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PRESCRIPTIVENESS PRESCRIBED

Several years ago my tranquil retirement was interrupted with a surprise job offer: to teach writing to a pair of home-schooling grandchildren. Our daughter, their teacher, asked my wife and me if we would try our hand at giving supplemental formal instruction to her two oldest children, then aged 11 and 9. Years ago I once taught a three-hour writing class at a small college but that was to young adults, and I discovered it certainly wasn't as easy as it may have looked. I came away from that semester with a heightened respect for the skill of the teacher. Now I was being asked to mentor an age level where I had no experience. Yet how could a grandparent say no?

My wife and I signed up for bi-weekly sessions of team teaching. Our aim was to show our two youngsters how they could acquire the basic skills of clear, concise communication through correct use of the written word. Each week one of us would discuss with them an element in this process and then assign a theme for them to put into written form. They tackled short descriptive essays, book reviews, letters, stories, opinion pieces, persuasive articles, interviews, and even a bit of poetry. It may be a truism, but one learns to write by writing.

We insisted on high standards. We kept emphasizing the mantra of my wife's college teacher, the legendary Raymond Woodbury Pence, that it is not enough to write in order to be understood; one must write so as not to be **misunderstood**. We required our charges first to do drafts of their work and then to keep revising them until they were sure the final version was the very best they could produce. We tried not to be too draconian. Even though they learned that

writing is hard, often frustrating work with no magic formulas, they gradually came to appreciate the rewards that awaited the careful writer.

Along the way, even though it was not our main emphasis, yes, we touched on the rules of grammar. We didn't diagram sentences the way I learned in Sister Agnes Carmel's fourth grade. But we did talk about parts of speech, how they fit together, and some rules of the road in using them. Today's professional linguists, I was all too aware, would find it harmful and counterproductive to inject such clutter into the creative process. Yet I was taught that the rules of grammar turn the noise of words into language that conveys meaning. I wanted my grandchildren to understand that far from stifling them, these rules would provide them the real freedom to communicate clearly in a world filled with cacophony.

At times I worried that I was being too hard-nosed in the goals I set for students of their ages. Yet time and again they rose to the challenge. I was both surprised and thrilled by how they responded -- and I don't believe my reaction was simply that of a proud grandfather. We ended the year on a high note. Catherine and Joseph had become better writers for their efforts, and they knew it. They told their mom that writing had become their favorite subject.

I have no way of knowing, of course, whether our anecdotal experience proved any larger points about the best ways for children to learn to write. But I do admit to a certain malice aforethought in thus joining one of the longest shooting wars in the history of the English language. For well over a half-century -- and some would argue for much longer than that -- a fierce, often nasty struggle has been waging over the rules of grammar. Well into the 1980s, most teachers still employed "prescriptive" grammar instruction setting forth how people should write, rather than "descriptive" grammars which tell how people actually use language. Prescribing, of course, means to lay down rules authoritatively as a guide. Over the ensuing

years, however, a majority of academic linguists have backed away from appearing authoritative. Instead, armed with vast amounts of computer studies, they are now firmly ensconced in the descriptive camp, focusing on how language is structured and used without passing judgment on what is right or wrong. In teaching writing, they say they want students to express themselves without being hung up on rules. After all, why is it not sufficient to express one’s thoughts as one sees fit, and not be restricted and hampered in how one does it? Everyone recognizes that English is a living language and is constantly changing. One descriptivist argues that “if language is going to keep changing anyway – and it is – what is the use of posting the little rules and making people uncomfortable only to see the (rules) eventually blown away by the wind,” especially in the multi-cultural America in which we live.

Such argumentation infuriates the prescriptivists. They point out that going back into antiquity, grammar has traditionally been considered one of the seven liberal arts. Indeed, for ages it was held as the first, the primary, the foundational art to be mastered. Elementary schools were once known as “grammar schools” for a reason, for it was there where teaching grammar was the fundamental launching pad in a child’s education. A worried British broadcaster and writer named Libby Purves, writing in the *Times of London* in 2012, summed up this position: “Of all school disciplines, learning language correctly matters most. Clear, confident communication is the bedrock of every other endeavor in education and in life. . . . Neglecting, downgrading and generally dumbing standards is a great cruelty to visit on children.”

Thus have the battle lines been drawn.

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It comes as more than parochial curiosity to note that a key antecedent in these grammar wars can be traced right here to the Queen City. In 1838 a child named William Strunk was born

in Cincinnati into a German immigrant family who prized education. He graduated from Woodward High School, one of the first public schools in the country, and went on to study law at the University of Cincinnati. He became a prominent educator and lawyer in the young city, serving on the school and library boards and as a trustee of the university. The family lived on Stanton Avenue in Walnut Hills, attended the Presbyterian church, and eventually numbered three children.

One of those siblings, William Strunk Jr., was born on July 1, 1869, and as he grew up he was deeply influenced by his father's example and interests. Young Will, like his father, earned a bachelor's degree in 1890 at the University of Cincinnati and wanted to pursue a career in teaching. So he went off to Cornell University for further studies. There he would spend the rest of his life, fulfilling his career ambitions. First he earned a doctorate in 1896 and then, for the next 46 years, he taught English "far above Cayuga's waters."

On the Cornell campus, he became a well-known professor, especially for his composition class, English 8. For that class he required a single text, a 43-page volume he privately printed and titled "The Elements of Style." He himself referred to it as "the little book." It was simply a handbook of writing tips – made up of 7 rules of usage, 11 principles of composition, and a list of words and expressions commonly misused. That was it – framed as sharp, concise commands as if coming from a drill sergeant: "*Omit needless words.*" "*Use the active voice.*" "*Put statements in positive form.*" "*Do not explain too much.*" "*Revise and rewrite.*" "*Above all, be clear.*"

A student in the composition class of 1919 was a young man named Elwyn Brooks White, who described his teacher as "one of the most inflexible and choosy of men," friendly and funny yet with a "sting (in) his kindly lash" as he set forth his rules.

Toward his students, Professor Strunk manifested sympathy for the struggles of the writer attempting to communicate with an audience. In White's words, "Will felt that the reader was in serious trouble most of the time, floundering in a swamp, and it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get the reader up on dry ground, or at least to throw a rope."

"Will knew where he stood," White recalled. "He was so sure of where he stood, and made his position so clear and so plausible, that his peculiar stance has continued to invigorate me. . . . He had a number of likes and dislikes that were almost as whimsical as the choice of a necktie, yet he made them seem utterly convincing.

"He scorned the vague, the tame, the colorless, the irresolute. He felt it was worse to be irresolute than to be wrong."

Reminiscing about his teacher, White said: "In the days when I was sitting in his class, he omitted so many needless words, and omitted them so forcibly and with such eagerness and obvious relish, that he often seemed in the position of having shortchanged himself – a man left with nothing more to say yet with time to fill, a radio prophet who had outdistanced the clock. Will Strunk got out of this predicament by a simple trick: he uttered every sentence three times. When he delivered his oration on brevity to the class, he leaned forward over his desk, grasped his coat lapels in his hands, and, in a husky, conspiratorial voice, said, 'Rule Seventeen. Omit needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!'"

The student, Elwyn Brooks White, eventually became known, of course, as E.B. White, the celebrated writer of the "Notes and Comments" page in the *New Yorker* magazine and author of such beloved books as *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*.

In 1946, Professor Strunk died of cancer at 77, leaving his wife Olivia and three children. Another three decades would pass before the Macmillan publishing house approached E.B. White about his possible interest in preparing an edition of Professor Strunk's "little book" for the general public. Thus, in 1977, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* first appeared. It has remained so popular that it has been in continuous print ever since, now in its fourth edition. In the process, it has thrown a rope to more than 10 million students, writers and other admirers – a publishing record for a book of its kind. White thought it appealed to so many because he said it fit on the head of a pin the vast number of rules and principles of English.

I daresay there's hardly a person in this audience who has not encountered the "little book" somewhere along the way. Its influence is difficult to overestimate. Asked to name one book that made him who he is today, David McCullough identified *The Elements of Style*. "I read it nearly 50 years ago and still turn to it as an ever reliable aid to navigation, particularly . . . with reminders to 'revise and rewrite' and 'to be clear.'"

Dorothy Parker once said that "if you have any young friends who aspire to become writers, the second-greatest favor you can do them is to present them with copies of *The Elements of Style*. The first-greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they're happy."

Indicative of the grammar wars that have paralleled Strunk and White's little book over the years, not everyone has been enraptured with *The Elements of Style*. The purists have sniffed at it, noting that although both Strunk and White were fine writers, the book itself contains a fair share of grammatical blunders and can hardly be considered a comprehensive textbook. One critic cited it as "an anachronism in the face of modern English usage," lashing out at Professor Strunk's "uninformed bossiness." Another, this one from Britain, called it "the book that ate America's brain." With the textual analysts taking over the academy and prescriptive grammar

being consigned to the scrap heap of history, a member of the descriptive school labeled *The Elements of Style* “an aging zombie . . . a hodgepodge, its now-antiquated pet peeves jostling for space with . . . 1990s computer advice.”

The unkindest cut of all comes from one of today’s leading voices in the descriptive camp, Dr. Steven Pinker, who actually finds much of Strunk’s guidance “charming and timeless,” yet adds: “Strunk was born in 1869, and today’s writers cannot base their craft exclusively on the advice of a man who developed his sense of style before the invention of the telephone (let alone the Internet), before the advent of modern linguistics and cognitive science, before the wave of informalization that swept the world in the second half of the twentieth century.”

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Despite this barrage of criticism, *The Elements of Style* remains the granddaddy of all the books on language lining my library shelf. It has been my go-to reference guide ever since I first encountered it as a young editor. E.B. White admitted that he was once the kind of writer who did not have “any exact notion of what was taking place under the hood.” I was like that. As a rookie reporter, I thought I knew something about writing until I started editing for a living. Then I discovered that I was like so many others who didn’t really know a gerund from a gerbil – as Patricia O’Conner points out in her *Grammarphobe’s Guide*. My newspaper job forced me to raise the hood and no longer take for granted what makes a motor work. English is not easy, as languages go. I had to master some of its mechanics.

Every fortnight or so, a plain white envelope would arrive on the city desk of my newspaper containing the latest single-sheet copy of *Winners and Sinners*, which its author, Theodore Bernstein, styled “a bulletin of second-guessing issued occasionally from the southeast

corner of *The New York Times* News Room.” Bernstein was the managing editor of *The Times*. He originally intended his comments for the paper’s reporters and editors, but so popular were his observations that he graciously bowed to the demand from outside and shared them with a wider audience of newspaper people on what he found good and bad in the columns of America’s leading journal. His recounting of the sinners usually outnumbered the winners but we all profited from Bernstein’s learned, often witty explanations of what he found right and what he found wrong about the language employed by the news staff.

Bernstein thought that “if writing must be a precise form of communication, it should be treated like a precision instrument. It should be sharpened and it should not be used carelessly.”

In matters of grammar and usage, he refused to take sides on what he called “a well-trampled battleground.” “On one side,” he noted, “are the stiff-necked grammarians, brandishing rigid rules, which they wield whether or not the rules are supported by history, idiom or certificates of convenience and necessity. On the other side are the soothing champions of the masses, with their battle cry, ‘Whatever the people say is okay by me; the people speak real good.’” Bernstein refused to join either camp. “To enlist with the too-orthodox would be to tend toward prissiness and to risk losing touch with the popular tongue,” he explained. “To enlist with the too-liberal would be to invite the horrors of anarchy and to risk losing touch with the language of the literate.”

Going back over two tattered books I have treasured, which distill the best from *Winners and Sinners*, it seems possible that battles over prescriptive and descriptive grammar should at some point admit sweet reason, as Ted Bernstein attempted to suggest. Why can’t the farmers and the cowboys be friends? Alas, such is the bad blood between the two camps that what would

appear to be complementary goals turn instead into incompatible views. It's akin to the vitriolic political gridlock of Washington.

In a sense, these grammar wars strike one as proxies for larger struggles in our society. The differences fit within the thesis advanced by Daniel T. Rodgers, the Harvard historian, who argues that we are living in an "Age of Fracture" in which the decades of the late 20th Century saw a collapse of accepted social and political norms and an assertion of the individual's wants.

In his beefy, authoritative volume, *Modern American Usage*, Bryan Garner makes the salient point that "the study of writing – like the very fact that writing exists – serves as a conservative, moderating influence. Our literary heritage has helped form our culture. The means by which we record words on paper has an enormous influence on readers and on the culture as a whole." He sees the descriptivists, on the other hand, as egalitarians reflecting the tenor of the times. For them, "we're all seen as equal – not just in how we write and think, but in how we confront the lived questions. What you believe is your business. I may not think the way you do but I accept your right to do so. After all, we're all equal. . . . It's impermissible to say that one form of language is better than another: as long as a native speaker says it, it's okay – and anyone who takes a contrary stand is a dunderhead. . . . The spirit of the day demands that you not think critically – or at least not think ill – of anyone else's language. If you believe in good grammar and linguistic sensitivity, **you're** the problem. And there is a large, powerful contingent in higher education today – larger and more powerful than ever before – trying to eradicate any thoughts about good and bad grammar, correct and incorrect word choices, effective and ineffective style."

When he arrived at Yale to teach writing, William Zinsser was surprised to find that 170 had signed up to take his course that had room for only 20. He attributed the popularity to

student desperation to learn grammar that permissive teachers had ignored. But after all, who wouldn't want to be taught grammar by this celebrated writer who once famously remarked: "There's not much to be said about the period expect that most writers don't reach it soon enough"?

These musings may strike bystanders as overblown esoterica. The practical questions rising out of them, however, can go to the very heart of some of the burning issues of the day. To take one primary example, consider what has become of the use of the third-person-singular pronouns – *he, she, him, her, his, hers*. In her *Confessions of a Comma Queen*, Mary Norris calls these six ancient words the most ticklish subject in modern English usage.

The inescapable fact is, our language lacks a gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun. Linguists have been struggling for most of the past two centuries to invent one, but their efforts have languished. The prescriptive guru of usage, H.W. Fowler, has offered three makeshift solutions. The time-honored way has been to use the masculine form in which "he" is understood to stand for either the masculine or feminine pronoun. Even though the dictionary does define "man" as including all persons, many today consider this use sexist. Some even go so far as to use "she" simply as a bow to gender inclusivity. A second approach is to create a compound singular by using "he or she," "him or her," "his or hers." This awkward usage strikes most as cumbersome and clunky. A third way, which has gained much favor after decades of being seen as ungrammatical, is to permit "they" and "their" for use as a singular pronoun.

Thus, it becomes acceptable to write, "Every student can have **their** own computer," in order to avoid "his or her own computer."

Or: "A student should avoid bringing discredit to **their** school."

Or: “It is assumed, if someone is pressured, **they** will tell the truth.”

The advent of feminist thinking, along with single-sex and transgender issues, has served as a particularly potent force pushing the sanctioning of this use. After years of debate, the American Copy Editors Society has officially accepted the “they” solution and recently, in a landslide vote at the American Dialect Society’s annual meeting, “they” was anointed by the crowd of linguists as their “word of the year.” They said it was a way of aligning language with emerging ideas about gender identity. They claimed that those who consider themselves “gender fluid” would prefer the use of the pronoun “they” rather than “he” or “she,” or “their” rather than “his” or “her.”

The comma queen, Mary Norris, remains adamant. “I hate to say it,” she writes, “but the colloquial use of ‘their’ when you mean ‘his or her’ is just wrong. It may solve the gender problem, and there is no doubt that it has taken over in the spoken language, but it does so at the expense of number. An antecedent that is in the singular cannot take a plural pronoun. . . . It’s not fair. Why should a lowly common-gender plural pronoun trump over singular feminine and masculine pronouns, our kings and queens and jacks?”

In a universe ruled ever increasingly by the gods of diversity and political correctness, the sheer logic surrounding Miss Norris’ reasoning is nonetheless cast aside as so much flotsam. Consider this advisory issued at the start of the school year at the University of Tennessee by a campus diversity officer: “There are dozens of gender-neutral pronouns. For all folks who went to school back when there were only *him* and *her* – here’s a primer: some of the new gender neutral pronouns are *ze*, *hir*, *zir*, *ye*, *xem* and *xyr*.”

Last November, during an educational observance called Transgender Awareness Month, children in American classrooms were given “pronoun buttons” to wear on which they could display their own preferred personal pronoun.

The descriptive school would likely react by noting that if that is where English usage is going, then it will be interesting for the linguists to document the continuing evolution of the pronoun. Not so the prescriptivists, to be sure, and for good reason.

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It’s just not the personal pronoun that keeps the prescriptivists riled up. Other grammar gaffes draw their understandable ire because in each instance the goal of clear communication is fumbled away.

Take, for example, the ongoing debate over the so-called Oxford comma, or serial comma. The question involves whether to insert a comma before “and” in a series of three or more things. Purists require its use to prevent ambiguity. In America, however, the tendency is to use it willy-nilly. The *Associated Press Stylebook* decrees that the “and” alone is usually sufficient to clarify the meaning. However, omitting the serial comma can lead to mischief, as in the following –

“On stage, the country-western singer was joined by his two ex-wives, Kris Kristofferson and Waylon Jennings.” The absence of a serial comma before the “and” comically suggests that it was those manly stars, Kris and Waylon, who were the singer’s ex-wives.

Or, “This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and God.” And here I thought Ms. Rand was an avowed atheist who wouldn’t be seen in bed with anything suggesting the Almighty.

Countless other careless mishaps clutter the way to precise writing. Patricia O’Conner, the “*Grammarphobe*,” devotes a whole book to why it’s dangerous to construct English sentences without following a building code. She is keen on warning against danglers, those words or phrases found in the wrong places at the wrong times. To illustrate:

“Already housebroken, the Queen brought home a new corgi.”

“Born at the age of 43, the baby was a great comfort to Mrs. Wooster.”

“Dumpy and overweight, the vet says our dog needs more exercise.”

Of course, it’s not the Queen who is housebroken, or the baby who is 43, or the vet who is dumpy and overweight. More careful construction would keep the reader from wincing.

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The digital revolution, in which the Internet and social media transform the way people communicate, has further shaken the cause of good grammar. Most of us can remember when spam was cheap ham; when a hashtag was a military stripe; and tweets and twitters were somehow related to an Audubon bird book. We can even recall when messages didn’t end in emojis. Now those messages flow merrily through chat rooms, blogs, and Instagrams.

The *Grammarphobe* argues that cyber-writing is “no excuse for lousy English. . . . In fact, good English is especially important in cyberspace because the speed and brevity of email and other online writing conspire to muddle your message.”

The emergence of texting raises particular red flags. Students of the phenomena notice that so-called “text-speak” actually influences how people think. With thumbs flying, texters dash out a series of letters, numbers, and symbols that often carry meaning only to those who have learned the code. For example, WUU2 means “what are you up to?” and LOL means “laughing out loud.” Some descriptivists claim “text-speak” is actually modernizing the English

language, illustrating its flexibility in new and streamlined ways to convey complex messages. The prescriptivists groan, saying its use corrupts the language and promotes laziness among its users, especially the young, who so urgently need to understand the role of proper grammar in achieving precise communication.

Then there is the new technology itself. It has been reliably reported that one bank kept sending daily email acknowledgements beginning with the individualized salutation: “Dear Mr. Smith; (semicolon) A payment has been made . . .” or “Dear Ms. Jones; (semicolon) Because of insufficient funds . . .” When an exasperated customer wrote to protest the repeatedly misused semicolon after the salutation, a bank representative coolly responded: “The semicolons are embedded in our computer systems, and there’s no easy way to change the code.”

Maybe, just maybe, though, there’s hope for the mother tongue in this digital jungle. In a front page story, *The Wall Street Journal* recently reported that crimes against grammar are turning off picky singles seeking to connect on Internet dating sites. The story told how a fellow named Jeff Cohen used his OkCupid site to line up a date for after-work drinks at a Manhattan bar, but was chagrined when the young woman messaged back: “I’ll see you **their**.” He immediately sensed this grammar-challenged girl wasn’t for him. Now, according to *The Journal*, Cohen has joined scores of other techies in using an app called the Grade, which actually checks messages for grammatical and spelling errors and assigns them a letter grade ranging from A+ to F. The Grade downgrades messages containing such abbreviations as “wasup” (for “what’s up?”), “2d4” (for “to die for”), and YOLO (for “you only live once”). The popular, much advertised dating site, Match, actually surveyed 5,000 singles and found that after personal hygiene, the ingredient which most attracted them to a potential date was someone who

used proper grammar and punctuation. This led a linguistics professor at Columbia University to conclude that “grammar snobbery is one of the last permissible prejudices.”

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N. M. Gwynne would surely rank as one of the leading grammar snobs in the English speaking world today. He was a one-time successful English businessman before turning to teaching. His subjects have included English, Latin, Greek, French, German, mathematics, history, classical philosophy, natural medicine, the elements of music, and “how to start up and run your own business.” His pupils have ranged in age from 2 to 70, all over the English speaking map. Since 2007, they have been enrolled in courses he offers on the Internet. In every case, he writes, he has been forced, first, to tackle English grammar because “it has been largely forgotten by my older pupils or because it has been ignored, most often completely,” by those of school age. Why so much emphasis on grammar education? Because Gwynne passionately believes that “all thinking and communicating of any kind depends on grammar, grammar being simply the correct use of words, and words being the indispensable tools of thought.”

At the prompting of a pupil’s father, Gwynne decided to put together a handbook he called “the ultimate introduction to grammar and the writing of good English.” Initially helped by only word of mouth, the first edition sold out, followed by two others. Finally, a hardback version was published and for five months in 2013 it became the top selling book in England. We can thank the editors at Alfred A. Knopf for introducing *Gwynne’s Grammar* last year to an American audience.

The book’s success is all the more remarkable because, like *The Elements of Style*, it is simply a slender volume about parts of speech, the basics of syntax, punctuation, and examples of good and bad grammar – hardly the stuff of the modern-day bestseller.

With lively wit and utter British self-confidence, Gwynne manages to make a principled, unforgettable case for the prescriptive way. “It is my position,” he writes, “that the prescriptive approach to grammar, the one that says some things are right and some things are wrong, rather than describing things as they are, is the only correct approach. . . .

“For the last several decades,” he continues, “the public has been preposterously asked to believe that methodically learning the basics of how to do something destroys a child’s creativity. Common sense and thousands of years of tradition tell us, on the contrary, that the techniques of *any* activity, from composing poems to playing tennis, must be carefully learned *as a science* – often very painstakingly in the case of the most satisfying and enjoyable occupations – before the budding practitioner can hope to flourish at it.

“Those who speak English today have the prodigious good fortune of having inherited from our ancestors a language which has two really spectacular features. One is that it is the most widely spoken language there has ever been. The other is that during the last four centuries, it has been, together with classical Greek and Latin, one of the three great vehicles of thought, communication, science, and culture of all time.”

Gwynne is no stick-in-the-mud. He recognizes that anything alive must grow and change, and language is no exception. But he argues convincingly that English grammar has remained surprisingly intact since before the turn of the 16th Century and that the changes which have taken place, at least into the 1960s, have served to enrich the language and move it in the direction of greater precision and clarity. To the descriptive camp which allows usage to bend in the popular winds, he snorts, “We should be influenced neither by prevailing fashion nor by present-day majority vote nor by the pronouncements of acknowledged experts – and not even if those experts are unanimous – but *only* by adequate evidence.”

As *Gwynne's Grammar* achieved its unexpected popularity in Britain, the critics pounced, denouncing the book as a mixture of “misinformation and nonsense.” They debunked what they called the “myth” that there is one “correct” grammar that can be explicitly taught and tested. Britain’s then-minister of education, the controversial Michael Gove, was not among those swayed by these criticisms. In fact, he recommended that the book be read by civil servants of the realm to help them “write and think properly.” Imagine the outcry if the legions of American bureaucrats were faced with such a decree.

If the attentive reader detects a flavor of *The Elements of Style* in Gwynne’s approach, there is a reason. He is a great admirer of Will Strunk’s “little book,” the one used in English 8 at Cornell (although not E.B. White’s revised edition that achieved such popularity). He is attracted by Strunk’s conciseness, calling the book “a minor work of genius” and proclaiming “there has certainly never been anything else like it.” In an ultimate tribute, he incorporates the entirety of Strunk’s original text as the second part of his own handbook, because he says that vocabulary and grammar alone, which he examines in the first part, are not enough to make writing readable. The successful writer must also acquire a sense of style, so that thoughts can be conveyed in ways that are clear, when necessary forcible, and always graceful. He credits Strunk with having served that purpose in providing unforgettable pointers for shaping style and adding flair to writing.

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For a half century, from Strunk to Gwynne, from America back to the mother country of England, well-armed volumes have been marched into battle to fight the grammar wars. One wag commented that more grammar instruction spews forth from books these days than can be discovered in the contemporary classroom. I treasure my own shelf lined with these books, but

my modest collection is nothing compared with the seemingly endless rows in the language section downstairs at the legendary Strand used book store in Manhattan, the Broadway “home to 18 miles of books.”

Still, to a worldly spectator the onward march of the descriptive side must seem ever to gain momentum. Defenders of normative standards are often cast as evil doers worse than the storm troopers from Star Wars. A University of Michigan linguist has gone so far as to offer the twisted view that “in an age when discrimination in terms of race, color, religion, or gender is not publicly acceptable, the last bastion of overt social discrimination will continue to be a person’s use of language.” In other words, those who dare to promote long-honored language values now stand guilty of discrimination.

It would be tempting to conclude that the state of proper English has never been worse. One can take comfort, however, in the fact that past generations have voiced many of the same complaints, especially about language use among the youngsters then coming up.

Despite what academic linguists may contend, I found in my own experience, offering writing lessons to my grandchildren, that young minds do yearn for guidance. I could see they wanted a traffic cop to tell them when to stop and when to go, where to park and where not to. I had no desire to place these two seekers in linguistic straitjackets, or to hamstring their writing with complicated sets of rules. There were no tablets to pass down from Mount Sinai guaranteeing their way to a promised land of good grammar. I only offered a gentle nudge or two toward standards of safe passage. In no way did this approach seem to stifle their creativity. One of them especially was constantly looking for novel approaches that would make his work come alive.

Most fascinating for me in this experience was discovering what appeared to be an inherent desire in these children to find order in the language they used. From my observation, they gravitated on their own toward an identifiable logic. They grasped for what to them seemed true. Could it not be the case that human nature in its essentials is made for grammar?

Perhaps that is only the wishful thinking of a one-time editor. As with MacArthur and aging soldiers, old editors never die. We rest content in inflicting our prescriptive passions on grandchildren.

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