CONTENTS

LESSON ONE Understanding Style 1
LESSON TWO Correctness 11
LESSON THREE Clarity 1: Actions 35
LESSON FOUR Clarity 2: Characters 62
LESSON FIVE Concision 88
LESSON SIX Cohesion and Coherence 114
LESSON SEVEN Emphasis 145
LESSON EIGHT Controlling Sprawl 163
LESSON NINE Punctuation 189
LESSON TEN Elegance 208
GLOSSARY 226
ANSWERS TO EXERCISES 241
INDEX 257
Lesson Two: Correctness

God does not much mind bad grammar, but He does not take any particular pleasure in it.–ERASMUS

It is not the business of grammar, as some critics seem preposterously to imagine, to give law to the fashions which regulate our speech. On the contrary, from its conformity to these, and from that alone, it derives all its authority and value.–GEORGE CAMPBELL

No grammatical rules have sufficient authority to control the firm and established usage of language. Established custom, in speaking and writing, is the standard to which we must at last resort for determining every controverted point in language and style.–HUGH BLAIR

English usage is sometimes more than mere taste, judgment, and education—sometimes it’s sheer luck, like getting across the street.–E. B. WHITE

CHOICE VS. OBEDIENCE

In later lessons, we will examine principles of style that can help you write clearly, even gracefully. Those principles do not demand obedience; they suggest ways to recognize choices and then to choose well. For example, which of these sentences seems the clearest?

1. There was a lack of sufficiency of evidentiary support for their claim.
2. Their claim lacked a sufficiency of supporting evidence.
3. They lacked sufficient evidence to support their claim.

Most of us choose 3., but 1. and 2. are not grammatically wrong, only less direct than we might prefer. But before we consider these kinds of choices, we should address a matter that some writers and teachers think is even more important. It is the matter of “correctness.”

We must write correct English. But we must also understand that some points of grammar and usage are less important than many think (in fact, are not important at all) and that a writer who obsesses on usage can write in ways that are entirely correct but wholly unreadable. So we are going to consider this matter of correctness before that of clarity not because “good usage” is the first characteristic of good writing, but because we should to put it in its place—behind us—before we move on to more important matters.

Unlike matters of style, this question of correctness seems to address not choice, but obedience. When the American Heritage Dictionary says that irregardless is “nonstandard…never acceptable” (except, they say, when we’re trying to be funny), the choice between regardless and irregardless seems at
best academic. It is not a question of better and worse, but of right and of utterly, irredeemably, unequivocally, existentially Wrong.

That simplifies things: “correctness” does not require good taste or sound judgment, only a good memory. If you remember that *irregardless* is always Wrong, its possible choice ought never rise to even the lowest level of your consciousness. The same would seem true for dozens of other “rules”:

- Don’t use double negatives.
- Don’t begin a sentence with *and* or *but*.
- Don’t end a sentence with a PREPOSITION.
- Don’t split INFINITIVES.

Unfortunately, questions of correctness are not settled so easily: Many of the rules that some of us may remember are not linguistic fact, but classroom folklore, invented by eighteenth-century grammarians out of whole cloth, taught by those who repeat what they find in textbooks, and are now enforced by many among us, despite the fact that some of those rules are ignored by respected writers everywhere. Other rules are imperatives that we violate at the risk of seeming at least careless, at worst illiterate. Those rules are observed by even the less-than-best writers. And then there are rules that we may observe or not, depending on the effect we want.

REASONS FOR RULES

Two Extreme Views

There are divided opinions about the social role of Standard English and the rules that allegedly define it. To some, Standard English is just another stratagem invented by one class to repress another: a standard grammar helps keep the underclasses under. To others, Standard English is the final product of a sifting and winnowing conducted by generations of grammarians, a kind of managed linguistic Darwinism whose outcome is the best of all possible forms of English, now captured in rules that are observed by the best writers everywhere.

Both views are right, partly. The radical critics are right in that Standard English did arise from impulses toward control. For centuries, some have always believed that “errors” in grammar can identify those who are unwilling or unable to learn diligence, self-discipline, and obedience—the values that those who manage our institutions look for in those whom they screen for admission. And the conservatives are right: many features of Standard English did originate in efficiencies of expression. For example, we no longer need the elaborate verb endings that writers used a thousand years ago, and so we now omit present tense endings in five of six contexts:

- I leave + 0
- you(sg.) leave + 0
- she leave + S
- we leave + 0
- you(pl.) leave + 0
- they leave + 0.

So by that measure, the -s in, “You knowS him,” seems not just ungrammatical, but redundant and therefore in the nature of things inherently Wrong.
A MORE REASONED VIEW

The history and logic of Standard English are more complicated.

Historical Accidents

The radical critics are wrong when they claim that Standard English was devised to achieve socially vicious ends. Linguistic standards arise from historical accidents of social geography and political power. When a society is marked by differences in regional dialects and regional prestige (usually grounded in wealth), the most prestigious dialect will predictably be that of its most prestigious region, and that most prestigious dialect is likely to become the basis for that society’s standard form of writing. Thus if a thousand years ago, Scotland had been closer to the Continent than was London and had developed great ports and become the center of Britain’s economic and literary life, it is likely that Standard English today would resemble the English not of London but of Edinburgh.

But the conservative critics are also wrong when they claim that the features of Standard English today reflect an intrinsic superiority over the features of nonstandard English. It is true that many features of Standard English seem to reflect impulses toward efficiency. But most of those features are shared by speakers of all dialects, regardless of social class or geographical origin. Every speaker of Modern English, for example, enjoys (or should) the absence of nouns that are grammatically masculine, feminine, and neuter.

Illogical Logic

If Standard English is not defined by features that are historically inevitable, neither is it defined by features that are intrinsically logical, if by logical we mean regular and predictable. In fact, many features of nonstandard English are more “logical” than their corresponding features in Standard English.

• The person who says, He knewed that makes the same “mistake” as the first person who said, I climbed the tree instead of the historically correct clum. Both speakers apply the principle of regularity to a body of inconsistent data, an act that in any other context is taken as a sign of intelligence.

• With reflexive pronouns, we use the possessive form in myself, ourselves, yourself, yourselves, herself, and its[es]elf, so it seems “logical” (i.e., predictable) to use possessive pronouns in his[es]elf and theirselves.

• The person who says, “I’m here, ain’t I?” uses a wholly logical (and once entirely acceptable) contraction of am + not:

I am here, (am + not → ain’t) ain’t I?

What is illogical is the correct form—I’m here, aren’t I?, because that aren’t derives from an ungrammatical construction:
I am here, (are + not → aren’t) aren’t I?

We could point to a dozen other examples where, strictly applied, principles of logic and historical precedent should legitimate the form that we condemn as nonstandard, the form that in fact reflects a logical mind deducing and applying the principle of regularity.

I want to be clear: Though logic predicts himself and knewed and history attests to a once respectable ain’t, we must still reject those usages in writing intended for serious purposes, so much greater is the power of convention than of logic. But we must also reject the notion that Standard English has a natural logic or goodness or an historical inevitability that, by its nature, makes Standard English or its speakers superior to nonstandard English and its speakers. Those who want to discriminate, of course, will do so on the basis of any social difference. But since our language seems to reflect the quality of our minds more directly than do our hair styles or ZIP codes, it is easy to think that linguistic “error” is a reliable sign of mental deficiency. All of us who take language seriously must reject the idea that accidents of correctness connect in any way with the intrinsic goodness of language or its users. That belief is not just wrong. In a democratic society, it is destructive.

THREE KINDS OF RULES

These attitudes have been complicated further by grammarians who, in their zeal to accumulate principles of “good” English, have since the eighteenth century confounded three kinds of rules, rules that refer to the fundamental structure of English, to its standard usage, and to its most debatable points of usage, usually trivial.

1. Some rules define the fundamental grammatical structure of English—ARTICLES precede NOUNS: the book, not book the; verbs usually precede OBJECTS: I see you, not I you see. These rules are observed by every native speaker of English.

2. Some rules distinguish Standard from nonstandard speech: you was vs. you were, I don’t know nothing vs. I don’t know anything. The only writers who worry about these rules are those striving to join the educated class. Educated writers think about such rules only when they see them violated.

3. Finally, some grammarians have tried to impose on educated and literate people rules that they think they should observe. Most date from the last half of the eighteenth century:

   • don’t split infinitives, as in to quietly leave.
   • don’t use than after different; use from.
   • don’t use between for among, when referring to three or more.
A few date from this century:

- don’t use hopefully for I hope, as in *Hopefully it won’t rain.*
- don’t use which for *that* in RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES as in *a book which I bought.*

By mingling these three kinds of rules in the same book, sometimes on the same page, grammarians have led generations of writers to believe that a split infinitive is an error as important as a double negative, and that both are almost on a par with incoherent sentences.

We are going to concentrate on the third class of rules, because they are the only ones that cause educated writers anxiety. They are the rules whose “violation” Pop-grammarians endlessly rehearse as evidence for the Decline of Western Values. But since such grammarians have for centuries been accusing educated writers of violating these rules, we have to conclude that educated writers have for centuries been ignoring both rules and grammarians. Which has been lucky for the grammarians, because if educated writers did obey all the rules that all the grammarians invented, grammarians would have to keep inventing new ones.

The fact is that some educated and careful writers honor every rule; most observe fewer; and a few know all the rules, but also that they need to observe only certain ones, and that other rules they can observe or ignore as they choose. What do those of us do who want not only to write well, but to be thought of as “correct?”

**ON OBSERVING RULES THOUGHTFULLY**

**The Worst (i.e., Safest) Case Policy**

We could adopt the worst-case policy: follow all the rules all the time because somewhere, sometime, someone might criticize us for something—for beginning a sentence with *and* or ending it with *up.* And so with a stack of grammar books and usage manuals close by, or with a grammar-checker booted up on a computer, we scrutinize every sentence for “errors,” until we learn the rules so well that we obey them without thought. But if we decide to follow all the rules all the time, we surrender a measure of stylistic flexibility. Worse, we may find ourselves so obsessed with rules that we tie ourselves—and our writing—into knots. And sooner or later, we will begin to impose those rules—real or not—on others. After all, what good is learning a rule if all we can do is obey it?

**A More Thoughtful (but Riskier) Approach**

The alternative to blind obedience is selective observance. But selectivity has its problems. First, you must learn which rules to observe, which to ignore, and which to observe or ignore as you choose. Second, you have to deal with those whose passion for good grammar seems to give them a moral upper hand: they
seem dedicated to precise usage and able to identify in violations like “between you and me” sure signs of moral decay.

If you want to avoid being labeled “permissive,” or worse “without standards,” but if you also don’t want to submit mindlessly to whatever “rule” someone can recall from ninth grade English, you have to know more about the rules than do the rule-mongers. For example, some teachers and editors chide those who would begin a sentence with and or but. For matters of this kind, it is useful to refer to the most conservative guide to British English (the preferred standard for most conservative American critics): H. W. Fowler’s A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (first edition, Oxford University Press, 1926; second edition, 1965). The second edition was edited by Sir Ernest Gowers, who added this to Fowler’s original entry on and:

That it is a solecism to begin a sentence with and is a faintly lingering superstition. (p. 29)

To the original entry for but, Gowers added “…see and.”


The Final Arbiter: Habits of the Literate

To be sure, every good writer commits an occasional error. We all have slipped up on the number for a verb distant from its subject, and when someone points it out, we gratefully correct it. But we must reject as folklore any rule that is regularly and unselfconsciously ignored by educated and intelligent writers and by equally intelligent readers. If otherwise careful writers begin sentences with but and the vast majority of careful readers don’t notice, then regardless of what any teacher or editor says, beginning a sentence with but cannot be a grammatical error.

On the basis of two principles—how the best writers regularly and unselfconsciously write, and how their best readers respond—we can sort rules of usage into these three categories:

1. Real Rules. When we violate these rules, our educated readers notice and condemn. These are the rules of Standard Usage.

2. Folklore. When we violate these “rules,” few if any educated readers notice, much less condemn. So these are not rules at all, but folklore that we can ignore, unless those we are writing for have the power to exact from us whatever kind of writing they like.

3. Optional Rules. When we violate these rules, few readers notice, but when we observe them, some careful readers do. We can observe these rules or not, depending on how we wish to affect those for whom we are writing.
1. REAL RULES

The most important rules are those whose violation stigmatizes a person as a writer of nonstandard English.

1. Double negatives: The car had **hardly no** systematic care.
2. Nonstandard verbs: They **knowed** what would happen.
3. Double comparatives: This way is **more quicker**.
4. Some ADJECTIVES for ADVERBS: They worked **real good**.
5. Some incorrect pronouns: **Him and me** will study it.
6. Some subject-verb disagreements. **We was** ready to begin.

These and others are so egregious that literate writers never knowingly violate them, unless they are trying to be funny. They are rules whose violations we instantly note[sic], but whose observance we entirely ignore. (Among these, some require discrimination: see faulty parallelism (pp. 169-70), dangling modifiers (pp. 183-84), and comma splices (p. 195).

2. FOLKLORE

A second group of rules includes those whose observance we do not remark, but whose violation we do not remark either. In fact, these are not rules, but folklore, enforced by many editors and schoolteachers, but ignored by most educated and careful writers.

The advice that follows I have based on a good deal of prose that was carefully written and intended to be read just as carefully. The quotations that illustrate “violations” of these alleged rules are from writers who are of substantial intellectual and scholarly stature or who, on matters of usage, are arch-conservatives (occasionally both). You may never have heard of some of these “rules,” but even if you have not yet met someone who has invoked one, chances are that you will.

1. Never begin a sentence with and or but. Allegedly, not this (a passage that violates the “rule” twice):

   **But**, it will be asked, is tact not an individual gift, therefore highly variable in its choices? **And** if that is so, what guidance can a manual offer, other than that of its author’s prejudices—mere impressionism?

The vast majority of highly regarded writers of nonfictional prose begin sentences with and or but, some more than once a page.

Some especially insecure writers also think that they should not begin sentences with because:

Because we have access to so much historical fact, today we know a good deal about changes within the humanities which were not apparent to those of any age much before our own and which the individual scholar must constantly reflect on.
–Walter Ong, S.J., “The Expanding Humanities and the Individual Scholar,” PMLA

They would prefer either of these:

We have access to so much historical fact, so today we . . .

We have access to much historical fact. Consequently we . . .

This proscription appears in no handbook, but it is gaining popular currency. It must stem from advice intended to avoid sentence FRAGMENTS like this one.

The application was rejected. Because the deadline had passed.

When we attach this introductory because-clause to a MAIN CLAUSE and punctuate the two as a single PUNCTUATED SENTENCE, the introductory because is correct:

Because the deadline has passed, the application was rejected.

A more recent variation on this theme is a suspicion that we should not begin a sentence with a preposition, either.

In the morning, everyone left.

This kind of folklore results from overgeneralizing the “rule” about ending sentences with prepositions and perhaps the mistaken belief about because. It is a “rule” with utterly no substance.

2. Use the RELATIVE PRONOUN that—not which—for restrictive clauses; use which for NON-RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES. Allegedly, not this:

Next is a typical situation which a practiced writer corrects “for style” virtually by reflex action.
Yet on just the previous page, Barzun himself had written, “In conclusion, I recommend using *that* with defining clauses except when stylistic reasons interpose.” (No stylistic reasons interposed.) A rule can have no force when a writer as prestigious as Jacques Barzun asserts it in print and then immediately and unselfconsciously violates it, and his editors and proofreaders and he himself never catch it.

This point of usage first saw light of day in 1906 in Henry and Francis Fowler’s *The King’s English* (Oxford University Press; reprinted as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1973). Henry and his brother Francis recommended the rule, because they thought that the random variation between *which* and *that* in restrictive clauses was messy. So they simply announced that writers should (with some exceptions) limit *which* to non-restrictive clauses.

A non-restrictive clause describes a noun that a reader can already identify unambiguously. In this position, *which* enjoys the full support of historical and contemporary usage:

Abco ended its bankruptcy, which it had announced earlier.

Since a company can usually have only one bankruptcy at a time, a reader identifies it unambiguously as the only bankruptcy in question, and so the writer puts a comma before the modifying clause and begins the clause with *which*.

But, according to the brothers Fowler, we should use only *that* to introduce a restrictive relative clause, a clause identifying a noun phrase that (not *which*) a reader cannot identify unambiguously:

Abco developed a product *that* (not *which*) made money.

If Abco has many products and the reader does not know the particular product the writer was referring to, then the identifying clause singles out that product from an indefinite set of other products. And so the writer does not put a comma before the modifying clause, and, at least according to the Fowlers, should begin the clause with *that*.

But this “rule” did not then and does not now enjoy the support of either historical or contemporary usage. Francis died in 1918, but Henry continued the family tradition with *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. In that landmark reference work, he devoted more than a page to discussing the fine points of *which* and *that*, and then, perhaps a bit wistfully, added this:

Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers. (p. 635)
That observation was apparently judged still relevant to our own usage, because it was retained by the editor of Fowler’s second edition.

3. Use fewer with nouns that you can count, less with quantities you cannot. Allegedly not this:

   I can remember no less than five occasions when the correspondence columns of The Times rocked with volleys of letters from the academic profession protesting that academic freedom is in danger and the future of scholarship threatened.

We never use fewer before uncountable singular nouns: fewer sand, but educated writers use less before plural nouns: less problems.

4. There is a handful of words commonly used in ways proscribed by some conservative critics, who are ignored by most careful writers.

   Most careful writers do not restrict since to refer to an earlier point in time (We’ve been here since Friday) but use it with a meaning close to “We take for granted (and hope that you will too) the truth of the proposition following this word since”:

   Since we agree on the matter, we need not discuss it further.

   Careful writers use while in the same way. They do not restrict it to its temporal meaning (We’ll wait while you eat), but use it as well with a meaning close to “The fact that I state in this clause is true right now, but what I assert in the next simultaneously qualifies it”:

   While we agree on the problems, we disagree about solutions.

Though some critics insist that data and media must always be plural, many careful writers use them as singulars, in the same way they treat agenda and insignia as singular (agendum and insignie were the original singulars). Careful writers and careful readers distinguish between the plural forms, strata, errata, and criteria and their singular forms, stratum, erratum, and criterion.

Careful writers use anticipate to mean “expect”; alternative to refer to one of not just two, but three or more choices; contact as a general verb meaning “enter into communication with.” Editors of some dictionaries who base their decisions on the usage of careful writers countenance infer for imply and disinterested for uninterested. Many teachers and editors disagree. So do I.

A nice point about disinterested, though: Its original meaning was, in fact, that of today’s uninterested. Only in the eighteenth century did
disinterested begin to mean “impartial.” Some critics like to cite this newer usage to claim that those who use disinterested to mean uninterested encourage the demise of English. Right or wrong, the recalcitrant survival of disinterested in its original sense shows just how durable our language really is.

On the most formal of occasions, when you would want to avoid a hint of offending anyone who might believe in any of these alleged rules, you might decide to observe them all. In ordinary circumstances, though, these “rules” are ignored by most careful writers, which is to say that these rules are not rules at all, but folklore. If you adopt the worst-case approach and observe them all, all the time—well, private virtues are their own reward.

3. OPTIONAL RULES

These rules, complement the Real Rules: Few readers notice when you violate these Optional Rules, but most readers will notice when you observe them and assume that you are signalling special formality.

1. “Do not split infinitives.” Some purists would condemn Dwight MacDon-
ald, a linguistic arch-conservative, for this:

   ...one wonders why Dr. Gove and his editors did not think of labelling knowed as substandard right where it occurs, and one suspects that they wanted to slightly conceal the fact or at any rate to put off its exposure as long as decently possible.

   —“The String Untuned,” The New Yorker

They would require this:

   One wonders why Dr. Gove and his editors did not think of labelling knowed as substandard right where it occurs, and one suspects that they wanted to conceal the fact slightly or at any rate to put off its exposure as long as decently possible.

The split infinitive is now so common among the best writers that when we avoid splitting, we invite notice, whether we intend to or not.

2. “Use shall as the first person simple future, will for second and third person simple future; use will to mean strong intention in the first person, shall for second and third person.” Some purists would condemn F. L. Lucas, a highly regarded writer on matters of style, for this:

   I will end with two remarks by two wise old women of the civilized eighteenth century.

   —“What Is Style?” Holiday

They would demand:
I shall end with two remarks by two wise old women of the civilized eighteenth century. They would be right, only if they needed some special formality.

3. “Use whom as the object of a verb or preposition.” Purists would condemn William Zinsser for this:

Soon after you confront this matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: “Who am I writing for?”

—On Writing Well

They would insist on:

Soon after you confront this matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: “For whom am I writing?”

Whom is a small but distinct flag of self-conscious correctness. And when a writer makes the wrong choice, it is a sign of anxiety.

The rule: The form of the pronoun whom/who depends on whether it is a subject or an object of its own clause. This is an example of over-compensation:

The committee must decide whom should be promoted.

In that sentence, since whom is the subject of the verb should be promoted, that whom should be who.

4. “Do not end a sentence with a preposition.” Purists would condemn Sir Ernest Gowers for this:

The peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official with.

—The Complete Plain Words

And insist on this:

The peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick with which to beat the official.

The second is more formal, but the first is correct. Whenever we move a preposition before a which or whom we make its sentence more formal (with the obligatory whom compounding the formality). Compare:

The man with whom I had spoken was the man to whom I had written.

The man I spoke with was the man I had written to.
We must occasionally recognize that a preposition at the end of a sentence can be clumsy and weak. George Orwell may have ended this next sentence with a preposition to make a point, but I suspect it just turned up there.

(The defense of the English language] has nothing to do with archaism, with the salvaging of obsolete words and turns of speech, or with the setting up of a “standard English which must never be departed from.

–George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

This would have been less awkward and more emphatic:

Defenders of English do not preserve archaisms, salvage obsolete words and turns of speech, or create rules of “standard English” that (not which) a writer must always obey.

5. “Do not refer to one with he or his; repeat one.” Purists would deplore Theodore Bernstein’s he:

Thus, unless one belongs to that tiny minority who can speak directly and beautifully, one should not write as he talks.

–The Careful Writer

They would prefer the more formal:

Thus, unless one belongs to that tiny minority who can speak directly and beautifully, one should not write as one talks.

6. “Contrary-to-fact statements require the subjunctive form of the verb.” Purists would correct this by H. W. Fowler:

Another suffix that is not a living one, but is sometimes treated as if it was, is -al; &... .

–A Dictionary of Modern English Usage

They would insist on this:

Another suffix that is not a living one, but is sometimes treated as if it were, is -al; &... .

As the subjunctive slowly sinks into the sunset of linguistic history, it gives a sentence a faintly archaic and therefore formal glow. We regularly and unselfconsciously use the simple past tense to express most subjunctives:

If we knew what to do, we would do it.

Be is the problem: Strictly construed, the subjunctive demands were, but was is gradually replacing it:
If this were 1941, a loaf of bread would cost twenty cents.
If this was 1941, a loaf of bread would cost twenty cents.

Certainly, when the occasion calls for formal English, the wise writer chooses the formal usage. But the writer chooses.

THE BÊTES NOIRES

For some critics, a fourth group of items has become the object of particularly zealous abuse. These are the items the columnists and commentators endlessly cite as evidence that cultivated English is an endangered species. There is no explaining why these items should excite such passion, but they have become the symbolic flags around which those most concerned with linguistic purity have apparently agreed to rally. None of these “errors” interferes with clarity and concision; indeed, some of them save a word or two. But because they may arouse such intense feelings, every writer should know their special status. However real those feelings may be, though, we have to understand that these so-called rules are largely capricious, with no foundation in logic, history, etymology, or linguistic efficiency.

1. Never use like for as or as if. Not this:

These operations failed like the earlier ones did.

But this:

These operations failed as the earlier ones did.

Like became a conjunction in the eighteenth century when writers began to drop the as from the conjunctive phrase like as, leaving just like to serve as the conjunction. This elision of one element while keeping the other is a common linguistic change. We might note that the editor of the second edition of Fowler deleted like for as from Fowler’s original list of Illiteracies and moved it into the category of Sturdy Indefensibles.

2. After different use from, never to or than. Not this:

These numbers are different than the others.

We solve this differently than we did last year.

But this:

These numbers are different from the others.

We solve this differently from the way we did last year.

This is a case where ignoring the rule can save a few words.
3. Use *hopefully* only when the subject of the sentence is in fact hopeful. Not this:

   **Hopefully**, the matter will be resolved soon.

But this:

   **I hopefully say** that the matter will be resolved soon.

This rule is so entrenched in the popular mind that it is impossible to convince some critics by evidence alone that the rule is idiosyncratic, with no basis in logic or grammar. *Hopefully* always refers to the feelings of the speaker, when used to introduce a sentence such as

   **Hopefully**, it will not rain tomorrow

It is synonymous with,

   **I am hopeful when I say** it will not rain tomorrow.

It is parallel to other introductory words such as *candidly, bluntly, seriously, frankly, honestly, sadly, and happily*:

   **Seriously**, you must be careful

   → **I am serious** when I say that you must be careful.

No one condemns a speaker who uses one of these words to describe attitude, but many deplore the exactly analogous *hopefully*. If we adopted their line of reasoning, logic would further require that we also reject all words and phrases such as *to summarize, in conclusion, finally*, and so on, because every one of them also qualifies the voice of the writer: *I summarize, I conclude, I say finally*. But just as bad money drives out good, so does entrenched folklore drive out logic.

4. Never use *finalize* to mean *finish, complete, end*.

   But *finalize* does not mean what any of those other words means. *Finalize* means to clean up the last few small details of a project, a specific sense captured by no other word. Some think *finalize* still smacks too much of the bureaucratic cast of mind, an understandable objection. But we ought not accept the argument that the word is bad because *-ize* is ugly. If we did, we would have to reject *nationalize, synthesize, rationalize*, along with hundreds of other common words.

5. Never never use *irregardless* for *regardless*. The word is a recognizable blend of *irrespective* and *regardless*, but history doesn’t legitimize it (or should I say, make it legitimate?).

6. Do not modify an absolute word such as *perfect, unique, final, or complete* with *very, more, quite, and so on*. Presumably, not this:
We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . .

A SPECIAL PROBLEM: PRONOUNS AND SEXISM

We expect literate writers to make verbs agree with subjects.

There are several reasons for this.

We also expect their pronouns to agree with antecedents. Not this:

Early efforts to oppose building a hydrogen bomb failed because it was not coordinated with the scientific and political communities. No one wanted to expose themselves to anti-Communist hysteria unless they had the backing of others.

But this:

Early efforts to oppose building a hydrogen bomb failed because they were not coordinated with the scientific and political communities. No one wanted to expose himself to anti-Communist hysteria unless he had the backing of others.

We must use a singular pronoun to refer to a singular referent:

The early effort to oppose the building of a hydrogen bomb failed because it was not coordinated . . .

But there are two further problems. First, do we use a singular or plural pronoun when we refer to a singular noun that is plural in meaning: group, committee, staff, administration, and so on? Some writers use a singular pronoun when the group acts as a single entity:

The committee has met but has not yet made its decision.

We use a plural pronoun when members of a group act individually:

The faculty received the memo, but not all of them read it.

These days we find the plural used in both senses.

Second, what personal pronoun should we use to refer to indefinite pronouns: someone, everyone, no one and to singular nouns that do not indicate gender: teacher, doctor, person, student? Casual usage invites the plural:

Everyone who spends four years in college realizes what a soft life they had only when they get a nine-to-five job, with no summer and Christmas vacations.

When a person gets involved with drugs, no one can help them unless they want to help themselves.
In both cases, more formal usage requires the singular pronoun:

Everyone who spends four years in college realizes what a soft life she had only when she gets a nine-to-five job, with no summer and Christmas vacations.

When a person gets involved with drugs, no one can help him unless he wants to help himself.

But when we observe the formal rule, we raise another, thornier problem—the matter of gender-neutral language.

Common sense demands that we express ideas in ways that are neither wrong nor gratuitously offensive. We give up nothing when we substitute humankind for mankind, police officer for policeman, synthetic for man-made, and so on, and we stop reinforcing stereotypes. (Those who ask whether we should also substitute person-in-the-moon for man-in-the-moon are being merely tendentious.)

But generic he is different: If we reject he as a generic pronoun because it is sexist, and they because it is ungrammatical or potentially ambiguous, we are left with either a clumsily intrusive he or she, a substantially worse he/she, (or worst, s/he). The he/she or s/he constructions make anyone with a sense of style flinch:

When a writer does not consider the ethnicity of his/her readers, they may respond in ways s/he would not have anticipated to words that for him/her are innocent of ethnic bias.

So we rewrite. We can begin by substituting plurals for singulars:

When a writer does not consider the ethnicity of his readers . . .

When writers do not consider the ethnicity of their readers . . .

But to the careful ear, plurals are less precise than singulars.

When appropriate, we can substitute a second person you or a first person we (though some readers object to the royal we):

If we do not consider the ethnic background of our readers, they may respond in ways we would not expect to words that to us are innocent of ethnic bias.

We can also drop people altogether, but that leads to academic abstraction, a problem that this book is dedicated to eliminating:

Failure to consider ethnic background may lead to an unexpected response to words considered innocent of ethnic bias.
Finally, we can alternately use *he* and *she*, as I have done. But that is not a good solution either, because to some readers, *she* seems as intrusive as *he/she*. A book reviewer in the New York Times (1/9/92) wondered what to make of an author whom the reviewer charged with attempting

to right history’s wrongs to women by referring to random examples as “she,” as in “Ask a particle physicist what happens when a quark is knocked out of a proton, and she will tell you . . . ,” which strikes this reader as oddly patronizing to women.

We might wonder whether particle physicists who happen to be women would feel the same way.

For years to come writers of English are going to have a problem with generic pronouns, and to some readers, any solution will seem awkward. I suspect that we will eventually accept *they* as singular:

No one should turn in their writing unedited.

There is precedent: At one time, our second person singular pronoun was *thou*. But by the late sixteenth century, *thee* and *thou* were considered socially condescending, even insulting, so most English speakers replaced them with you, originally a strictly plural pronoun. The same thing could happen with *they*. Predictably, some believe that should such a day ever come, speakers and writers of English will have surrendered all aspirations to precision. We can only wait and see.

**PRECISION**

We must put this matter of precision precisely: We want to be grammatically correct. We must be. But if we include in our definition of correct both what is true and what is folklore, we risk missing what is important—that which makes prose wordy and confusing or clear and concise. We do not achieve precision merely by getting straight all the *whiches* and *thats*, by mending every split infinitive, by eradicating every *finalize* and *hopefully*. Many of those who concentrate on such details seem oblivious to the more serious matter of imprecision in substantive thought and expression, and it is those who will allow obtuse prose eventually to become the national standard, prose like this grammatically impeccable and stylistically wretched passage (it actually appeared in print):

Too precise a specification of information processing requirements incurs the risk of overestimation resulting in unused capacity or inefficient use of costly resources or of underestimation leading to ineffectiveness or other inefficiencies. Too little precision in specifying needed information processing capacity gives no guidance with respect to the means for the procurement of the needed resources. There may be an optimal degree of precision in providing the decision-maker with the flexibility to adapt to needs.
SUMMARY

The finer points of correct English are unpredictable, so I can offer no principles by which to decide whether any particular point of usage is Real, Optional, or Folklore. Indeed, if “correctness” did submit to principle, correctness would be less of an issue, because most “errors” of usage are created by someone trying to level idiosyncrasies on the basis of a general principle. But, of course, the idiosyncrasy of such rules is exactly what makes them so useful to those who already know them. Their very unpredictability guarantees that they will be mastered only by those born into the right social environment or by those willing to learn such rules as one of the prices of admission.

Actually, I think that those of us who choose to observe all these rules all the time do so not because they think that they are protecting the integrity of the English language or the quality of our culture, but because they want to assert their own personal style. Some of us are straightforward and plainspeaking; others take pleasure in a bit of elegance, in a touch of fastidiously self-conscious “class.” The shalls and the wills, the whos and the whoms, the aggressively unsplit infinitives–they are the private choices that let us express a refined sense of linguistic decorum, a decorum that many believe testifies to linguistic precision. It is an impulse that we ought not scorn, so long as it is informed and thoughtful, and so long as those who believe in all the rules include in their concern for precision the more important matters to which we now turn.