Breaking the Rules
Breaking the Rules
Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction

Edgar H. Schuster

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To Nancy, lifetime companion through this rich and wonderful life, and to the children, their spouses, and the grandchildren who have done so much to make it so.

In addition to my wife and family, I dedicate this book to the memory of my friend, Robert W. Boynton, a great teacher and a publisher of the best books that our profession needed to read. Bob was there at the origin of this book, in a sense, for I first met him in the very late 1950s when I joined a small band of Philadelphia-area English teachers, a “linguistics club,” dedicated to finding answers to difficult questions. Breaking the Rules is the end product of a quest that began there.

I had just started my teaching career at Central High School (a public school that was open only to the brightest kids in the city—it’s Noam Chomsky’s alma mater), where they handed me a textbook and said, “Here, teach this.” Having graduated from Columbia as a vagabond major, which the college permitted in those days, I quickly discovered that I was woefully unprepared to teach “grammar.” My bright students asked many questions I could not answer, and when I queried fellow faculty members, they didn’t know the answers either, not even veterans who had been teaching in the school for forty years.

So I joined the club. Bob was “just an English teacher” himself in those days, though a particularly energetic, outspoken, and straightforward one. I loved his wit and good humor and his antiauthoritarian stances. I still remember the Post-it note he frequently used later in his life: “Illegitimi Non Carborundum,” it read—”Don’t let the bastards get you down.”

The world knows what Bob went on to do, but I saw much less of him once he left the Philadelphia area, until the middle 1980s, when he became my co-chair of the NCTE Committee on Publishers and English Teachers. He really energized that group, and two years in succession, we created grand all-day, postconvention workshops. The first one, however, was rejected by the program committee, which claimed we would not get a large enough audience. Feeling passionately that we would get a large audience and that we should be heard in any case, Bob refused the rejection. We began to lobby influential NCTE members, and if that hadn’t worked we were prepared to put the program on at the Convention, without Council
approval. The Program chair—or whoever it was—changed his mind. The workshop was a huge success; we had to turn people away. The succeeding year’s workshop was equally successful.

That was Bob: He knew more about what the profession needed than the NCTE itself.

It was Bob, too, who first introduced to me the concept of teaching against the textbook, and the more I have learned about textbooks, the sounder this idea has become, particularly the dominant traditional school grammar textbooks, the best-sellers, like Warriner’s *English Grammar and Composition* and Hodges’ *Harbrace College Handbook*. When I wrote Bob, not long before he died, to tell him about this book, I was reminded of his antitextbook poem, and I conclude this dedication by giving it to you. “It’s the best poem I ever wrote,” Bob said, and then added with his characteristic good humor, “and the only one.”

**The Rime of the Ancient Warriner’s**

It is an ancient Warriner’s  
And it stoppeth every wight  
From doing what is best to do  
When learning how to write.  
It mixes skills and drills and frills  
With exhortation solemn,  
And stacks itself on classroom shelves  
Column after column.  
Amoeba-like, it splits itself  
Into scope and sequence clones,  
With names alike as Mike and Ike  
And wholly writ by drones.  
(It transmogrifies itself with ease  
Into Little, Brown, and Hodges  
And Bedford, Crews and Ebbitts  
And a hundred other stodges.)  
It names the parts and modes and marks  
It’s a taxonomic rite—  
And multitudes are led through it,  
And still they cannot write,  
And go as ones that have been stunned  
And are of sense forlorn,  
Much sadder and unwiser wights  
Than ever they was born.
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The single individual who has helped me most in this project is my friend Dorothy (Dolly) Russell, a professional reference librarian. (All my life I have said librarians were the salt of the earth; now I really know what that means.) Dolly was my student in a summer writing course at Lehigh University and was the best poet among the students I have taught there in over ten years. With respect to research, Dolly never failed to discover what I needed to know. Occasionally she tested ideas on her husband, her children, and her friends. I thank them as well. She has also read all of the manuscript and has made an abundance of valuable suggestions. Quite notably, she did a superb job on the index.

My son, Bill; my son-in-law, Charlie Allred; my daughter, Nina; and my wife have also read and commented on the manuscript and have helped to improve it materially. My daughter Claire has given helpful artistic advice.

Special thanks goes to Ian Michael of Bristol, UK, for his review of my history of Traditional School Grammar in Chapter 1. There is no one alive who knows more about that topic than he does, and his own English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800 and The Teaching of English from the Sixteenth Century to 1870 (both Cambridge University Press) deserve to be much better known in this country than they are.

Bill Varner was probably the first to suggest that an article I published in Kappan could be turned into a book. I thank him, too, for initially shepherding my proposal through the editorial committee at Heinemann.

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Finally, without the help of my (now deceased) good friend Bill Simon, this book would probably have taken me twice as long to write. I shall always remember that gentle man.
Most people think students break rules aplenty. Why encourage them? The short answer: in the interest of helping them to become independent thinkers and more effective communicators. But before discussing the benefits of rule breaking, let’s look at what language rules are and why some should not be broken.

We all feel intuitively that grammar is a system of rules that are to be followed. Quite so. Indeed, speakers and writers disregard these rules at their peril, usually at the cost of communicative derailment. If I were to ask you where the office post is, for example, communication would leave the tracks. Why? Because I would have broken a rule of English grammar that requires single-word modifiers normally to be placed before the word they modify.

This system of rules is acquired by native speakers mostly (not entirely) even before they enter school (see Chapter 1)—though it is a few years later before one’s writing ability catches up. Let’s call these the bedrock rules of English syntax. This book does not advocate breaking these rules.

This book also does not advocate breaking another group of rules—those that distinguish it’s from its and affect from effect, for example. Breaking these usually does not derail communication, but it may delay it, and it may have the further unhappy consequence of causing the reader to think badly of the writer. In fact, you will find a glossary in the third chapter of this book that covers how these rules can be taught effectively. These rules have the authority of the dictionary behind them—a universally agreed upon standard.

Americans who write or edit need to know the rules of Well-Edited American Prose (WEAP)—or have an editor who knows them. These rules can be tricky,
since they are not uniform across the publishing industry, which is why most publishers have their own stylebooks. People who don’t write and don’t intend ever to write or edit have no need to know such rules and are very unlikely to learn them. I don’t mean to downplay these rules, since knowing them is empowering, but trying to teach and learn them has driven not a few teachers and students to the brink of substance abuse.

On a fourth type of rule, which might loosely be called a usage rule, my position is more complex, and I would rather defer discussion till the third chapter. There is no universally agreed upon standard for these rules.

**Which Rules Should Be Broken?**

What sort of rules do I advocate breaking? The answer is a host of rules that have accrued through the centuries since the first grammars of English were written and that are now so essential a part of school grammars (or English-teacher folklore) that to omit them is to foredoom any textbook or handbook to the dustbin, at least in the larger school and college textbook markets. These are mythrules, “rules” that rule no one—other than perhaps a handful of pop-grammarians and hardened purists who look for their authority somewhere in the sky rather than here on earth.

How do we know a mythrule when we meet it? I propose—with thanks to Joseph M. Williams—what I call a “favorite writer test.” (It could be a favorite speaker test, if the tester were concerned with oral English.) Here is how it works.

**The Favorite Writer Test of Correctness**

We Catholic elementary school graduates were sure that the nuns received their rules directly from Mount Sinai, but there aren’t many teaching nuns around today. Where do ordinary mortals get their linguistic commandments? Many purists will say, “From logic,” but alas, even conservative linguists will tell you that—to quote one—“Language never has followed the rules of logic. There’s no language on earth where mathematical logic and its grammar correspond neatly” (McWhorter, quoted in Dreifus, 2001). (In the same interview, McWhorter says he could be a purist himself—“in another universe.”)

To check for correctness of the written language, try the following test. (Note: The test works especially well when dealing with purists, but it may also be used with anyone interested in checking for correctness.)

First, ask the interested person to name a favorite writer. It’s best to use a modern writer, since real rules change from time to time. Also, to avoid the charge that “creative writers” get away with everything, it’s best to choose a nonfiction writer.
Second, go to a library (it needs the business anyway) and find a book by that writer.

Third, observe whether the “rule” under discussion is observed by that writer. If it is, the other scores a point; but if it isn’t, you do, and he has to back off his white charger.

Let’s take an illustration. My purist friend tells me that I must not begin sentences with and or but. (My computer tells me the same thing.) One of my friend’s favorite nonfiction writers is William Zinsser. Zinsser is a particularly good choice because among his books are several on how to write.

In the library, we find Zinsser’s On Writing Well (1976), and we randomly turn to the chapter “Rewriting.” The third paragraph begins with “But,” and the last sentence of that paragraph begins with “And.” Moreover, later in the chapter, Zinsser shows us a couple of pages that he has rewritten “four or five times.” In the middle of those pages, this surviving sentence appears: “But he won’t do this for long.”

If my friend still insists that it is wrong to start sentences with and or but, we are, as Joseph Williams puts it, no longer debating usage but theology (1995, p. 180).

This illustration is a test of a writing myth rule, but the test works for grammar, usage, and punctuation as well.

Should Students Know the Rules Before They Can Break Them?

Most of us English teachers are aware that good writers violate “rules.” Even relatively conservative handbooks, for example, acknowledge that sentence fragments may be effectively used. However, where students are concerned, the permission to violate is often paired with the injunction BEWARE, or “First learn the rules, then you can break them—sometimes.”

Knowing certain kinds of rules can be important, as I have said, but let’s keep the following points in mind before we next pass along the commonsense injunction that students have to learn rules before they can break them.

1. We need to think a great deal about how, at what time, and under what circumstances children learn rules in the first place. The assumption that they learn usage, composition, or punctuation rules simply by having teachers or textbooks present them is as naive as thinking that kids learn grammar by memorizing definitions. Composition theorists insist, for example, that students do not learn rules from English-teacher marginalia such as AWK, CS, or MM, or from teachers editing their work. Paul Diedrich, an outstanding teacher and a specialist in composition
who went on to a distinguished career at Educational Testing Service (ETS), insisted many decades ago that the best thing we teachers could do to promote growth in student writers was to make positive comments on the content of what the students wrote and one suggestion on how they could improve next time. This advice has been repeated by English educators thousands of times since, right up to the present day. In Coaching Writing (2001), William Strong suggests that after teachers read students’ writing, they add one or two suggestions on how the kids can improve next time.

2. In initially acquiring our native language, we often break rules before we learn them. Composition researchers have found the same to be true where writing is concerned. Significant research demonstrates that certain kinds of errors are a sign of growth. In fact, to quote Constance Weaver—whose chapter “Toward a Perspective on Error” in Teaching Grammar in Context is an excellent discussion of this matter—“writing growth and error go hand in hand” (1996a, p. 69). I’ll never forget a ninth grader’s description of sitting in an empty church—the best impromptu piece of writing by a student at that level that I have ever read. It was full of punctuation errors, most of which were related to the fact that she was using participial phrases that she could not yet punctuate. Would any thoughtful English teacher prefer that this student avoid using participial phrases until she learned how to punctuate them?

3. Overconcern with following rules may undermine self-confidence and may be the root reason why so many adults fear writing. Not long ago, as part of a presentation, I asked a group of about seventy teachers to write to a prompt. Within a short time, all were working diligently (as was I). When I asked them to evaluate their own efforts, however, only a handful were willing to give themselves anything higher than an average grade, and many rated themselves far lower.

   Why? I wanted to know. Was the environment not conducive to writing? Was the time too short? Was the topic dull? Did they not understand the task? Did they have little or nothing to say? The answer to all these questions was “no.” The root problem was that they dreaded writing, and one of the main reasons was their fear of making errors. Trying to write while worrying about errors is like trying to waltz in a ballroom with loose floorboards.

   It’s been a long time since the early research of Donald Graves and his colleagues, but we must be ever mindful of their discovery that the second of the two most important determinants of how well kids write is their self-confidence. Self-confidence in writing is not fostered by insist-
4. *Premature attention to rules may inhibit creativity and cause students to “play it safe.”* Put yourself in the seat of a ninth grader (especially, perhaps, one sitting for a high-stakes writing test): “Do I use this structure [say it’s some sort of verbal phrase], even though I may ‘dangle’ it or not know how to punctuate it correctly?” If you’ve had the experience of reading thousands of state essays, you probably know that her answer is frequently, “No, I’ll play it safe.” You may also have noticed that the papers that really come alive are often those that break rules.

5. *Finally, many of the rules aren’t rules in the first place.* You’ll meet a large number of these in the usage, writing, and punctuation sections of this book. For example, in spite of the fact that every textbook in print says that writers should use a semicolon before conjunctive adverbs and other transitional words and phrases, you will see in Chapter 5 that writers do not employ this punctuation. Even the promulgators of this myth-rule regularly break it. Why should students learn rules that no one follows?

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**The Reflective Teacher**

Reflective teachers are those who constantly inquire into their own practice, who are “in continual conversation with [their teaching],” as John Mayher puts it (1990, p. 283). They are experimenters, independent thinkers, and are likely to find more sense in what Mayher calls uncommon sense than in common sense. You won’t find them reading from scripts or slavishly following teacher’s manuals, though you might find them giving quizzes and assigning homework, maybe even asking students to memorize things.

Most important, they will encourage students to examine rules and to break them. Why? Because the unexamined rule is not worth keeping. Not to allow students to break rules is to deny them full access to the linguistic resources of English, resources that people need to express themselves and achieve their own voices. Huck Finn wouldn’t be Huck unless he broke rules (linguistic and otherwise), and neither would his creator be the master writer he was.

**“Only Look and Connect”**

E. M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* opens with the memorable epigraph, “Only connect.” This can be modified into a motto for reflective English teachers: “Only look and connect.” Look at the results of your teaching; look at the facts of language; look at practices of our best writers, both student and professional; look to see which rules really rule. Then connect what you discover to your teaching practice.
This can often be done with very little trouble. For example, earlier today I wondered just how often professional writers varied their sentence openings. Well, let's look. I selected a collection of essays by professional writers (The Bedford Reader, Sixth Edition, 1997), arbitrarily opened it to a right-hand page, and noted how the sentences in the paragraph I hit upon started. I did this five times. (I hit pages 115, 247, 377, 463, and 591.) Seventy-seven and a half percent of the forty sentences opened with the subject noun phrase. Of the remaining sentences, ten percent opened with a simple conjunction (and, but, so), and five percent opened with prepositional phrases. There was one adverb opening, one infinitive phrase, and one sentence opened with its object. This “research” took me five minutes. (For a more detailed look at how professional writers open their sentences, see Chapter 4, pp. 120–124.)

How does this connect with practice? If you teach from a textbook, you are familiar with a “rule” that students should vary their sentence openings. At the very least, this looking raises doubt about the value of this advice. I have been amazed at how many “rules” fall by the wayside when they are examined by this simple strategy.

Regularly Solicit Feedback from Students

If the purpose of teaching is to enhance student learning, a reflective teacher should solicit student feedback, often. I’m always taking pop opinion polls of my students. I do it by actually passing out ballots, rather than by a show of hands. (There’s too great a chance that the sheepish and the shy will vote with the majority rather than say what they really think.) It takes only a minute to rip a piece of paper into thirty ballots, and the results can be put on the board for all to see, with a student calling out the votes and you tabulating them.

When I taught American Literature, I used six different novels. After each book, I asked my students to rate it on a scale of one to five. If a book couldn’t get at least a 2.5 rating, I dropped it. That’s how I learned that I couldn’t teach Moby Dick or The Scarlet Letter to my eleventh graders. I stopped teaching both. (The best received novels were To Kill a Mockingbird at 1.6 and The Great Gatsby at 1.88.)

Discover What Your Students Already Know

Well before the standards mania struck, every school district I knew of already had standards. For one thing, we gave final examinations in English. We assumed that what was on the final was what students needed to learn. But we never asked whether the students might already know it. A few years ago, to answer this question, I gave fifty-five questions from the final English examination to 541 tenth
graders during the first week in October. The average grade was 61.0 percent correct, and 30.3 percent passed the exam. Students in the honors track averaged 76.4 percent correct. A reflective teacher might ask why we’re “teaching” students what they already know.

In studying individual sections of the October versus June scores, I discovered that gains were extremely modest across all tracks. For example, although the district used a textbook vocabulary program, the total gain in vocabulary for the year was only 10.4 percent. If we assume that students would have experienced some vocabulary growth from maturation alone, this percentage gain seems trivial. In all other areas, the gains were even more modest; in fact, in some areas, there were losses. Scores on subject-verb agreement questions, for example, went down, and there was a 7.7 percent loss in knowledge of “correct verb forms.”

Giving parts of the final in the fall might seem a radical notion, but it has the additional benefit of revealing to the students what they need to learn. And if they don’t need to learn it, you can change the curriculum and perhaps alleviate boredom.

**Join or Create a Teacher-Researcher Group**

As described in Marion S. MacLean and Marian M. Mohr’s book, *Teacher-Researchers at Work* (1999), reflective researchers study their own classrooms or students and share their results with like-minded others. They eschew “control groups,” sampling, and other sorts of statistical stuff (they’re not bent on proving anything), but they solicit feedback from their colleagues, and they often “publish” their results, in one form or another (seven articles by teacher-researchers appear in MacLean and Mohr’s book). Teacher-researchers ask significant questions, with emphasis on improving instruction and growing as teachers. The book has a chapter on forming one’s own research group and an extensive bibliography. These teacher-researchers have responded to what Frank McCourt suggests in his quote at the beginning of this chapter.

**Do Research on Your Own**

Every conscientious public school English teacher holds the equivalent of two full-time jobs. The first she does during the regular work week. She does the second on weekends and evenings—and mornings, if she’s an early riser. Since everyone is entitled to a life outside of work and a little leisure time, I have been suggesting reflective techniques that require relatively little time.

But a few teachers seem never to sleep. If you’re one of them, you might attempt an in-depth study of one or more of your classes, on your own. That’s what Finlay McQuade did in the late 1970s, examining his Editorial Skills elective. His study is a model of individual teacher research, but I discuss it here also.
because of its “landmark” status (Weaver, 1996b, p. 15), and because it supports an important thesis of this book—that traditional grammar traditionally taught is an utter failure (see Chapter 2).

Finlay McQuade was a young, well-qualified, energetic, popular, highly intelligent high school English teacher who taught an Editorial Skills course to eleventh- and twelfth-grade students at Sewickley Academy in Sewickley, Pennsylvania. The course was regarded as a “good” one by everybody, including the highly motivated students who enthusiastically took it and were convinced they learned a great deal from it. McQuade, furthermore, believed in teaching traditional grammar. I believe he taught it as well as any classroom teacher I have ever known.

Initially, McQuade made the commonsense assumption that students who had passed the course had learned something, and all was well—until the English Department decided to identify student weaknesses so that they (the weak students) could be given additional work. One of the areas examined was “mechanics.” Unaccountably, some of the students who had taken and passed McQuade’s Editorial Skills did not pass the departmental test and were assigned to a remedial course. McQuade was “alarmed” and decided that he had to reflect on and evaluate his own course.

If he was alarmed initially, he must have been ready to quit teaching English after his research. In fact, McQuade did quit full-time English teaching. It will surprise no one who has read his study that he subsequently pursued issues of thinking and learning.

The course was traditional. McQuade reviewed parts of speech and sentence structure and then had students apply grammatical principles to the task of finding errors. He used two traditional textbooks and lots of worksheets, tests, and exercises. He took the same approach to punctuation and diction, and to spelling, if he had the time.

Readers who want the full story are urged to read McQuade’s article in the October 1980 English Journal, but here are the main conclusions of his research.

1. Measured by their scores on the Cooperative English Tests (at the time, a widely used, nationally normed test published by ETS), taking Editorial Skills “made no difference in student achievement” (p. 28), and students who did not take the course showed as much gain as those who did.

2. On matched, teacher-made, pre- and post-tests of course content, “The class average on the pre-test . . . was actually higher than the average on the post-test” (p. 28). The kids knew more before they took the course.
3. McQuade hoped that taking the Editorial Skills course would help students score higher than they otherwise would on the CEEB Achievement Test in Composition, and they did gain (over their SAT test scores), but “the average difference between the SAT and Achievement scores of students who had not taken Editorial Skills was just as high” (p. 29).

4. On essays students wrote before and after the course, the frequency of errors was reduced by almost half. But before allowing himself a small sigh of relief, McQuade looked at the specific errors and found that the improvement came from “a few students who had learned a few of the simpler skills. The number of errors involving the more complex skills of grammar and general punctuation was not reduced at all” (p. 30).

5. The pre-course essays of the students who took the course were “not spectacular,” the post-course essays were “miserable.” Specifically, McQuade felt that Editorial Skills graduates wrote badly after the course because they wrote “to honor correctness above all other virtues” (p. 29).

I read this study when it first appeared, over twenty years ago. I’m still waiting for a rebuttal from anyone who favors teaching traditional school grammar.

The research was based on a small sample, to be sure, and it is not without other imperfections, as McQuade himself freely and frequently admits, but it seems to me that he conclusively proves his belief that “we [teachers] must evaluate our own teaching, . . . including those features of it that we have come to value most” (p. 30).

And where did those features come from? At the beginning of the last century, the philosopher George Santayana observed that those who did not remember the past were condemned to repeat it. Read on and judge for yourself whether teachers of this grammar have been repeating the past for the last two and a half centuries.
Breaking the Rules
3

Usage: Rules That Do Not Rule (and a Few That Do)

Scholars have always consistently averred that good usage is the only conceivable criterion of good English, but most people still clamor for a heaven-sent standard to measure their words by.

—GEORGE LYMAN KITTRIDGE, SOME LANDMARKS IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR, 1906

Until we recognize the arbitrary nature of our judgments, too many of us will take bad grammar as evidence of laziness, carelessness, or a low IQ. That belief is not just wrong. It is socially destructive.

—JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS, STYLE: TOWARD CLARITY AND GRACE, 1995

In his article, “The Usage Industry,” Tom McArthur (1986) traces the origin of the notion of good English back to 1604, when schoolmaster Robert Cawdrey published his Table Alphabetical of Hard Usual English Words, which was designed for “the linguistically insecure” (says McArthur). Cawdrey specifically addresses himself to “Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskillfull persons” (doesn’t that make your blood boil!), yet according to McArthur, it was not only women who bought the book but members of the rising middle class generally, a group anxious to better themselves by learning “the King’s English.” McArthur contends that such people were prone to be followers and were preyed upon by publishers eager to make money with all kinds of self-improvement books (1986, p. 8). Just visit the language section of your local bookstore and you’ll see that the usage industry is very much alive today and still preying on the insecure. (The most revealing title among the books is Woe Is I, by former New York Times Book Review editor Patricia T. O’Connor. It’s also one of the best and best written of the guides.)
Traditional school grammar (TSG) has left a heritage of prescriptive rules that have little or no basis in the realities of everyday spoken or written language. Put another way, usage—what good writers and speakers actually do—rules too little. But let’s begin by examining the concept of rule in language.

Two Fundamental Kinds of Rules: Descriptive and Prescriptive

As a way of distinguishing two basically different kinds of rules, consider these sentences:

1a. Where is the teacher biology?
1b. Where is the biology teacher at?

No native speaker of English with a fully functioning brain and not under the influence of a medication, say, or lack of sleep, would speak or write a sentence like 1a. The reason is that our brains are wired with rules (see Chapter 1), one of which tells us that modifiers generally precede the headword they modify. This type of rule is often called a descriptive rule, a rule that describes what native speakers of a language customarily do. There are a large but unknown number of such rules. They are used by all native speakers of English. (Some of us are better wired than others: I’ve rarely taught a group of teachers without finding someone who was better wired than I am; and I’ve rarely observed a grammar class in which some students weren’t better wired than their teacher.)

In contrast, no descriptive rule prevents us from speaking sentences like 1b, and indeed, the sentence would be used by many native speakers of English. Those who disapprove of it do so because it “doesn’t sound right” or because they have been taught that it is wrong to end a sentence with a preposition. The rule that prohibits 1b is known as a prescriptive rule. Prescriptive rules tell us what we should do. They are not observed universally.

Here are four basic characteristics of descriptive versus prescriptive rules:

**Descriptive Rules**

1. Universal: Observed by all native speakers of a language
2. Learned unconsciously, wired into the brain
3. Tell what native speakers do in fact
4. Violation causes lack of understanding or misunderstanding of the message

**Prescriptive Rules**

1. Limited: Observed by some native speakers, not by others
2. Learned from various environmental sources
3. Tell what speakers should do
4. Violation causes no misunderstanding; may focus on the messenger
Activity 3–1: Sense versus Nonsense

**Goal:** To help students appreciate the nature of descriptive rules and the fact that they have so many in their heads.

**Procedure**
Write on the chalkboard or overhead projector duplicate pairs of sentences such as these:

A. Dug a has carpet our in cat hole the.
B. Our cat has dug a hole in the carpet.

Clearly, A is ungrammatical, B is grammatical. Ask students why they routinely produce sentences like B and never produce “sentences” like A. The answer is that they have descriptive rules built into their heads. No native speaker ever says he learned to produce sentences like B from a textbook.

Next, list (and discuss, if you wish) some of those descriptive rules by contrasting the two “sentences.” Your rules might include:

1. *our, the, and a* must precede nouns (*cat, carpet, hole*).
2. *has* must precede the verb (*dug*).
3. *in* introduces a noun phrase (*the carpet*).
4. Prepositional phrases (*in the carpet*) follow verb phrases (*has dug*) or noun phrases.
5. Subjects (*our cat*) must precede verb phrases (*has dug*).
6. Objects (*a hole*) must follow verb phrases.

With the exception of the glossary of commonly confused words at the end, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of prescriptive rules, beginning with the issue of a standard for judging linguistic rights and wrongs.

**The Search for a Standard: On Whose Authority?**

If we want to declare something is wrong or incorrect, we need some standard by which to measure. The standard for descriptive rules is clear enough: accurate communication of the message. ("Where’s the teacher biology" is wrong because it does not communicate the intended meaning of the speaker.) What is the standard for prescriptive rules? Early grammarians were conscious of the need to answer this question.

**A Linguistic Academy**

One way to distinguish “correct” speech and writing from incorrect is to institute an academy, a group of linguistic scholars who would be empowered to decide
such matters. Such an academy had been instituted in Italy in 1582 and in France in 1635 (founded in 1634). Although Cawdrey's work was published in 1604, the effort to correct and improve English didn’t really gain momentum until around 1660, when it gathered the backing of some of the most eminent literary figures of the age, including John Evelyn, John Dryden, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, and Jonathan Swift. Perhaps the two best known documents were Defoe's Essay upon Projects of 1697 and Swift's Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue, which appeared in 1712. But nothing significant was done; indeed, fifty years after Swift's Proposal, Bishop Lowth opened his Grammar (1762) with the lament that “no effectual method hath hitherto been taken to redress the grievance which was the object of it [i.e., of Swift's Proposal]” (p. iv).

By Lowth's time, literary figures such as Samuel Johnson and Joseph Priestley had weighed in against this means of establishing authority, but perhaps the most eloquent statement against it was made much later by the Danish grammarian, Otto Jespersen, who wrote in Growth and Structure of the English Language (1905)

... the English [language] is like an English park, which is laid out seemingly without any definite plan, and in which you are allowed to walk everywhere according to your fancy without having to fear a stern keeper enforcing rigorous regulations. The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself.

One wonders how Shakespeare would have fared with an academy peering over his shoulder. And how liberty-loving Americans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would have reacted to an academy proposal. At any rate, the proposal died.

The Lexicographer as Authority

Although the English did not institute an academy to rule on usage matters, they got a good dictionary in 1755. Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language did establish standards where spelling, pronunciation, and word meanings were concerned. (Noah Webster's American Dictionary did the same in this country in 1828.) Dictionaries are authorities on these matters because there is widespread agreement to abide by them. Also, most dictionaries do not prescribe spellings and pronunciations; they merely describe those that exist. My dictionary, for example, lists five distinct spellings and three pronunciations for bogeyman.

But is a dictionary a valid source of authority for correctness in usage?

Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster no doubt knew a great deal about usage, but was there good reason to trust them beyond all others? Suppose they disagreed with each other? And they often did: Webster, for example, approved of noways, but Johnson said it was used only by “ignorant barbarians.”
What if they disagreed with themselves? Johnson approved of *learn* for *teach* in his 1755 edition, but reversed himself, declaring it “obsolete” in his 1785 edition. (Obsolescence apparently can take forever; see the treatment of “learn, teach” in the 2001 *Elements of Language, Sixth Course*, p. 769.)

What if they were way out of the mainstream, and swimming against the current? Johnson, for example, defended double comparisons and comparison of incomparables—such as *perfect*—but thought *banter* was “barbarous” and *con* (*against*) was “despicable cant.” Webster defended *you was* and *who is it for?* He also accused Shakespeare of using barbarisms and “the grossest improprieties.”

In fact, Webster once stated that the people of America “spoke the most pure English now known in the world.” (Had Johnson been alive at the time, one can imagine his roar crossing the Atlantic.) As this comment itself well illustrates, lexicographers of the age were no more likely to be objective in matters of usage than anyone else.

**The Authority of Custom or Usage**

We have already seen (in Chapter 2) that Bishop Lowth, in particular, had no compunctions about criticizing the best writers of his own and earlier times. Nevertheless, he and other grammarians often cited the authority of “usage” or “custom,” by which they meant what educated writers or speakers actually wrote and said. Here, for example, is Lindley Murray’s tribute to what is often called “the doctrine of usage”:

> The practice of the best and most correct writers, or a great majority of them, corroborated by general usage, forms, during its continuance, the standard of language; especially, if, in particular instances, this practice continue, after objection and due consideration. Every connexion and application of words and phrases, thus supported, must therefore be proper, and entitled to respect, if not exceptionable in a moral point of view. . . . With respect to anomalies and variations of language, thus established, it is the grammarian’s business to submit, not to remonstrate. (1795, p. 144)

Though there are more hedges here than in a formal French garden, Murray finally seems to come down on the side of good usage. But as Sterling Leonard notes in his chapter, “The Appeal to Usage and Its Practical Repudiation,” no eighteenth-century grammarian except Joseph Priestley “made the appeal to usage with anything approaching consistency,” and indeed, “the appeal to usage . . . resulted in a complete repudiation of usage” (1929, p. 165).

**To What Authority Did the Eighteenth-Century Grammarians Appeal?**

If even good usage was not truly an authority for the eighteenth-century prescriptive grammarians, what was? According to Leonard, these were the main appeals:
Breaking the Rules

1. Ipse dixit appeals to authority
2. Appeals to supposed parallels in the Latin language, chiefly; sometimes to Greek, French, or Anglo-Saxon
3. Appeals to “reason and analogy” (i.e., logic or grammatical regularity of any kind)

The weakest of these is the first: It’s right because I say so; for after all, who are you? And why should I obey your commandments? But questions like these never seem to trouble true prescriptivists. Goold Brown, for example, who wrote a monumental *Grammar of Grammars* in 1851, purported to have all the answers, and clearly saw himself as the “heaven-sent standard” Kittredge refers to in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. Pooley notes that Brown excoriated every well-known grammarian who preceded him and saw himself as “the messiah to lead the way to a correct and perfect grammar” (1957, p. 28).

The second appeal—to other languages—pitches one upon a very slippery linguistic slope. For example, we might demonstrate through an appeal to the French language that infinitives should not be split (since French infinitives are single words). On the other hand, French routinely uses double negatives. What is the rationale for following the French language for one rule and ignoring it for another? (See other examples of where this appeal would pitch us, at the conclusion of the previous chapter.)

Finally, the third appeal—to reason and grammatical regularities—is full of the deepest pitfalls and potholes. Nothing is truer of languages than that they change. And they change often in unpredictable, irrational ways. Consider the pronoun set:

- I, me, my, myself
- you, you, your, yourself
- we, us, our, ourselves

Then compare these:

- he, him, his, himself
- they, them, their, themselves

If grammatical regularity were a reliable guide, himself and themselves would have to be hisself and theirselves. Mine is another irregularity; the other pronouns in its set all end in -s. Consider also subject-verb agreement in tag sentences like this: “I’m right about that, aren’t I?” I am?

If analogy truly ruled, English teachers would long ago have accepted alright, on the analogy of already and altogether, but even though James Joyce, Flannery O’Connor, and Langston Hughes used it, teachers (and lexicographers) have not
accepted it. For a demonstration of the falsity of appeal to logic, see the next activity.

Activity 3–2: Do Two Negatives Make a Positive? Always?

**Goal:** To demonstrate first-hand that language is not necessarily logical.

**Procedure**
I was always taught that it was wrong to use double negatives, not because it would label me as a person of low socioeconomic status, but because “two negatives make a positive.” Two negatives do make a positive in mathematics, but language is often not logical. The reality in the English language is that two negatives *sometimes* make a positive but more often do not.

You can dramatize this interestingly in the following way. Select two students from the class as “actors” (one will be no more than a prop). Tell everyone in the class to imagine that it is a swelteringly hot mid-summer day and that the first actor is dying of thirst. She is desperate for a soft drink, and happily, there is a drink-dispensing machine nearby. However, she has only a dollar bill and the machine is insisting on the right change.

Instruct the actor with the dollar bill to behave normally at all times. You are standing closest to the machine; the other student is farther away; there is no one else on the scene. If the actor behaves normally, after trying the machine, she will ask you if you have change for a dollar. You respond by saying, “I don’t have no change.” The student will move on and ask the same question of the student who is standing farther away from the machine.

The point is that, although you have violated the double-negative rule, the student understands perfectly well that you are denying her request; that is, the violation of the double-negative rule causes no misunderstanding. That’s because it’s a prescriptive rather than a descriptive rule. Point out, if necessary, that if two negatives *really* made a positive, the student would offer you the dollar bill, expecting change. (I have tried this experiment many, many times and have *never* had a student act this way, not even in jest.)

Of course, it is true that two negatives *sometimes* make a positive. If you altered the intonation of your voice: “I don’t have NO change,” it might be interpreted as a positive. The remarkable thing is that the human mind is capable of deciding when two negatives do make a positive, and when they do not. Most of the time, it’s the latter.

**Standard English**

In the search for authority, perhaps nothing has been more final and yet more controversial than the notion of *standard English*. We know, of course, that that band
of people who invaded England in 449 A.D. and rapidly spread their language (Old English) across the island in all directions did not arrive speaking standard English. In fact, what is called standard English developed from the East Midlands dialect that William Caxton used in his publications. It evolved alongside dialects that eventually became relegated to regional status. It was merely one of many dialects. And it still is. If it is superior to others, it is so because of its prestige, not because of any innate superiority.

Defining standard English is not easy, and quarrels about what is and what is not “standard” appear to be endless. But according to the editors of The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language, linguists agree on these three things about the standard:

1. It is most easily identified in printed materials.
2. It is generally used by English-language news broadcasters.
3. It relates to social class and level of education, and is often considered to “match the average level of attainment of students who have finished secondary-level schooling.” (1996, p. 903)

Standard English, then, in America, would be the English of Well-Edited American Prose (WEAP); that is, the English of editors at such institutions as Alfred A. Knopf and The New York Times. Especially when we are referring to the spoken standard, it is the English of our major news broadcasters. Broadly, it is the dialect of educated speakers, of those who “run things.”

In no other respect is it more important for English teachers to “only look (or listen) and connect.” If standard English is the language of The New York Times and Alfred A. Knopf editors and radio and television news broadcasters, then that is it. Sure, even a broadcasting dean or a Times editor may slip occasionally, but if we hear or read words or expressions on a regular basis in these media, then they are standard English, whether we like it or not. There is no higher appeal, no academy here, no Pope of the Word.

In our looking and listening, we English teachers may often need to be more conscious than we sometimes are of two basic principles:

1. There are significant differences between written and spoken standard English, and we should not hold speakers to the same standards as writers.
2. There are major differences between relaxed standard and more uptight standard English. Even Edwin Newman must loosen his tongue along with his tie after work.
Is standard English, then, the certainty grammarians have long sought? Is any given word, phrase, or structure correct if it can be found in the standard English dialect and incorrect if it cannot?

So many people think so that it would be foolish to ignore them. Nevertheless, a little thought should convince anyone that it is not always simply a matter of correct versus incorrect. (Sometimes, it is. See the glossary of commonly confused words at the end of this chapter.) There are often degrees of correctness, and they run in a continuum, from what have been called status-marking errors on the one extreme to “errors” recognized as erroneous only by those who get their authority from celestial spheres on the other. Consider the following by way of example:

2a. I seen them yesterday.
2b. I’ve got the latest CD.

The rule violated in Sentence 2a is, of course, that saw, not seen, is the standard past tense form of the verb to see. When a word or phrase sharply differentiates educated from uneducated speakers, we will call that expression a status-marking error.

A linguist once observed that there is not two cents worth of difference between “I seen them yesterday” and “I saw them yesterday”—except the I-saw-them people run the schools. It’s a clever remark, and it’s true that both sentences mean the same thing. But the fact that the I-saw-them people run the schools (and a good deal else besides) is of no small consequence.

We can bewail the fact that there are expressions that divide native speakers of English from one another (I do), but it is impossible to escape that fact. It’s impossible to escape the fact that regular use of nonstandard English in the larger society is likely to handicap the user, economically and socially.

Sentence 2b uses a contracted form of the phrase have got. That this is not a status-marking error may be established by listening to the daily speech of any educated person. You will find have got in WEAP sources as well. (See the glossary of mythrules later in this chapter for further comment on this item.) To outlaw this is to play messiah. I call it a mythrule. Specifically, a usage mythrule is a rule that someone believes should be followed by educated speakers of the language, but which is generally not followed by them.

Characteristics of Nonstandard English

We have said, borrowing the term from Maxine Hairston (1981), that the sharpest divergences from the standard may be characterized as status-marking errors. It is
appropriate to describe some of them. They have been given various names, but *nonstandard* seems the most neutral.

1. **Nonstandard verb forms.** Some of these are nonstandard past-tense forms of irregular verbs, such as *brung* for *brought*; and nonstandard past participial forms, such as *had went* for *had gone*. Also nonstandard is using a regular ending on an irregular verb, such as *gowed* for *grew*. We are not talking here of items like *lie*/*lay*, which sometimes make even well-educated people throw up their hands; and of course, we are not talking about cases where either of two forms may be used by educated speakers, such as the past tense of *sing*, which may be either *sang* or *sung*.

2. **Double negatives and comparatives.** It’s true that double negatives and double comparatives were defended by Samuel Johnson and were once used by our best writers: Chaucer and Shakespeare, for example. It’s also true that two negatives very often do not make a positive—the second merely intensifies the first (see Activity 3–2). Nevertheless, this is one area where the prescriptive grammarians have prevailed. For the last two centuries, speakers and writers of standard English have eschewed both the double negative and the double comparative (*more* *better*, *most* *unkindest*). Quasi double negatives such as *can’t* *hardly*/*scarcely* *should* probably also be listed under this heading.

3. **Some subject-verb disagreements.** If we listen carefully to the speech of well-educated persons, perhaps even to ourselves, we will hear subject-verb disagreements from time to time, particularly when the verb is distant from its subject. But when verbs immediately follow their subjects, speakers of standard English rarely disagree. We would list as status-marking errors such items as *we was* for *we were*, *she have* for *she has*, and *he don’t* rather than *he doesn’t*. The dropping of the -*s* on most third-person, present tense verbs probably also belongs here, though this usage is deeply ingrained in some dialects, and it poses a special problem for many Asians, who have no such inflectional endings in their native languages.

4. **Some incorrect pronouns.** In standard English, object pronouns are not used as subjects, for the most part, and vice versa. The use of *them* as a substitute for *these* or *those* is another example of nonstandard speech: “I’d like one of them books.”

5. **Some adjectives for adverbs.** When a sentence ends with an adverb that modifies the whole predicate rather than the complement alone, standard English speakers use the adverbial form: “We go to soccer games regularly.” Most English teachers also claim that *really* (not *real*) should be used as a modifier of adjectives.
6. Miscellaneous words and phrases. Ain’t, ways attached to words like any and some, this here, learn for teach, and perhaps had ought, hisself, and regardless, though some would consider some of these regional rather than nonstandard (see comments below), are often considered nonstandard English. Could of, should of, would of, and so on, are nonstandard in writing, but the pronunciation of for ’ve is common in everyone’s speech.

Further Observations on Nonstandard English

As stated, there are degrees of correctness within standard English and, as noted, large differences exist between standard written and spoken English and between relaxed and uptight standard. What about nonstandard English? Can the same things be said about it? More importantly, do speakers of standard English sometimes use nonstandard?

If some of the following comments appear irreverent, I can only plead the irreverence of observation.

Ain’t

From time to time, people get into a huff about certain words or phrases and try to ban them from the language. Hopefully is a recent example of a failure to win a ban, but sometimes, as with ain’t, the ban succeeds. Though it was used for centuries by educated speakers—aín’t can be found, for example, in written texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and “Mystery Theatre” watchers have heard it in the speech of the ultra-sophisticated Lord Peter Whimsey—it has been stigmatized “beyond any possibility of rehabilitation,” according to the American Heritage Dictionary.

One might observe, however, that this judgment applies to the unselfconscious use of ain’t. When we know that a speaker “knows better,” many of us do not necessarily find the word objectionable. (I once sat for an hour listening to a nationally famous authority in the field of reading who must have used ain’t at least three dozen times. He was clearly using it as a sort of folksy emphatic, but he did it so often that, frankly, I grew quite tired of it—and of him. But I didn’t for a moment judge him illiterate.)

Ain’t is also more common in some sections of the country than in others, and appears to be more acceptable in everyday conversation in those areas—though probably not at afternoon tea parties. It is also informally used in England, as a substitute for am not. It is common in popular music—and we’re not talking only about rap or country. Golden Oldies and show tunes use it frequently. Finally, it is common in phrases such as “You ain’t seen nothing yet” (used often by Al Gore in
the 2000 presidential campaign), “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” “You ain’t just whistling Dixie,” and others.

Anyway

I insert this item—which the original (1941) Harbrace labeled as a vulgarism for anyway—not because I wish to contradict the notion that it is nonstandard, but because it was used regularly in speech by a highly intelligent and well-educated daughter of highly intelligent, well-educated parents. She was, furthermore, a great editor for a major publisher. I don’t know how or why it became a staple of her speech, but it certainly did not brand her as a speaker of nonstandard English. We are all entitled to some eccentricities.

Irregardless

In some people’s minds, the prefix ir- in irregardless must mean not, the suffix -less must mean without, and on that basis, they argue that irregardless is a double negative. But is it? If someone said to me in a conversation, “I don’t believe you, irregardless of your credentials,” I doubt very much that I would think the speaker was saying something positive about my credentials. Two of the most sophisticated, literate, and well-educated people I know use this word. One used it in a lengthy article, as recently as 1999; he is a long-time college English professor. The other, a writer by profession, says he learned it in his childhood and will never give it up. (I grew up in the same neighborhood, but didn’t learn it. Figure that.)

I suppose all dictionaries label irregardless as nonstandard. The OED (Second Edition, 1989) says it’s “chiefly North American” and “in nonstandard or humorous use.” Some might say this shows how little they know about what’s happening on this side of the Atlantic, but I won’t quarrel with that characterization, in spite of my friends. However, those who fly into a rage over it and claim, “There is no such word,” are clearly misguided.

Real for Really

“You’re a real good friend” is supposed to be nonstandard English, but keep your eyes and ears open on this one. On March 22, 2002, in The New York Times, I read: “. . . best news to hit this city in a real long time.” This was written by the reporter; it was not quoted dialogue.

Me and My Friends Are. . . .

The expression “me and my friends” (and variants, with nouns other than friends) as subject of a sentence really upsets many speakers of standard English—especially older speakers, who often reject it outright as an illiteracy. I know this well, since I was one of them. (No good English teacher objects to “me and my friends” as an
I modified my position when, at the urging of my friend and colleague, Hans P. Guth, I listened to the speech of well-educated people—particularly of young people. Hans argued that it was perfectly good informal English. Well, I did listen, and I heard object pronouns in subject territory frequently in the speech of a wide range of people, including Ivy League college graduates. When I recently reminded my son that he used it after graduation from college, this is what he wrote:

The phrase came into my mind, completely separate from our discussions, just last night when I was describing some of the antics my friends and I were involved in years ago. My first impulse was actually to say “me and my friends” but I halted myself because I knew it did not sound proper with an educated audience (our friends Jeff and Julie, who went to good schools in Boston). If I was with other people last night I might actually have used the phrase, and that is at age 45 with hopefully a university professorship in my near future! Old habits die hard.

I do feel that I first and most often used the phrase with Bobby and Tommy years ago and knew even then that it was not proper English. But kids, particularly in conversation with each other, couldn’t care less about using proper English. And yes, although I do not remember the instance you recall, I expect that my Columbia friends (Tim, Charlie, Mark) and I did use the phrase frequently in informal conversation. They probably grew up using it in their neighborhoods; it was widespread kidspeak. I clearly remember a Columbia classmate who eventually became a nuclear physicist often bragging, employing one-upmanship, starting sentences with “Oh yeah, well me and my friends . . .”.

I was startled last night to find that the phrase was actually still stored in the back of my head!

Notice that Bill wrote (twice) “my friends and I.” There seems to be a disjuncture between the phrase in speech and in writing—at least for users of standard English. “Me and my X” is in the air, so to speak, and it has been for a long time. Do you remember the song, “Me and My Shadow,” in which the structure is used as a subject in many lines? It was written in 1927, by Billy Rose, with music by Al Jolson and Dave Dreyer. More recently (2002), the distinguished editor, Herman Gollob, published Me and Shakespeare. Novelist Jane Smiley entitled one of her New York Times Magazine articles, “The Dream Factory: Me and My Product.” (Within her article, however, Ms. Smiley wrote “The skirt and I did talk about engineering a takeover,” not “The skirt and me” [March 12, 2000, p. 36].)

Some linguistic justification for this usage has been offered by Steven Pinker (1994), who observes that me and my friends is an example of a headless structure. It is not the same as any of its parts. The fact that me and my friends is the subject
of a sentence does not mean that either me or my friends is a subject. The whole phrase is the subject. T.S. Eliot used a similar headless structure in his famous line, “Let us go then, you and I.” Here, the headless you and I is presumably in apposition to us: “Let us [you and I] go then.” Since us is an object case pronoun, should Eliot have written you and me? I think most English teachers would agree that he should not.

To test for pronoun correctness, textbook authors and teachers often recommend that students drop and the other words in the subject and try the pronoun by itself. Note how this might work:

Sentence tested: Me and my friends are walking together.
Deletion test (A): Me are walking together.

Since we would not say this, it supposedly proves that Me is incorrect. However, look what happens when we try I:

Deletion test (B): I are walking together.

This doesn’t work either, proving that “I and my friends (or My friends and I) are walking together” is also incorrect—even though it isn’t.

I believe WEAP editors would not let a me and my friends subject noun phrase get by, even if an Ivy League graduate did write it, but in the oral language, the structure remains “widespread kidspeak,” as my son put it (though I’ve caught adults using it, too), and judging by the college freshmen I’ve been teaching during three decades, it is peculiarly resistant to change.

The Double Negative

Although the unselfconscious use of double negatives is characteristic of non-standard English, there is a lot more at the bottom of this issue than one might suppose. Let’s stir it up.

Robert Lowth was the first, I believe, to maintain that “Two negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative.” He gives several illustrations of double negatives from Shakespeare in his footnotes, and calls the latter’s usage a “relique of the antient style,” which is “now obsolete” (1775, p. 93). What a small distance into the future he saw.

In Activity 3–2, there is one situation in which two negatives were not perceived as making a positive. Here is another:

Assume you are checking student homework. If one of your students casually says, “I didn’t do no homework,” you immediately understand that he did none, and grade him accordingly. (Two negatives do not make a positive.) But with a different inflection of his voice—something like, “I didn’t do NO homework”—he
would be denying that he did none, implying that he did at least some. (Two negatives do make a positive.)

I’m a Sinatra fan (and wish that all of us articulated as well as he did). One of my earliest memories of his work is the ballad “All or Nothing at All,” which he recorded with Harry James in 1939. It contains a line in which he says there is no in between. When he recorded the song again in 1966, he sang, there ain’t no in between. Did Sinatra change his mind about there being an in between? Obviously not. In this case, the added ain’t strengthens no; it does not negate it.

Another example of one negative intensifying another is seen in such sentences as these:

No, I didn’t commit the crime.
No judge would think the speaker was pleading guilty.

Or consider an angry lover who says, “I never, never want to see you again.” Any rejected lover would not treat this as a positive, nor would she be likely to correct the speaker by saying, “You mean you never ever want to see me again.”

Here’s a similar pair (borrowed from usage experts Bergen and Cornelia Evans). Is there any difference between the double negative of the first sentence and the single negative of the second?

He couldn’t sleep, not even with a sedative.
He couldn’t sleep, even with a sedative.

On the other hand, two negatives—even without any special inflection—often do make a positive, as in these examples from The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language:

It’s not unlikely [i.e., it’s likely] that I’ll come.
You can’t not admire them. [i.e., you must admire]

The fact is that the line between standard and nonstandard English rules for negation can be very slight. What’s the difference, Steven Pinker asks, between

I didn’t buy any lottery tickets and
I didn’t buy no lottery tickets?

The slim difference is that standard English adopted any as the agreement element, whereas nonstandard adopted no. The French went a different route. In standard French, the double negative is used routinely: “Ce n’est pas mal” means “It’s not bad,” but it translates literally: “It not is not bad.” “C’est pas mal” is nonstandard French. (For a good discussion of how the double negative arose in the French language, see McWhorter’s The Power of Babel (2001), pp. 26–27.)
None of this is meant to deny that the unselfconscious use of most double negatives is nonstandard. If you want to be categorized as ill educated, few things would get you there quicker than consistent use of double negatives.

The Double Comparison

When declining adjectives and adverbs, it is standard either to prefix *more/most* or to attach the suffixes *-er/-est*. To use both is to be guilty of the double comparison error: “I like swimming more better now.”

But recall the speech of Shakespeare’s Mark Anthony, referring to Brutus’ stabbing of Caesar:

That was the most unkindest cut of all.

It is, even today, a memorable and moving line, and I suspect that no one but a very narrow minded grammarian would find it otherwise. The *most* before the superlative *unkindest* simply intensifies its force. It did so in Shakespeare’s time. It does so today.

Yet many decades after Shakespeare, grammarians found such structures to be “double comparisons” (technically, it’s a double superlative here) and legislated them out of existence in standard English. They did so on the ground that it was illogical to do the same job twice. It should be “most unkind cut” or “unkindest cut.” No need for both “most” and “-est.” The problem with this apparently solid conclusion is that, once again, a natural language is not necessarily logical, nor need it be.

What Should Teachers Do About Nonstandard Speech?

I speak a dialect, you speak a dialect, all God’s children speak dialects, because as linguist John McWhorter (2001) says, dialects are all there is/are/be. I grew up speaking a Philadelphia dialect, one that has several nonstandard features (“Yo, youse guys, how ‘bout them Iggles!”). Although I went to a Catholic elementary school where I was taught by nuns for eight years and went on to a fine public high school, several elements of the dialect remained with me. Then, in college, I promptly fell in love with a professor’s daughter, and she literally kicked the dialect out of me within days. Every time I would use a nonstandard expression, she’d boot me in the shins. “We don’t talk like that,” she’d say. In short order, I didn’t talk like that either.

Today, I speak standard English, most of the time (not on the golf course). Yet some years after I had graduated from college, when I was driving a cab in Philadelphia, the dialect came in handy. I shifted from my standard English whenever my fare spoke Philadelphian—and got much better tips as a result.
I tell this story as a prelude to the following observations about ways of dealing with kids who don’t “know the rules.”

1. Regardless of the dialect someone speaks, his language will have far more in common with standard English than differences from it. He will put determiners in front of nouns; he will put phrasal modifiers after nouns; he will put subjects before verbs and objects after them; and so on and on. In other words, he will follow bedrock grammar rules. The job of learning standard English is not necessarily difficult. It’s not a foreign language, after all. And many of the kids who don’t know it already speak at least one foreign language.

2. However, I was instructed by good people for twelve years, without much effect on some aspects of my dialect. Within about two weeks, Christine had done the job. This points up the powerful influence of motivation (see my comments about court reporter students before the glossary of commonly confused words later in the chapter), and perhaps it also says something about the social nature of learning. (For some good activities designed to promote motivation for students to learn the standard dialect, see Larry Andrews’ Language Exploration and Awareness: A Resource Book for Teachers.)

3. We must begin by respecting the students’ own dialect. During what some chose to characterize as the Eubonics plague a few years back, you’d have thought that African-American Vernacular English was some kind of disease, but it isn’t, and those who use it communicate perfectly well with others who do. The notion that any dialect is rule-less is absurd. It’s difficult enough to change habits learned at the mother’s knee and reinforced by everyone in the child’s home environment; we must not make it even more difficult by acting as if our students were linguistic failures for not having learned “proper English.” Our students must respect their own linguistic aptitude, as Mina Shaughnessy (1977) insists, and see that mastering standard English is a matter of staking a claim to the language of public transactions—educational, civic, and professional. It shouldn’t be seen as disloyal to or destructive of their native culture.

Activity 3–3: Code Switching and Respecting Students’ Dialects

**Goal:** To promote the use of standard English in students who speak other dialects.

**Procedure**

*Code switching* refers to changing one’s dialect, depending on circumstances. As I have pointed out, as a cab driver, I switched codes depending on my passengers.
Some good work to encourage code switching in elementary school students is being done by Rebecca Wheeler (2001) and teachers who work with her in the Virginia Peninsula. (Some similar activities are used in various urban school systems.) Rather than follow the correctionist approach, they observe the contrast between the rules of the students’ dialect (called home speech) and the rules of standard English (school speech). Here are two examples of contrasting rules, from third-grade teacher Rachel’s class:

**Example One: Possession**

**Home Speech:** Christopher family moved to Spain.

(Rule: The possessor appears next to and before what is possessed.)

**School Speech:** Christopher’s family moved to Spain.

(Rule: Possession is shown by adding ‘s to the possessor.)

**Example Two: Plurality**

**Home Speech:** I have two sister and two brother.

(Rule: Plurality is shown by numbers before the nouns.)

**School Speech:** I have two sisters and two brothers.

(Rule: Plurality is shown by adding -s to nouns. Note: The standard English rule here requires the speaker to be redundant.)

Students are not expected to use school speech on all occasions—we all vary our speech somewhat, depending on the occasion. But they are taught to code switch when the occasion demands it. Taking state tests is one good example of such an occasion.

You can easily make up your own activities along these lines, always beginning by noting that the dialect of your students does follow rules. Linguist Johanna Rubba comments on this method:

An approach to teaching that recognizes students’ home speech as rule-following and valuable in its own context, and compares it with standard English as an equal rather than as an inferior, makes the children feel valued as well. When their native intelligence is not denigrated by suggesting that they have learned English poorly, their confidence about learning another variety is boosted. (personal email communication)

**Activity 3–4: Third-Person, Present Tense Subject-Verb Agreement**

**Goal:** To help students learn standard English subject-verb agreement in the third person, present tense.
Procedure
Begin by writing on the board or duplicating a number of relatively “bare-bones” sentences, such as those that follow. In each case, I have italicized the subject and the part of the verb phrase that controls agreement. You may or may not wish to do that.

Our TV set works now.
Our TV sets work now.
The boys stand on the corner every afternoon.
The boy stands on the corner every afternoon.
The new teachers don't like interruptions.
The new teacher doesn't like interruptions.
My aunt has come to visit.
My aunts have come to visit.

Invite your students to divide each sentence in half, at the most natural place. You should get

Our TV set / works now.
Our TV sets / work now.
The boys / stand on the corner.
The boy / stands on the corner.
The new teachers / don't like interruptions.
The new teacher / doesn't like interruptions.
My aunt / has come to visit.
My aunts / have come to visit.

This separates the subject part of the sentence from its predicate, and since we have excluded modifiers after the subject and before the verb, the subject will be the word directly to the left of the slanted line and the verb or the auxiliary that carries agreement will be directly to the right.

Ask the students what observations they can make about these two words. The expected answer is that when the subject ends in -s, the verb or auxiliary does not; and when the subject does not end in -s, the verb does. I call this the -s, no s; no s, -s principle of standard English.

You might ask students to pronounce carefully pairs of sentences, like these:

Our set works. The boy stands. The teacher doesn't like.
Our sets work. The boys stand. The teachers don't like.
To conclude, ask students to substitute pronouns for the noun subjects. They will find that the -s verb goes with the pronouns she, he, and it; the uninflected verb goes with they.

**LESSON EXTENSION**

As you know, the -s, no s; no s, -s principle works only if the subject noun has an -s plural form (which means that it works for probably ninety percent of all the nouns in the language). For nouns with irregular plurals—man/men, child/children, mouse/mice—the speaker has to learn that the singular form calls for a verb in -s; the plural form calls for a verb without the -s.

**LESSON FOOTNOTES**

1. Students who regularly use nonstandard verb forms may have special difficulty pronouncing verbs that end in certain consonant clusters—asks, expects, and takes, for example—and may avoid the added -s for that reason.

2. Teachers interested in a superb discussion of this and similar problems of nonstandard speakers or writers will find it—along with a great deal of good exercise material—in Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors & Expectations*. See her Chapter 4 especially.

3. With past-tense verbs (except be) and with modal auxiliaries, subject-verb agreement is automatic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past Tense</th>
<th>Modal Auxiliary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our TV set worked yesterday.</td>
<td>Our TV set <em>will</em> not work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our TV sets worked yesterday.</td>
<td>Our TV sets <em>will</em> not work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Overwhelmingly Negative and Arbitrary Attitudes of the Tradition**

One of the problems with the TSG tradition is that it finds usage errors in every kitchen cabinet and corner, making the task of learning standard English seem almost insurmountable, even for speakers whose dialect is much closer to the standard than are those of many of our students. Moreover, the *attitude* toward those who use less than “proper” speech is appallingly negative. Here, for example, are Hodges’ comments on the 280 usage errors in the Glossary of the first edition (1941) of the *Harbrace Handbook of English*:

- absurd
- avoid
- bad
- careless
- faulty
- illiterate
- illogical
- impermissible
- not proper
- overworked
- provincial
- questionable
Talk about sinners in the hands of an angry God (see Chapter 4). One can only wish our vocabulary of praise were half so extensive.

Yet in the 1998 Glossary of the same handbook, this huge 280-item catalogue has dwindled to 156 errors. That’s a reduction of 124 errors, or forty-four percent. However, ninety-one of the 156 are new errors, errors not recognized in the 1941 edition. This means that from mid-century to end-century only sixty-five errors survived.

Does the reduction mean that speakers stopped making the other errors? Yes, in a few cases, assuming they were errors in the first place. In 2003, we don’t often hear *gent* for *gentleman* (which *Harbrace* labeled “a vulgarism” in 1941), but for the most part the “errors” of 1941 have become standard English in 2002.

Here is a little quiz. How many usage errors do you find in the following sentences?

- The philosopher was born in the second century A.D.
- Did you put the ad in the newspaper?
- After having eaten his dinner, he left.
- All of the trees were bare.
- They bought bread and also butter.
- Every place I go, I see her face.
- We are not as young as we used to be.
- The bus arrived at about noon.
- Park your auto in the lot.
- My dog was awfully sick yesterday.

Most people, given this “test,” find few or no errors. Yet the 1941 *Harbrace* found one in every sentence. And these are from the entries under “A” only. The “errors” in the ten sentences were labeled, respectively, absurd (because it means “in the second century in the year of our Lord”), colloquial (should be *advertisement*), redundant (cut *after*), colloquial (should be *all the trees*), weak (cut *also*), vulgar (every *place* should be *everywhere*), careless (the first *as* should be *so*), redundant (cut *at*), not proper in formal writing (should be *automobile*), and slang (*awfully*).
The sixty-five errors that survive into this century are a mixed bag. Some are distinctly nonstandard items, such as *ain't* and *learn for teach*. Some are confusing pairs, such as *accept/except* and *affect/effect*. Some others are perennial difficult-to-master verbs, such as *lie/lay*, *rise/raise*, and *sit/set*. And finally, there are miscellaneous items like *and etc.*, *fewer/less*, *good/well*, *like, as, as if*, and *try and*.

Although they are talking about the written rather than the spoken language, Connors and Lunsford (1988) make this cogent observation about teachers’ ideas about errors, “[They] have always been absolute products of their times and cultures” (p. 399).

The list of errors in the original *Warriner’s*, by the way, is very similar to *Harbrace’s*, though they are fewer in number. Several of these items are discussed in the sections that follow.

I will say more about the rules-and-error mania in Chapter 4, but whenever I think about spoken usage, I get a sick feeling. Notions like *superiority* and *inferiority*, *security* and *insecurity*, and all sorts of ideas related to *class* flash in my mind. “What good is learning a rule if all we can do is obey it?” Joseph Williams (1997, p. 20) asked some time ago, and the question has haunted me for years. Too many of us want not simply to learn rules, but to enforce them, to lord ourselves over others.

I don’t want to do that, and I don’t want the profession to which I have devoted most of my adult life to stand for that. In that spirit, I offer my Glossary of Bêtes Noires and Mythrules, all of which deal with “rules” that are largely ignored by educated and careful writers, and even more so by educated and careful speakers. My *On the Other Hand* comments speak to the fact that the whole matter of usage is far more subtle than TSG makes it out to be.

I do not mean to suggest that people who react against certain uses of language are necessarily ill tempered or ill willed. Even more so, I am aware that people do abuse language and should be criticized for it. If you want to consider language abuse, look at the National Council of Teachers of English Doublespeak Awards, which are given out each November at the annual convention of the organization. The Committee might criticize the Pentagon for glamorizing war (“Operation Desert Storm”) or for attempting to defend the indefensible—for example, by calling napalm bombs “anti-personnel ordinance,” or naming the killing of innocent children “collateral damage.” These are linguistic abuses that ought to be criticized. I’m not aware of Doublespeak ever giving an award to someone who wrote *like* for *as* or who used *irregardless*.

A Word About Usage Guides and Textbooks

I’ve long believed that every practicing English teacher ought to have an up-to-date usage manual right next to her dictionary. Modern dictionaries append usage
notes to entries and have usage panels, but individual books often go into more
detail.

Up-to-date is a critical modifier, since usage changes, sometimes on relatively
short notice. A good example would be the word hopefully. In 1969, this word used
as a sentence adverb was accepted by forty-four percent of The American Heritage
Usage Panel. In 1992, only twenty-seven percent of the Panel accepted it. It’s my
best guess, based on listening to well-educated speakers, that the percentage will
turn sharply the other way the next time a poll is taken.

Probably the most famous usage guide is the first one organized as a diction-
ary and the first that used the term usage in its title: H. W. Fowler’s A Dictionary
Fowler’s, written by Margaret Nicholson, appeared in 1957. (This has been out of
print for some time.) The original Fowler was lightly edited by Sir Ernest Gowers
and published in 1965. While certainly not a reliable guide to contemporary usage,
remains an interesting book, and it contains some historical information not
always found in current guides.

Usage guides go in and out of print so often that I hesitate to recommend any
specific one. I look for authors who have spent much of their lives in the study of
usage. It’s also interesting to compare usage guides with one another.

It is particularly important that English teachers below the college level not
rely on their textbooks for usage opinions. As the contrast between the back-
grounds of Robert Lowth, with his many advanced degrees, and Lindley Murray,
who left off schooling at age eleven, dramatically illustrates, textbook writers have
always been a very mixed lot. In today’s market, moreover, major publishing
houses frequently farm out large sections of textbooks to what are called “devel-
opment houses.” In these places, an editor is hooked up by telephone, fax, FedEx,
or whatever, to anonymous worker bees who produce manuscript at x-dollars per
page. This farming out is probably more often done with the grammar, mechanics,
and usage sections of texts than with others because these parts are perceived as
fixed or unchanging. Development-house editors themselves may be well-qualified
individuals in many respects (I know a couple who are very well qualified), but
they are not likely to be usage authorities, and those who work under them are
often even less likely to possess up-to-date knowledge of usage or grammar.

All this is not to say that a decent textbook can’t be produced in a develop-
ment house, an even better book perhaps than comes from the hand of a named
author. But where the named author fails, at least we have someone to blame for
the failure. To whom do we look if a book produced in a development house fails?

Of course, that’s assuming the author actually wrote the book. Unfortunately,
we can never tell for sure from the cover who wrote it. As we have seen, most of
the books bearing Warriner’s name were not written by him, and this “tradition,”
while by no means universal (Hans Guth always wrote his textbooks), is not at all uncommon. I once asked Theodore Hornberger, who was on my dissertation committee and who was a long-time chief author of *The United States in Literature* volume in the best-selling Scott Foresman series, how much he had to do with the book. He responded, “I make a few suggestions, now and then.” The book was mainly written by Foresman editors. And James Reid at Harcourt had at various times more editors in his stable than Pimlico has horses.

A few years ago, I met a young man at an NCTE convention who was a “writer” on a well-known series of books dealing with composition. He told me he had been ordered to “stay away from the authors.” It was clear that the “authors” were not expected to write, and the writers were not authors. Welcome to textbook publishers’ Wonderland.

### A Glossary of Bêtes Noires and Mythrules

In his discussion of usage, Joseph M. Williams (1995, 1997) creates a special category of error that he calls a *bête noire* (literally “black beast” in French). He defines it as a so-called rule that is “largely capricious, with no foundation in logic or linguistic efficiency,” but that nevertheless arouses a particularly fierce ire in many people. It is the ferocity that the word or phrase generates that is the chief defining condition distinguishing bêtes noires from other usage errors. Perhaps the most common bête noire during this generation is the word *hopefully*. Around the time I graduated from college, we had *finalize*.

And of course there have been others. I remember a time while my children were still in secondary school that the phrasal verb *sleep over* became a local bête noire. So strenuously was the English Department—or at least several members of it—against it that teachers swore on their red pens to slash it out of existence. The regional newspaper took up the cause as well, maintaining that only the cartoon character Snoopy truly slept over. Children might sleep overnight at one another’s houses, but *sleep over* by itself made no sense. *Sleep over what*? the crusaders demanded to know.

The dust has long since settled on this bête noire, but it settled over a little corner of the English Department, not the tomb of the expression. *Sleep over* is recognized as a phrasal verb in current dictionaries without any usage label, leaving one wondering what all the fuss was about. In the list to follow, the first three items qualify as bêtes noires; the rest are what I call *mythrules*.

#### Different From/Than

Not all bêtes noires die as quickly as *sleep over* did. The question of whether one should say or write *different from* or *different than* has been with us since the mid-
Usage: Rules That Do Not Rule (and a Few That Do)

eighteenth century at least, and it still survives in the most recent Harbrace, in the following form:

Both [different from and different than] are widely used, although different from is generally preferred in formal writing (1998, G6).

The condemnations seem to be growing softer, however, and perhaps this distinction will finally go the way of sleep over.

Like, As, As If

I'm old enough to recall the cigarette ad, “Winston tastes good like a cigarette should,” and to remember what a tizzy that like caused. It went on for a couple of decades, as I remember, and though the slogan is long dead, many still mightily object to conjunctive like.

This is all the more curious because writers from Chaucer’s time on have used like as a conjunction and no eighteenth-century grammarian condemned this usage.

Here is a passage from an essay published in Harper’s, one of our most reputable magazines. Furthermore, the article was written by David Foster Wallace, who is a self-confessed SNOOT (Syntax Noodnicks Of Our Time) about language. He is talking about Bryan A. Garner, the author of A Dictionary of Modern American Usage.

His argumentative strategy is totally brilliant and totally sneaky, and part of both qualities is that it doesn’t seem like [italics mine] there’s even an argument going on at all. (“Tense Present,” p. 57)

The phrase “like I (you, she, he) said,” in particular, is as standard in the speech of educated Americans as standard gets. “As I said” identifies one as stuffy or overly self-conscious.

On the Other Hand

Although my advice would be to ease up on like for as if in speech, it is a different matter in writing. The famous New Yorker editor William Maxwell once advised an author, “Write as if you wish to be understood by an unusually bright 10-year-old.” It is unlikely that he would have written, “Write like . . .”. I find myself as a writer often asking whether my likes would sound better as as ifs, and if they would, I change them.

Hopefully

Hopefully is supposed to be used only as an adverb, meaning “in a hopeful manner.” It is not to be used to replace a phrase like “I hope” or “It is to be hoped.” But consider these sentences:
Thankfully, she stepped on the brakes in time.
Fortunately, she stepped on the brakes in time.
Blessedly, she stepped on the brakes in time.
Happily, she stepped on the brakes in time.
Hopefully, she stepped on the brakes in time.

Does anyone really believe that the last must mean that she stepped on the brakes in a hopeful manner? The force of analogy does win, sometimes, in language, and it seems to be winning on this one.

**Split Infinitives**

**Mythrule:** Do not insert other words between the infinitive marker *to* and the verb form that follows it. Example: *to deny* is the infinitive form of the verb *deny*; *to actually deny* or *to forcefully deny* are deemed split infinitives.

Curiously, Sterling Leonard (1929) found no objections to the split infinitive among eighteenth-century grammarians, and he calls it “both a discovery and an aversion of nineteenth century grammarians” (p. 95). The rationale for this non-rule is supposedly that the infinitive is considered a single word—as it is in fact in such languages as Latin, French, and Spanish—and that one should not cleave this word in two. Historically, the infinitive marker *to* was actually a preposition meaning “toward,” and thus there was nothing to split. However, the prepositional force of the infinitive *to* was lost as early as the fourteenth century, and today there remains no prepositional force at all.

While literate writers and most editors now split infinitives remorselessly, many language watchers still take this mythrule seriously. In a 1986 survey of letters sent to the BBC radio series *English Now*, the split infinitive ranked number two in a list of listeners’ complaints. (Number one was the *I* in between *you* and *I.*) Randolph Quirk comments, “There is no feature of usage on which critical native reaction more frequently focuses” than the split infinitive (1985, p. 497). However, Quirk also points out that infinitives often *should be split*, particularly when not to split them leads to artificiality or ambiguity.

Closer to home, in the 1959 edition of *The Elements of Style*, Strunk says the split infinitive “is for the most part avoided by the careful writer,” but in the fifth chapter of the same edition, which was added by E. B. White, we read that “some infinitives seem to improve on being split.” In the 2000 edition, White’s comment is retained, but Strunk’s is modified, allowing for splitting if “the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb.”

Try the following little “test” with the English teachers on your staff—after trying it yourself. Insert the word given in brackets in the sentences below into the
most natural place next to or inside of the italicized infinitives. How many infinitives did you split?

I want you to tell it like it is. [really]
I’d like to know an opera star. [actually]
He’s the last person to consider being dishonest. [ever]

On the Other Hand

Perhaps precisely because infinitives are split so commonly, we can sometimes achieve a nice effect by not splitting one. On page xvii, I purposely wrote, “A few teachers seem never to sleep.” For me, it is notably more emphatic than “A few teachers seem to never sleep.” Students who really care about writing style ought to be made aware of this option.

Have Got

Mythrule: Avoid using have got in the sense of possess. Use have instead. According to this, we should write, “We have many friends here,” rather than “We’ve got many friends here.”

Have got in the sense of “possess” has been good conversational English for a long time, according to the conservative usage expert Sir Ernest Gowers’ revision of H. W. Fowler’s A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (1965). Gowers furthermore notes that many careful writers—including Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift, and John Ruskin—approved of this usage. After quoting Philip Ballard, who concluded that have got is “not a real error but a counterfeit invented by schoolmasters,” Gowers adds, “Acceptance of this verdict is here recommended.”

At times, have got is essential. Consider the following responses to the question: “Have you received it yet?”

A. Yes, I already have it. (present tense)
B. Yes, I’ve already got it. (present perfect tense)
C. *Yes, I’ve already it.

The (C) response is not English. The (B) sentence is the natural contracted perfective response to the question and, it seems to me, is much more likely than (A).

Some people harbor the notion that there is something vaguely vulgar about the verb got, but this is clearly not so. It is the past tense of get, and my dictionary lists forty-five distinct uses of that verb. Only three of these are labeled “informal.”

Henry James, as scrupulous and sophisticated a writer as we have had, wrote: “[She] had mastered the sovereign truth that nothing in the world is got for nothing” (The Portrait of a Lady, p. 80).
Breaking the Rules

This one is from Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*:

Later, when the reader has got his bearings, shorten them.


On the Other Hand

Do you remember Myrtle Wilson, Tom Buchanan’s mistress in *The Great Gatsby*? Fitzgerald establishes her character early on, partly by filling her dialogue with *got’s*:

I’d like to get one of those police dogs; I don’t suppose you *got* that kind?
I’m going to have the McKees come up. And of course I *got* to call up my sister too.
I *got* to write down a list so I won’t forget all the things I *got* to do.

This use of *got*—for *have got*—may be nonstandard. It may also be the source of that anti-*got* feeling in the pit of some stomachs.

Ending Sentences with Prepositions

*Mythrule*: Do not end a sentence with a preposition.

This mythrule has been the butt of ridicule as early as John Milton, who wrote regarding it, “What a fine conformity would it starch us all into!” The origin of the rule has been traced to Bishop Lowth, yet the latter does not formulate a rigid rule. Rather, he comments that placing a preposition at the end of a relative clause (as opposed to *before* the relative pronoun) is less graceful and doesn’t agree with the “solemn and elevated style.” Lindley Murray copied Lowth almost verbatim.

Many textbooks maintain that prepositions are *always* followed by their objects, but it is much harder to find one that explicitly forbids ending sentences with prepositions. (*Harbrace*, indeed, says sentences *may* end with prepositions, and offers examples.)

If Shakespeare had followed this rule, Prospero’s lovely, “We are such stuff as dreams are made of,” would have to be revised to something like, “We are such stuff of which dreams are made.” And simple, straightforward questions like, “What am I guilty of?” would become the much stiffer, “Of what am I guilty?”

Where day-to-day speech is concerned, the best “rule” is to forget about this one.
On the Other Hand

Compare: Ask not for whom the bell tolls.
With: Don’t ask who the bell tolls for.

As a writer seeking a formal tone, is there any doubt which you would select?

**Placement of Only**

Mythrule: Only should be placed as close as possible to the word(s) it modifies. “I only have eyes for you” should be “I have eyes only for you,” according to this mythrule.

I still remember correcting this error on student papers—back in my greener years—over and over again. Why couldn’t students see that “I only have eyes...” meant that eyes are the only thing I have? No arms, legs, head, torso? Well, they couldn’t see it because it isn’t so. “I only have eyes” doesn’t mean that at all, and every reader—except dunderheaded English teachers such as I was—knows that perfectly well.

Even in a relatively formal register, we commonly find only placed before the verb when it “ought” to go after. For example, Nathan Hale was presumably using his best English as he was about to be executed, yet he purportedly said, “I only regret that I have but one life to give to my country,” not “I regret only...”

On the Other Hand

Sometimes, the cause of precision is better served—and ambiguity avoided—by careful placement of only. Sterling Leonard cites an author who wrote, “I will only mention another instance,” and then went on to supply a lengthy paragraph about a single instance.

**Less/Fewer**

Mythrule: We’re supposed to use less with nouns that can’t be counted: less sugar, less paper, less money; and we are supposed to use fewer with nouns that can be counted: fewer students, fewer cars, fewer minutes.

The real situation is much more complex. For one, many of our nouns are countable in some meanings, uncountable in others. Liberty, for example, is often a mass noun, as in Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty, or give me death.” But we often hear such uses as, “Since her fall, she takes (fewer or less?) liberties in the skating rink.”
We runners regularly count laps around a track, but would you say, “I did fewer laps today than I did yesterday”? Or how about minutes in the same context? Should it be fewer or less minutes? I don’t think I’ve ever said that I ran fewer minutes than on a previous occasion, but one can certainly count minutes. Colin Powell—who speaks a pretty good standard English—recently said something about “less people than ever.” Should he have said “fewer”?

If one has to pause in mid-sentence to decide whether less or fewer is the “right” choice, it’s a sign that the choice is not worth the trouble.

On the Other Hand

In writing, we can usually take the time to choose among alternatives, and one might find it more elegant to use fewer rather than less in some instances.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress has found fewer errors in student papers than they did a decade ago. That is good: the fewer errors students make, the better.

Activity 3–5: What Really Is Standard English?

Goal: To engage students in discovering the rules of standard English.

Procedure

Have your students select public figures whose standard English credentials are impeccable. Then ask the kids to select words or expressions from the bêtes noires and mythrules (or from any other source) and track that person’s speech habits over a period of time. I ask students to avoid speakers who read their words from hard copy or teleprompters, since such material is likely to be written by others in the first place.

To give an example, I once chose Christie Todd Whitman, who was governor of New Jersey at the time. She is well bred, intelligent, well educated, and she certainly “ran things.” (Besides, I liked her.) Other good choices are mayors, local congress people, senators, and of course national political figures.

Individual reports may be made at the end of the project, or a class project could be a dictionary of standard expressions. Note how this contrasts with what is normally done by usage police. They start with the “rules.”

Twenty-seven Commonly Confused Words: A Glossary with a Difference

Thanks to spell-check programs, many erstwhile spelling problems have vanished, but thanks to the same programs, our confidence that we are spelling incorrectly spelled words correctly may also be at an all-time high. The chief villains of the piece are commonly confused words.
Lists of such words may be found in nearly all textbooks and handbooks, and on websites as well. Some of these sources offer useful advice; many are virtually useless. In textbooks, particularly, rare is the list that gives more than a minimum of information, usually couched in technical jargon. The list that follows no doubt has its own imperfections, but I think you will find that it offers many fresh solutions to perennial problems, and it avoids technical terms almost entirely. My selection of items is based on my long experience as a teacher of Freshman English. The items have been common errors among my college freshmen.

However, I developed most of my teaching suggestions while I was an adjunct professor in the Court Reporter Program at Temple University. Most of my students there had graduated from Philadelphia public or parochial schools and had to work hard to succeed in an English course in which the passing grade was eighty-five percent correct on the final examination. They weren’t brilliant scholars, but they were highly motivated (a $40,000 job was waiting at the other end of my course). I will never forget them; they motivated me to work as hard as I have ever done as a teacher.

For each item, I first offer practical, nontechnical information that will help most students get the item right. This part is addressed directly to students. The notes that follow some items make additional comments or suggestions; they are addressed to the teacher and to more intellectually curious students.

Note: References are made to the Collins Cobuild corpus. This is a huge corpus of modern English text, which is used to analyze language usage. You can reach it on the Internet at titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk. I also make some references to the Kantz/Yates survey. These two teachers ranked the seriousness of usage errors, based on their survey of faculty in all disciplines at Central Missouri State. This survey may be accessed at the website of NCTE’s Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, a site worth visiting for several reasons. Just go to ateg.org and enter “Kantz/Yates.”

Advice/Advise

To Get It Right: Associate advice with the sound and spelling of vice, as in vice principal or vice president. If the word sounds that way, spell it that way. Remember: “The vice principal gave good advice.”

Affect/Effect

To Get It Right: If you need a verb, write affect. If you need a noun, write effect. A useful memory device (mnemonic) is the acronym VANE (Verb–Affect, Noun–Effect).

The new policy will affect all students. [verb, following will]
The effect will be profound. [noun, following the]
Notes

1. In determining whether the word they need is a verb or a noun, students are helped by looking for signal words—mainly auxiliaries and determiners—that precede the word in question. (See Chapter 2.) Here are the statistics from the Collins Cobuild corpus:

   The verb use of *affect* is preceded by a modal auxiliary (*will/would, can/could, may/might*, etc.) or by the infinitive marker *to* seventy-eight percent of the time.

   The noun use of *effect* is preceded by an article sixty-two-and-a-half percent of the time and by *in* (in the phrase, *in effect*) seventeen-and-a-half percent of the time.

2. *Affect* may be a noun; *effect* may be a verb. In the first forty American English illustrations from the Collins Cobuild corpus, however, there are no instances of *effect* as a verb and only three instances of *affect* as a noun. The odds, therefore, are very much in favor of the preceding *Get It Right* advice.

3. As a verb, *affect* means, broadly, “to influence”; *effect*, broadly, means “to cause, bring about.” These synonyms work well for most students. However, they do not work invariably. For instance, the first meaning of the verb *effect*, in my dictionary, is “to bring into existence.” Taken literally, that would mean the sentence, “My mother effected my baby brother,” is correct, but it is not.

   Some students are helped by the observation that *affect* often takes an animate object: “Cold weather affects me,” whereas the verb *effect* usually does not: “The new government effected many changes.”

4. I tell students that they should associate *affect* as a noun with the field of psychology. “Emotional response” is perhaps the best brief synonym. Here are the examples from the Collins Cobuild corpus:

   *his distant, depressed affect*
   *The flat, unresponsive affect of her depression*
   *an individual whose affect ranged from*

5. Textbooks and handbooks nearly always totally ignore the use of *affect* as a noun, spending all their space on distinguishing the verb uses of this confusing pair. Frankly, both the noun use of *affect* and the verb use of *effect* are uncommon in the student papers I have read; but it’s ill advised to pretend they do not exist.
A lot/Alot

To Get It Right: Ask yourself what an “alot” is. If you don’t know, then don’t write it.

Note

1. I introduce this item by walking around the class, asking students if they have ever heard of an “alot,” and I follow up with the preceding suggestion. Incidentally, although I have occasionally seen alright in print, I have never seen alot.

Are/Our

To Get It Right: Remember the sentence: “They are our best friends.” Articulate it carefully, and you will hear the difference, a difference that the separate spelling of the two words reflects.

Note

1. Even well-educated people usually do not distinguish these two words in normal speech. It doesn’t make a great deal of difference in speech, but in writing, the error is an embarrassment.

Brake/Break

To Get It Right: Associate brake with the slowing or stopping of motion or with the device that has that effect. Otherwise, use the break spelling.

Notes

1. The American Heritage Dictionary has six different entries for brake. Most of them, however, are rarely used words. Break, in contrast, runs for two full columns and has dozens of meanings.

2. Break is very common as a word initiator in compound words: breakage, breakdown, breakout, breakup, and so forth. In breakfast, it has an uncharacteristic sound.

Capitol/Capital

To Get It Right: Capitol is usually have domes. For all other meanings, write capital.

Cite/Site/Sight

To Get It Right: Cite is related to citation, which you may be familiar with through research papers—or the traffic court. Site is a place, such as a website or campsite. Sight refers to one of the senses and to seeing, which we do with that sense.
Compliment/Complement

To Get It Right: Try remembering I complimented Ida. Use the e spelling in the middle of the word for all other uses.

Note

1. A compliment is an act of courtesy or praise. Complement has a wider range of meanings, which is why we suggest students remember the former.

Could of, Would of, and Others

To Get It Right: The word you use in conversation after could, would, should, and so on, sounds like of, but it is actually a contracted form of have. When you write, always use have (or ’ve).

Wrong: You should of warned me.
Right: You should have warned me.
Informal: You should’ve warned me.

Notes

1. Some might consider this error, which Hairston (1981) labels “very serious,” a status-marking error. I remember clearly making it myself until about eleventh grade; I simply never realized that it was an error. (Or perhaps I wasn’t ready to learn that it was one.) At any rate, I vividly recall my eleventh-grade English teacher telling me that I should never use of after words like could, should, and would, and I never did it again. (The fact is that one could of course use of after a word like could. I just did it.)

2. Here is the lesson plan I use to teach this item:

Begin by telling your students that they have in their minds a list of nine words, all of which do the same job of work. I take the risk of saying that if I give them just two of them, they will be able to generate the other seven, and I offer them will and would. Sometimes, I get a word that does not belong to this list of what grammarians call the modal auxiliaries. It’s invariably an auxiliary of another ilk, such as do. I compliment such answers, without listing them on the chalkboard, where I put the others. My students have never failed to generate the following words:

will, would, can, could, shall, should, may, might, must

(For a complete list of modals, one would add ought to, used to, dare, and need, the latter pair being more common in the United Kingdom than in the United States. However, only the ones listed above—and some of them only in restricted circumstances—are followed by of in student writing.)
Usage: Rules That Do Not Rule (and a Few That Do)

Next, I point out that these words are normally followed by verbs in their base form and let the students fill in the examples:

will write shall find can sing may listen must finish
would go should stop could win might end

Now, inserting the word have between the modal and the verb we obtain:

will have written
could have won
would have gone may have listened
shall have found might have ended
should have stopped must have finished
can have sung

You might wish to call attention to the fact that the form of the main verb changes here, but the important next step is to ask students to pronounce these combinations, as in rapid speech. The answers are, truly:

will of (’ve) written
could of (’ve) won
would of (’ve) gone may of (’ve) listened
shall of (’ve) found* might of (’ve) ended
should of (’ve) stopped must of (’ve) finished
can of (’ve) sung*

*These are more common in the negative: shall not of (’ve) found, can’t of (’ve) sung.

The ’ve sounds exactly like of. Thus, it’s easy enough to write that word.

When students see this off/’ve confusion, they are more likely to correct themselves in the future. Sometimes, I have found students subsequently writing “would’ve” in their papers. If it’s in dialogue, that’s perfectly all right, but I tell them that most of us English teachers prefer have in other kinds of writing.

Council/Counsel/Consul

To Get It Right: Council refers to a governing body of some sort, such as a city council (or a student council). Counsel refers to advice, the kind of thing a guidance counselor gives. A consul is an officer in the foreign service of a country.

Except/Accept

To Get It Right: If you pronounce these carefully, you will never confuse them. Remember: “Everyone except me must accept some blame.”
Notes

1. Normally a preposition, except is sometimes used as a verb meaning “to exclude.” We’ve all seen those signs that warn “No twenty or fifty dollar bills excepted,” meaning that they are accepted. This is an interesting double negative.

2. Except has the noun form exception.

**It’s/Its**

*To Get It Right:* If in context you mean “it is” or “it has,” write it’s. If you do not mean one of these, write its. (NB: Never write it’s’)

(It’s/Its?) time to leave. The cat ate (it’s/its?) dinner early.

(It is) time to leave. (Yes) The cat ate (it is) dinner early. (No)

Therefore: it’s time to leave. Therefore: The cat ate its dinner.

Notes

1. Sentences must always be read in context.
   It’s the truth. (It is the truth. Right!)
   Its truth is obvious. (It is truth is obvious. No way!)

2. If students are unsure what meaning they intend—for instance in a sentence like “It’s true”—ask them to make the sentence emphatic by stressing the -s:
   (It’s/Its) right. Means: It is right. Therefore: It’s right.
   (It’s/Its) right hand is hurt. Does Not Mean: It is right hand.
   Therefore: Its right hand . . . is correct.

3. Nearly all textbooks and handbooks ignore the fact that it’s sometimes means “it has.” But ignoring this fact won’t make it go away. Consider the following sentences. Isn’t the second as natural as the first?
   It’s difficult to pass algebra. [It’s = It is]
   It’s been difficult to pass algebra. [It’s = It has]

**Know/No and Knew/New**

*To Get It Right:* Know and knew are the present and past forms, respectively, of the verb to know. If you’re talking about knowing, write them. If you write no and new instead, your audience will think you are illiterate.
Led/Lead

To Get It Right: Led refers to the action of leading performed in the past. It is also the form to use after has, have, and had. For all other uses, regardless of pronunciation, use lead.

Notes
1. The l-e-a-d spelling has multiple meanings and two distinct pronunciations. That is why we focus attention on led.
2. Students sometimes miss the contracted form of have. Note the following:
   a. She’s led us well. (She has led us.)
   b. You’ve led me astray. (You have led me.)

Loose/Lose

To Get It Right: Remember the phrase, loose laces, and whenever you need to decide whether to write loose or lose, let the pronunciation of loose in the phrase guide you. (The eyelets in the shoes suggest the double o of loose.) “Loose laces lose races” is a terrific mnemonic sentence.

Notes
1. Loose is the opposite of tight and has an s sound. Lose is the opposite of win and has a z sound. Lose also means “to have no longer.”
2. This is an extremely difficult item for many people. I once had an editor of a professional magazine change my perfectly correct loose to lose (in the phrase, “turn the students loose”).

Past/Passed

To Get It Right: Remember that passed is the past tense of the verb pass. Use it when you need a verb in that tense or after the verb markers have, has, and had. At all other times, write past.

Precede/Proceed

To Get It Right: To precede means “to go or come before,” as in a precedes b in the alphabet. If you mean anything other than this, spell the word with two e’s in succession.

Notes
1. Precede has three e’s, one after each consonant except the first.
2. *Precede* can mean to go or come before not only in space or time but also in rank or position.
3. *Proceed* is often jargon and can be omitted: *We proceeded to meet for three hours*—*We met for three hours.*
4. It’s a fact that the root of both these words is the Latin word for *go* (*cedere*). Thus, the real difference between them lies in their respective prefixes.

**Principle/Principal**

*To Get It Right:* If the word you want refers to a rule in some way, write *principle.* Also, use the *-le* spelling for the idiomatic phrase, *in principle.* For all other uses, write *principal.*

**Notes**

1. Focus is on the *-le* spelling because that is the more restricted term. The *-al* spelling is used for both nouns and adjectives in a wide range of meanings.
2. Elementary students are commonly taught, “The Principal is your pal”—whether she is or not, presumably. This is fair enough, but it doesn't go very far. A good single-word synonym for *principal* is “main.” The principal of a building is the main person in the building. The principal in a bank account is the main sum. The principal in a trial is the main contestant, or one of them. One's principal reason for doing or thinking something is one's main reason.

**Stationery/Stationary**

*To Get It Right:* Remember that stationery is what we write a letters on (or a place where we can buy such material). If this is not your meaning, write *-ary.*

**Note**

1. *Stationery* is somewhat more limited in its meanings than *stationary,* therefore, we focus on it. Students may be familiar with *stationary,* however, from such common terms as *stationary bike* or a *stationary front* in weather.

**Than/Then**

*To Get It Right:* Pronounce aloud the sentence in which *than* or *then* is used, putting emphasis on the word. You should be able to hear the difference and thus write the correct form.
Usage: Rules That Do Not Rule (and a Few That Do)

Example Sentences:  
1a. I'd rather spend time with my friends than go shopping.  
1b. I'd rather spend time with my friends, then go shopping.  
2a. We first had waffles, then cereal.  
2b. I like waffles better than cereal.  
3a. If you work hard, then you will succeed.  
3b. She worked harder than she had ever worked before.

Notes

1. In general, then means “next.” In general, than is used in making comparisons, where it typically expresses an alternative.

2. In my experience, the if . . . then (conditional) relationship is particularly difficult for students; they often write if . . . than. Encourage them to remember that it’s always “i before e”—if . . . then. If they know the abbreviation i.e., it could serve as the memory aid: i(f) . . . (th)e(n).

They’re/Their/There

To Get It Right: “Test” the word, in the order shown, beginning with they’re, which means “they are.” Test next for their, which is a word like the and must be followed by a word it is working with (usually a noun). If the word you want passes neither of these tests, write there.

Example Sentences:  
1. _____ always welcome here.  
2. The students began _____ homework early.  
3. I found my homework over _____.
4. _____ are bugs in our mugs.

Example 1 passes Test 1; therefore, They’re is the right answer.  
Example 2 does not pass Test 1: One cannot say, “The students began they are homework early.”  
Example 2 does pass Test 2: The students began their homework. Therefore, their is the correct answer. (Homework is the word their is working with.)  
Examples 3 and 4 cannot pass either Test 1 or Test 2. Therefore, there is the correct answer for both.

N.B. for poor spellers: All three words begin t-h-e. Thus, thier must be a misspelling.

Notes

1. The words are in order from least to most complex. It’s useful for students to memorize this order.
2. In the Collins Cobuild corpus, their is immediately followed by the noun it is working with 67.5 percent of the time. In nearly all other cases, only one modifier separates their from its noun.

3. There is two words. There-1 is an adverb, roughly meaning “in that place.” There-2 has no lexical content; it’s just a way of getting a sentence started when one does not wish to begin with its subject. For example, in Example 4, in our mugs tells where the bugs are, not the word there. Indeed, one can write “There are bugs there,” which even more clearly demonstrates the distinction between the two there’s.

4. Although there-2 is sometimes not recognized as a separate entity in grammar books, it is actually slightly more common than there-1 in the Collins Cobuild corpus.

5. This error ranks third in the Kantz/Yates survey.

**Threw/Through**

*To Get It Right:* Threw is the past tense of the verb to throw. Use through for all other meanings. Remember “The pitcher threw the ball through the strike zone.”

**Two/Too/To**

*To Get It Right:* Always first ask if you are referring to the number. If so, two is always correct. Next, be aware that too is two distinct words. It may mean “also.” Alternatively, it may be used simply to intensify the degree of the word that follows it. In that use, you can often substitute very for it.

- too-1: Are your parents coming, too? (*too* = also)
- too-2: I was too busy to call. (*too* = very)

If neither the number nor either meaning of too is involved, write to.

Notes

1. In everyday speech, we commonly distinguish too from to by pronouncing the former with a long “u” sound. Indeed, we must pronounce it that way. To is normally pronounced with a schwa sound. However, if to is stressed for any reason, it, too, may receive a long “u” sound.

2. To is actually two words. Its most common use is as a preposition, but it is also frequently used as an infinitive marker. Here are both uses in the same sentence:

   We expect to [infinitive marker] go to [preposition] school today.
**We’re/Were/Where**

*To Get It Right:* Pronounce the word distinctly, and you will easily distinguish among these three.

**Note**

1. The *were/where* pair ranked as the eighth most irritating error in the Kantz/Yates survey.

**Who’s/Whose**

*To Get It Right:* If in context you mean “who is” or “who has,” write *who’s*. If you do not mean one of these, write *whose*.

Someone (*who’s/whose*) friendly makes friends easily.  
Someone *who is* friendly makes friends easily. (*Right*)  
*Therefore:* Someone *who’s* friendly makes friends easily.  
No one (*who’s/whose*) seen the Rockies can forget them.  
No one *who has* seen the Rockies can forget them. (*Right*)  
*Therefore:* No one *who’s* seen the Rockies can forget them.  
Anyone (*who’s/whose*) car is double parked will get a ticket.  
Anyone *who is* car is double parked will get a ticket. (*Wrong*)  
*Therefore:* Anyone *whose* car is double parked will get a ticket.

**Note**

1. This item directly parallels *it’s/its*. It may therefore be good to teach them together. See additional notes for *it’s/its*.

**Write/Right**

*To Get It Right:* Remember “Did you *write* the *right* answer?” Writing is something we do with our *wrists*.

**Notes**

1. *Rite* also rhymes with this pair, but it has a specialized meaning.  
2. *Wright* has an even more specialized meaning (one who makes or builds something), but it comes into play in compounds like *playwright*, which must be distinguished from compounds like *copyright*.

**You’re/Your**

*To Get It Right:* *You’re* means “you are.” If that is the intended meaning, write *you’re*. Otherwise, write *your*.
Notes

1. This is a very easy item for anyone who stops to think about it. Alas, many of us do not, including me. I find I must constantly monitor myself. (I use my own test.)

2. In the Kantz/Yates survey, this item ranked second in the list of errors that most irritated college teachers. Only nonstandard verb forms out-ranked it. Don’t ask me why.
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