WRITE TO THE POINT

HOW TO BE CLEAR, CORRECT AND PERSUASIVE ON THE PAGE

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SURVIVING THE LANGUAGE WARS

MOST PUBLIC DISCUSSION of how language is used –
and certainly the most vociferous public discussion – is
concerned with mistakes. Should that be a capital letter?
Is it 'different from' or 'different to'? Where should that
comma go – inside the quotation marks or outside them?
On questions such as these, we're encouraged to think,
rests the difference between civilisation and barbarism.

These arguments have been characterised as 'language
wars' – and they can look like that. The sound! The fury!
To one side, the Armies of Correctness mass behind forti-
fications made not of sandbags but second-hand copies of
Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, *Gwynne's Grammar* and Strunk
and White's *Elements of Style*. Here's Lynne 'Deadeye' Truss,
her sniper-rifle loaded with apostrophes, taking pot-shots at
mispunctuated grocery advertisements; and there's Simon
'Mad Dog' Heffer, preparing a shock-n-awe offensive involv-
ing the word 'decimate', which he hopes will reduce the
enemy forces by a tenth.

On the other side, equally well dug in, are the Descriptiv-
ist Irregulars: a curious fighting force in which hippy-dippy
schoolteachers battle shoulder-to-shoulder with austere
academic linguists. There are a lot of cardigans. Someone

has just pulled the pin and lobbed a split infinitive over the barricades. Now they're sticking their tongues out and flicking V-signs and laughing. And, yes, I can just make out Geoffrey Pullum, looking peevish and tinkering with the controls of a devastating secret weapon they call only 'The Corpus'.

At issue is whether there is a correct way to write. Are there, or should there be, rules about the meanings and spelling of words, the use of punctuation marks, and the formation of sentences? And if there are, or should be, who pronounces on them? Like the conflict in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this war has been going on for as long as anybody can remember. In the Introduction to his *The Sense of Style*, the linguist Steven Pinker writes that 'complaints about the decline of language go at least as far back as the invention of the printing press'. He quotes Caxton in 1478 beefing that 'certaynly our langage now vsed veryeth ferre from that whiche was vsed and spoken when I was borne'.

Both sides – because all armies have their propaganda wings – will tend to caricature the positions of the other. Descriptivists see the Armies of Correctness as snobbish amateurs, obsessed with a set of prohibitions half-remembered from their own schooldays and essentially mistaken about how language works. Prescriptivists, meanwhile, see their opponents as smart-arsed ivory-tower types who, in trendily insisting that anything goes, actively collude in the coarsening and eventual destruction of the language they purport to study.

Intellectually, the Descriptivists are right. Nobody made the English language up. It isn't an invention, like tennis or a washing machine, where there's an instruction manual to which we can refer. It is not a fixed thing. It is a whole set of practices and behaviours, and it evolves according to the way it is used. One hundred years ago, 'wicked' meant 'evil'; now, in many contexts, it means 'excellent'. Nobody

decided that: it just – to use a technical linguistic term – sort of caught on. And if it just sort of catches on that 'gay' is understood to mean 'homosexual', or 'decimate' is understood to mean 'annihilate', no number of indignant letters to the *Daily Telegraph* will prevent that happening.

Does a language have rules? Yes, in one sense it does. It would not work if it didn't. But it doesn't have an umpire. It has rules in the same way that the acceleration of a body through space under gravity or the formation of a foetus in the womb have rules. The rules of language are a property of the system itself. And that system is a property of its day-to-day users.

You may think you don't know any grammar – because, perhaps, you weren't taught at school what a gerund is, or the difference between a conjugation and a declension. But every sentence you utter is grammatical: if it were not, nobody would be able to understand you. You conjugate – I conjugate, he conjugates … hell, we all conjugate – like a champ, and use gerunds without even thinking about it. The grammar that is taught and written down in books is not a manual for language users: it's a description of what they do.

That is where this book starts from. I take the part not of the Armies of Correctness nor of the Descriptivist Irregulars, but of the huddled civilian caught in the middle: cowering in the shelled-out no-man's land somewhere between them. And I want to try to present a practical way through.

I hope to acknowledge that there is real value in knowing where to put a question mark or how to spell 'accommodate' – and that the armies of proofreaders, sub-editors and schoolteachers who think about these questions are not labouring in vain. I'll have plenty to say in later sections about correct (or, more precisely, standard) usage – and about the pointless myths that have grown up about it, too.

But I also want to get the language wars in proportion. Language is a social activity – which is why these things matter. And yet it's precisely because language is a social activity that these things change over time. Knowing your audience is always more important than knowing a set of rules and prohibitions. Correctness is part of the picture, but it's not the whole or even the most important part of the picture.

Good writing is about much more than knowing how to frame a restrictive relative clause. It has to do with how you get a voice down on paper, how you make a sentence easy for your reader to take in, how you attend to the prose music that makes it pleasurable to read, how you make it fresh in idiom and vivid in image, and even how you present it on the page.

Almost all of us, in the first world, need to put pen to paper or stubby finger to keyboard daily. We write memos, emails, reports, presentations, CVs, blogs, tweets and letters of complaint, congratulation or supplication. Our working lives and our working relationships are shaped by how and what we write. To write clearly is an essential courtesy, and to write well is to give pleasure to your audience. You are not only making a case or imparting information; you are cultivating a relationship.

That's an important point. It's worth pausing for a moment to think about why prescriptivists and proud pedants – the sort driven to apoplexy by signs that say 'Five Items or Less' rather than fewer – feel as they do, and why they mind so much. Oddly, this has more to tell us about language than any of the rules they cherish.

The arguments people tend to make in support of 'correctness' are of four kinds:

1. Appeals to tradition. They will cite the authority of

previous style or grammar manuals, or the evidence of distinguished writers who seem to fall into line with their rules.

2. Appeals to logic. They will argue that the correct sequence of tenses, or the proper agreement of a modifier with its subject, are essential to the clarity of a sentence.

3. Appeals to efficiency. They will argue that non-standard usage blunts the precision of the language. If 'enormity' is allowed to mean 'bigness', or 'wicked' is allowed to mean 'excellent', confusion and, possibly, rioting will follow.

4. Appeals to aesthetics. They will denigrate certain constructions as ugly or clumsy or even 'barbaric'.

There is some merit, on the face of it, in all these arguments.

'Authorities' on language are often not only careful users, but careful observers of the way language is used. The usage of distinguished writers tells you something about the norms of the language at the time they were writing. And yet: what either tells us is not always straightforward. Writers serve their own ends; authorities have their own axes to grind, and themselves often refer to previous authorities. Which writers? Which authorities? And what are we to do when they contradict one another?

It is indeed possible to use logic or analogy to make some of your writing consistent – and you will usually benefit in terms of clarity if you do. But not always. English was not designed as a logical system. It was not designed at all. It evolved – jerry-built by millions of users over hundreds of years – to do its job. In the old children's TV series *The A-Team*, there was typically a scene in which our heroes were locked into a shed by the villains. Rummaging through the shed, they would discover a collection of old rubbish and

would use their ingenuity to knock up some improvised device to mount an escape. Before long, out through the doors of the shed would crash a three-wheeled tank made of plywood and dented paint cans, powered by an outboard motor and flinging tennis balls and old potatoes at the enemy from a rear-mounted trebuchet. The English language is that three-wheeled tank: no amount of wishful thinking will make it a Maserati.

In infancy, our language-hungry little brains hoover vocabulary out of the air; and not only that, they very quickly figure out the grammar that makes sense of it and start bolting the two together with a facility so efficient that theorists believed for a long time we must have an innate 'language organ' in the brain. By four months, children can recognise clauses; by ten months, they're getting the hang of prepositions; by a year old, they have the noun/adjective distinction down, and by the time they're three they've mastered the whole of English grammar. It's staggering – like deducing the rules of chess by watching a handful of games; or like figuring out the Highway Code and the workings of the internal combustion engine by standing next to the junction of the A1000 and the North Circular for half an hour.

Languages evolve in communities and they therefore bind communities. Americans don't aspirate the 'h' in 'herb', for instance, because in standard spoken English at the time their ancestors boarded the *Mayflower* it was pronounced 'erb' (it came in from the French, which didn't aspirate the *h* either). At some point between now and then, British English underwent a trend for pronouncing words as they were spelt and so, as Eddie Izzard put it, 'we say *herbs* – because there's a fucking H in it'. But is that rule applied consistently? No: because it's not a fucking rule. We both call the thing with which we chop our *herbs* or *erbs* a *nife*.

The difference between herb and erb is what's sometimes called a shibboleth: a word or pronunciation that distinguishes one language community from another. 'Shibboleth' was a shibboleth. If you needed to tell an Ephraimite from a Gileadite, a millennium or so BC, you'd ask him to say 'shibboleth', a Hebrew word that has something to do with corn. The Ephraimites didn't have the 'sh' sound in their language, so if he said 'sibboleth' you had your man, and could get straight to the business of slaying him with the jawbone of an ass, or similar.

When we talk about 'language' everyone knows we're not talking about just one thing: there are about 7,000 languages spoken worldwide. Less attention is paid to the fact that when we talk about 'English' we are not talking about a single thing either: we're talking about a huge, messily overlapping mass of dialects and accents and professional jargons and slangs – some spoken, some written – which have their own vocabularies and grammatical peculiarities and resources of tone and register. The sort of 'legalese' you'll see in the small print of your car insurance is English; as is the Russian-inflected 'nadsat' used in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*; as is the abbreviated text-speak burbling through your SMS or Twitter feed. They share a common ancestor, they share almost all of their vocabularies and grammars and they are, more often than not, mutually intelligible. It takes a while for a standard English user to 'tune in' to *A Clockwork Orange* – but not all that long.

On the other hand, a language is not only a set of practices. It is also, in its broader sense, a set of ideas about those practices. And the fact is that a very large number of people do believe that there is a right and a wrong way to speak or write. Those ideas are bound up with identity. Sometimes they are explicit – as in books written by proud pedants deploring the corruption of the Queen's English.

Sometimes they are implicit – as in the suspicion with which one community of dialect users might regard an outsider. The former of these two things is, at root, no more than a posh variant of the latter.

By adopting a pragmatic, rhetorical approach we can come at this from a third direction. We can try to arrange a Christmas kickabout for the troops in no-man's land. How? Suffer fools gladly. God knows there are a lot of them about, so you're going to be suffering them anyway. If you can't do so gladly, it's your gladness that will suffer, not the fools.

Yes: if someone believes that it's not English to split an infinitive they are, technically, quite wrong. But you're not interested in proving them wrong: you're interested in getting them on your side. Indulge them. If that's the sort of person you're writing to, *or even if there's a decent chance such a person will be in your audience*, leave that infinitive unsplit with a good grace and an inward smile.

We should also recognise that we have, and are entitled to indulge, a whole set of stylistic preferences. Every time you speak or write you are trying to form a connection with your audience, and that connection depends on speaking that audience's language. This book is primarily interested in standard English. One of the sociological features of standard English is that many of its users place a high value on getting it right. So, as I'll be repeating, you go to where the audience is.

That means that, as we make our way across that battle-field, it's worth knowing where the shell-holes are: better to step into one knowingly and carefully than to stumble over it in the dark and break your silly neck.

Furthermore, knowing the rules of standard English can help give you something that is vitally important to any writer: confidence. Many people, sitting down to write, feel apprehension or even fear. How am I going to fill this white

space? How am I going to say what I mean? What if I get the punctuation in the wrong place? What if I end up sounding stupid? Even the most fluent speakers can freeze up so that the voice that falters onto the page is not, somehow, their own.

That fear is responsible for more bad writing than anything else. Fear, more often than self-regard, is what makes people sound stiff and pompous in print, and fear is what makes people cling to half-remembered rules from their schooldays.

Writing, then, is in some respects a confidence trick. I don't mean that writers are in the business of hoodwinking their readers. Rather, that in the best and most fluent writing, the writer not only feels but instils confidence. The writer is in command and projects that – meaning the reader feels in safe hands. You are confident that the writer knows what he or she means and is expressing it exactly.

I don't say that there is one, and only one, form of good writing. This book is not a list of rules or instructions, though it contains many suggestions and opinions. It does not pretend to contain a magic formula. What it hopes to do, rather, is to walk you companionably around the question of what it is we're doing when we read and write, and how we can do it better and more confidently.

I'll talk about the basic bits and pieces that make up a sentence, and how you fit those sentences into paragraphs and larger units of thought and argument. I'll talk about why sentences go wrong and how you can fix them. I'll talk about specific types of writing, the conventions of grammar, and common mistakes and irregularities. I'll talk about the difference between writing for the page and writing for the internet. And I'll discuss some of the tricks that can be used to make prose livelier and more immediate.

But I'll also look at the bigger picture. Most of the

writing we do is intended, one way or another, to persuade, so I want to consider how persuasion itself works. What will make someone read your words and adopt your point of view? How do you capture their attention and keep it focused? How do you step back and see your words from the point of view of your reader? There's a body of knowledge on this subject that leads us from the ancient world, where Aristotle first set out the principles of rhetoric, to the laboratory of the modern neuroscientist.

Right. Out of the shell-hole. Let's see what it's like up there. One, two, three, HUP!