help you understand the organizing principles, or architecture, of English — **The Game of GrammaTecture**<sup>®</sup>. The second set will involve questions related to the nuances of punctuation and usage as well — **The Game of GrammaText**<sup>®</sup>.

The emphasis in the book and the games is on nonfiction writing. There are also some examples taken from novels, short stories, and poems, but nothing dealing specifically with dialogue.

Take your time. The games don't begin until page 23, and I encourage you to make sure you understand the rules — and the patterns — before you start playing. Read the directions for each game carefully. In English, many words can play more than one role, and as we have seen in some of the examples on previous pages, making hasty decisions about grammatical relationships can lead to foolish mistakes. Always keep in mind Mark Twain's wise counsel: "To get the right word in the right place is a rare accomplishment."

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Below are links to some of the sources referenced in "The Curious History...."

Origins of the classical Greek *grammatiké*:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=QrwUAAAAQAAJ&q=all+countries+manifold#v=snippet&q=all%20countries%20manifold&f=false>

William Caxton's comments on the English language's lack of stability:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=-MwKAAAAYAAJ&q=And+that+comyn+englysshe+that+is+spoken+n+one+shyre+varyeth+from+another.#v=snippet&q=And%20that%20comyn%20englysshe%20that%20is%20spoken%20in%20one%20shyre%20varyeth%20from%20another.&f=false>

Jonathan Swift's proposal for "fixing" the English language:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=PP8FAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA171&lpg=PA171&dq=jonathan+swift+Method+should+be+thought+on+for+ascertaining+and+fixing+our+Language&source=bl&ots=314Q8oWzjL&sig=eSCIsMr1yrbfUvDaSftxm8cMEAQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=PobpUJXwKaPK0wHK5oHgBw&ved=0CF0Q6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=jonathan%20swift%20Method%20should%20be%20thought%20on%20for%20ascertaining%20and%20fixing%20our%20Language&f=false>

Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=tqgifS7RsAkC&q=thoughts+by+words#v=snippet&q=thoughts%20by%20words&f=false>

Lindley Murray's *An English Grammar*:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=YHoSAAAAIAAJ&q=orthography+teaches+nature+#v=snippet&q=orthography%20teaches%20nature&f=false>