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Book Review: What is Good Grammar?

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What is Good Grammar?

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Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2014).

Many English teachers and professors dread meeting people in airplanes, those people who, upon learning of our profession, either apologize for any grammatical errors they might make or shut down completely, afraid to talk. Steven Pinker, in *The Sense of Style*, understands all too well the judgment many of us fear. He reassures us that *can* and *may* can be used interchangeably, that both *like* and *such as* are legitimate, that the passive voice is “unfairly maligned” (132), and—perhaps most comfortingly—that *whom* is “circling the drain” (242).

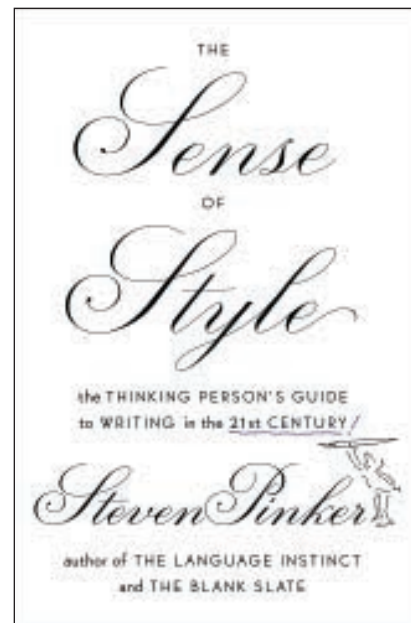
Pinker goes beyond reassurance, however; he helps us see how usage patterns change over time and why some conventions are worth observing while others aren't. To this end, he draws on evidence such as eye-tracking experiments, judgments by the 200-member Usage Panel from the *American Heritage Dictionary*, historical accounts of how particular conventions arose, and ample examples of both current and historical usage.

In addition to discussing usage, Pinker analyzes passages of “good writing” to illustrate what makes them effective, discusses strategies for achieving coherence, and gives advice on using syntax to avoid correct but convoluted prose. He also, in an especially interesting chapter, discusses “the curse of knowledge,” claiming that “the main cause of incomprehensible prose is the difficulty of imagining what it's like for someone else not to know something that you know” (57).

In conveying these concepts, Pinker sometimes goes into eyes-glaze-over detail, and, perhaps more troublesome, doesn't acknowledge the scholarly consensus that there is no such thing as “good writing.” He seems to ignore scholars who agree that the effectiveness of writing depends on how flexibly authors adapt their writing to new purposes, audiences, and genres. Despite Pinker's oversimplified view of “good writing,” his informative and often surprising discussions of usage—the highlight of the book—are likely to attract a variety of audiences. Pinker envisions his audience as “aspiring wordsmiths,” but his book may also be of interest to experienced writers seeking to make their tacit knowledge explicit, professors writing for non-academic audiences, teachers hoping to help students write more effectively, and “grammar mavens” wanting to know why Pinker—a linguist and cognitive scientist at Harvard—accuses them of being “sticklers, pedants, peevers, snobs, snoots, nit-pickers, traditionalists, language police, usage

nannies, grammar Nazis, and the Gotcha! Gang,” who, in their “zeal to purify usage and safeguard the language,” have made it “difficult to think clearly about felicity in expression and have muddied the task of explaining the art of writing” (188).

Addressing grammar mavens—and especially those who fear them—Pinker debunks many common misconceptions about usage. He notes, for instance, that the prohibition of split infinitives is “the quintessential bogus rule... according to which Captain Kirk should not have said *to boldly go where no man has gone before*, but rather *to go boldly* or *boldly to go*” (199). His discussion of this “bogus rule's” origin is typical of his explanations of many usage conventions—and, taken together, these explanations provide a fascinating glimpse into how our rules came to exist and why so many of them shouldn't, in fact, be rules.



For instance, Pinker explains (perhaps overzealously) that the “very terms ‘split infinitive’ and ‘split verb’ are based on a thick-witted analogy to Latin, in which it is impossible to split a verb because it consists of a single word,

such as *amare*, ‘to love.’ But in English, the so-called infinitive . . . consists of two words, not one” (229). Pinker goes on to quote several experts, including Theodore Bernstein, who notes that “There is nothing wrong with splitting an infinitive . . . except that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammarians, for one reason or another, frowned on it” (199).

Pinker also debunks the common belief that the pronoun *he* is gender-neutral and that using a singular *they* instead is incorrect. Quoting a 2013 press release, he tells us that Obama said, “No American should ever live under a cloud of suspicion just because of what they look like” (255). (Note that “No American” is singular, while “they” is typically seen as plural.) Obama,

purportedly gender-neutral he, including “She and Louis had a game—who could find the ugliest photograph of himself” (257).

Pinker concedes that the singular *they* is less accepted today than in centuries past, but he claims we’re in the midst of a historical change. He suggests that, if we’re confronted by a reader who is unhappy with our use of a singular *they*, we should “tell them that Jane Austen and I think it’s fine” (261).

Despite his own views on usage, Pinker recognizes the complexity of the choices writers must make. He notes, for instance, that using a singular *they* can be dangerous because readers may think the writer made an error. In the end, he wisely notes that a variety of considerations should inform writers’ choices, telling us that “a writer must critically evaluate claims of correctness, discount the dubious ones, and make choices which inevitably trade off conflicting values” (300). Because of the choices writers must make at every turn, writing is hard, but Pinker’s debunking of so many rigid rules just made it a little easier.

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Pinker is similarly passionate (and sometimes judgmental) when he condemns the notion that we shouldn’t end sentences with prepositions. This prohibition, he explains, “persists only among know-it-alls who have never opened a dictionary or style manual to check. There is nothing, repeat nothing, wrong with *Who are you looking at?* or . . . *It’s you she’s thinking of*” (220). The preposition pseudo-rule, he informs us, was invented by poet John Dryden based on a “silly analogy” with Latin in an attempt to show that Ben Jonson was an inferior poet (220). Pinker quotes Mark Liberman’s apt remark, “It’s a shame that Jonson had been dead for 35 years at the time, since he would otherwise have challenged Dryden to a duel, and saved subsequent generations a lot of grief” (220–221).

Pinker points out, did not write *because of what he looks like* or *because of what he or she looks like*. Pinker’s advocacy of the singular *they* (258) is further buttressed by its appearance in Shakespeare, Chaucer, the King James Bible, Swift, Byron, Thackeray, Wharton, Shaw, and Auden (258). Citing scholar Henry Churchyard, Pinker notes that Jane Austen used the singular *they* 87 times in her work (258).

Pinker provides a number of reasons that the pronoun *he* does not adequately represent both sexes. He cites experiments demonstrating that when people read the word *he*, they typically assume that the writer intended to refer only to males, and he summarizes an experiment demonstrating that “sexist usage. . . stops readers in their tracks and distracts them from the writer’s message” (258). Pinker offers several examples illustrating the fallacy of the



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