



Convincing (Or  
Should I Say  
“Persuading”?)  
Writers to Follow  
Rules: Rhetoric in  
Garner’s and Fowler’s  
Usage Manuals

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*This project compares Bryan Garner's 2009 Garner's Modern American Usage with Fowler's 1926 A Dictionary of Modern English Usage to analyze their rhetorical strategies. This comparison found both usage manuals to adhere to prescriptive rules; however, Fowler's prescriptions, through implementation of empathy rather than condescension, appeal to a wider audience.*

English usage is a controversial issue, and there are dozens of usage commentators who claim to be authorities on the subject. Two usage commentators, H.W. Fowler and Bryan Garner, are especially strict in their prescriptions and are considered to be authorities in this area. In this paper I will compare Bryan Garner's 2009 *Garner's Modern American Usage* with Fowler's 1926 *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* to analyze their rhetorical strategies.

Fowler tries to assert authority through his strong prose and unapologetic prescriptions. Garner imitates Fowler to a degree in order to gain authority, but I believe Garner recognizes that it is better to appeal to a wider audience of usage commentators and writers and gain their trust (even if he has to ease up on enforcing prescriptions) than to appeal to usage commentators alone. In order to gain a wider audience, he portrays himself as more relaxed than Fowler with regard to his prescriptions, provides more context than Fowler for his entries, and addresses his readers as peers and fellow writers.

Fowler is fearless in his prescriptions and seems not to care whether or not he sounds offensive. Perhaps the best representation of Fowler's unapologetic prose is the following passage from his entry *Negative & affirmative parallels*:

Writers who appear educated enough to know whether a sentence is right or wrong will put down the opposite of what they mean, or something different from what they mean, or what means nothing at all, apparently quite satisfied so long as the reader can be trusted to make a shrewd guess at what they ought to have said instead of taking them at their word; to his possible grammatical sensibilities they pay no heed whatever, having none themselves. (Fowler 1926, 373)

In this ruthless condemnation of "writers," Fowler separates himself from them and gives the impression that he is condescending to their level in order to police their usage. He makes no attempt to become the readers' friend; rather, he instills fear in them and motivates them to follow his prescriptions only in order to avoid being ridiculed.

Garner imitates Fowler's directness, but he is not so antagonistic toward writers. He simply states that double negatives should be avoided and that "to say, for example, that the point is not uninteresting or that someone's writing is not unintelligible is probably to engage in a time-wasting rhetorical flourish" (Garner 2009, 563). Garner cuts straight to the point, but he does not embarrass his readers as much as Fowler does. In other instances, Garner uses humor to temper his statements in order to appear more approachable. He states that those who use *flaunt* and *flout* interchangeably must do so with the hope that they will go "unnoticed (or unmentioned)"; he then states that "judges' written opinions fall into the first category" (360). This type of dry humor is prevalent throughout the manual and helps readers feel like they are in on a joke that others do not understand. In this way, readers feel a bond with Garner and consequently trust him more.

Garner outperforms Fowler in appealing to his audience by treating readers as fellow writers. With regard to *flaunt* and *flout* he states, "the words are best kept separate," effectively telling readers that it is their choice but that he has their best interest at heart when he recommends following the prescription (359). In this way, Garner effectively builds rapport with the readers by helping them feel that they are not being forced to follow his recommendations.

Fowler might not like Garner's less-than-vehement attack on proscribed forms, but Garner seems to have realized that the first step in encouraging correct usage is gaining readers' trust in order to influence them to choose prescribed forms over proscribed forms. Usage commentators may view Fowler as the ultimate authority, but Garner realizes that it does not matter as much what sources *usage commentators* consult—it matters what sources *writers* consult when they have a question. Garner is trying to become that source: despite his agreement with Fowler's rules, he softens Fowler's prescriptions in order to appeal to a wider audience.

Fowler's concise prose and short entries give the impression that he cannot afford to waste time on the silly mistakes that writers make. He frequently omits any historical context or descriptive usage, preferring instead to jump straight to the prescription. For example, his entry on *hang* is less than three lines: "past & p.p. *hanged* of the capital punishment & in the imprecation; otherwise *hung*" (Fowler 1926, 227). Fowler gives no examples of prescribed or proscribed use; his prose leaves little room for questions and therefore seems more impatient.

Garner, on the other hand, devotes almost an entire column to *hang*, including several examples of prescribed and proscribed use (Garner 2009, 409). This may be an attempt to compete with other usage manuals (such as *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*), which devote more space to discussing a term's history and giving examples of prescribed and proscribed usage. He imitates Fowler's direct judgments on terms but attempts to surpass Fowler by providing more examples and discussion; this makes him seem more invested in the readers' comprehension of the issue. Under *affect/effect*, Garner refers to Fowler's treatment of the verb forms of these two words and then states that "today even the confusion of [the noun forms of the two terms] is fairly common" (26). By citing Fowler, Garner gains credibility with usage commentators; by providing more discussion of the grammatical rule, he increases his credibility and accessibility in the eyes of writers.

Another tool Garner uses to provide readers with context is the Language-Change Index scale included on every other page of his dictionary. His scale gives each entry a rating from 1 to 5, with 1 being a totally rejected form and 5 being fully accepted (165). Since few people are likely to memorize every single rule, they appreciate knowing which rules are most important. In this way, Garner gains credibility in the eyes of his readers and respects their time and their inability to memorize thousands of rules. Even though he does not give evidence

for his ratings, the strong prose that accompanies them increases his accessibility and appeal to writers.

Perhaps the most significant difference between Fowler and Garner is their evaluation of the reader. Fowler seems to look down on his readers and regard them as his inferiors. He calls *equally* as an “illiterate tautology, but one of which it is necessary to demonstrate the frequency, & therefore the danger, by abundant quotation” and presents nine instances of its proscribed use (Fowler 1926, 145). In doing so, he gives the reader the impression that they fall into the category of “illiterates” and does little to sympathize with their confusion. In dealing with *unique* he condemns writing “*more, most, very, somewhat, rather, or comparatively unique*” and laments that “such nonsense, however, is often written” (680). Because many people employ these constructions when using *unique*, Fowler is effectively criticizing (and consequently losing favor with) the average writer.

Garner states that when writers use *data* in a singular sense they “[risk] their credibility with some readers” because, “in nonscientific contexts, *datum* is likely to sound pretentious” (Garner 2009, 225). Again, he appears to have his readers’ reputations in mind and seems to want them to have the respect of their peers while not appearing pompous. In addressing *unique* he tells the readers that “the tendency [to use it to mean ‘unusual’] is worth resisting” because avoiding this tendency will mark them as conscientious writers (831). Garner’s advice is frequently tied to the effect that each form proscribed (or proscribed) may have on writers’ reputations among their peers. Thus, Garner convinces his readers that he is only being stubborn about the rules because it will help them in the long run.

In reading each commentator’s manual, readers can easily see that both Garner and Fowler adhere to and promote prescriptive rules enthusiastically. However, Garner outdoes Fowler by being more appealing and more accessible. Fowler does little to create a collaborative relationship with his readers, but Garner tries to cultivate

a positive relationship with his readers while still being faithful to the traditional rules. Garner's language is reminiscent of Fowler (in fact, he quotes Fowler often throughout his dictionary); however, Garner attempts to improve upon Fowler's arguments and present himself as more approachable and, frankly, more likable. He invites readers to collaborate with him in future editions of his dictionary, stating that "I'm always grateful for thoughtful, well-considered suggestions" (Garner 2009, xi). This reflects a more careful, thoughtful approach to gaining readers' trust and persuading them to follow the prescriptions he sets forth. Fowler seems intent on communicating every prescription perfectly so that his readers' usage is perfect; Garner appears to recognize that appealing to many writers is more effective than appealing to just one or two, even if he has to gloss over some aspects of prescriptions to do so.

# References

Fowler, Henry W. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. London: Humphrey Milford, 1926.

Garner, Bryan A. *Garner's Modern American Usage*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.