



Staff Essay

# A Prescriptive Addiction: How I Became a Descriptivist

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*With such a powerful tradition of speaking and writing "correctly," English lends itself well to a prescriptive mindset of etiquette rules. Melville describes how his own use and perception of such rules changed over time. His understanding of linguistic theory changed him from a zealot to a conscientious objector in English's war on error.*

I have long known that I want to be an editor. I knew as early as high school that editing would be a good career choice for me. Prior to taking editing classes, I actually didn't know much about what editors do. But coming through the editing program at Brigham Young University has educated me about all that.

I initially wanted to be an editor because I was very much a prescriptive grammarian—that is, someone who applies traditional grammatical rules and accepts them as absolutely necessary. Fortunately, before I actually did any editing, I was converted to descriptivism, which means being concerned with *why* people are saying something a particular way rather than being concerned with *what* people should say. Are there conflicts between being an editor and being a descriptive grammarian? Perhaps, but I think that being aware of descriptivism has made me a better editor. Let me discuss my prescriptive past, my conversion to descriptivism, and how I apply both of those principles to editing.

## A prescriptive teenager

Throughout my years in junior high and high school (and even in elementary school), I was quite concerned with speaking “proper” English. When I learned a new grammatical rule, I would do my best to apply it, seldom questioning where the rule came from. In the public school system, these rules were always taught as being essential and absolutely right. And who doesn't want to be right?

So I learned the rules. And I loved them. I would even learn new grammar rules for fun. I was that annoying friend (or enemy) who would always correct you. “Whom,” I would say, “not who.” “To where are you going,” I would say, “not Where are you going to.” If someone called me a grammar Nazi, not only would I admit it, I would accept the title gleefully.

I was pretty good at all this grammar stuff. I shined especially bright in eleventh grade, the year we learned the most grammar. During the school year, I was chosen as the student of the month from the English department. When it was time for our first grammar test, I heard people from other periods talking about how difficult it had been; but when I took the test, I got the highest score of all five periods. During the entire school year, I think that there was only one test on which I did not score the highest, and even then my score was pretty high. It seemed that all of the eleventh grade knew that I consistently got the best scores on the grammar tests. Since our teacher graded on a curve, that didn't bode well for everyone else's grades.

Of course, it wasn't in just the eleventh-grade English class that I excelled grammatically. I scored a perfect score of 36 on the English portion of the ACT—which, if I remember correctly, was fairly prescriptive. I became the proofreader for my school's newspaper my senior year. That, however, was perhaps more of an embarrassment. It was highly publicized that I was the proofreader, but I rarely had time to proofread other articles (since they always got finished too late), and our teacher knew nothing about grammar but thought she did. This meant that our newspaper was full of typos and grammatical problems. I worried that people would think I didn't know what I was doing, even though I was supposed to be the grammar guru. (I even wrote an article about using "proper" grammar, using TV shows and movies as examples. It was one of the most prescriptive things I've ever written.) I "corrected" people's grammar all over the place and continued to do so until I entered college.

## A descriptive adult

When I registered for college at age twenty-one, I declared an English major. I wanted to be an editor, and I had always learned grammar in my English classes. But then I discovered that there was an English lan-

guage (ELang) major, and I knew that that was the major for me. After all, I don't care much for literary analysis, and writing isn't my favorite. I knew that I wanted to be an editor, and I saw that there was an editing minor housed in the ELang program. I was excited at the prospect of learning even more grammatical rules. All those grammatical questions I had had would be answered, and I would be the biggest grammar Nazi in the county! (No, that's not a typo; I did mean to say *county* and not *country*.)

Imagine my surprise when I took my first ELang class, Introduction to the English Language, and learned that those rules I had accepted as absolute truths weren't as absolute or correct as I had believed. I learned about the ideas of descriptivism and prescriptivism, and I began to realize that I was a prescriptivist but that descriptivism was less judgmental and more logical. I remember one particular class in which someone asked if *funner* was a word. My prescriptive heart said, "No, *funner* is most definitely not a word." But then our professor, an educated man with a PhD, said, "I would say it is." That response was a dagger to my prescriptive heart. That introductory class made me question and reevaluate all the rules I had learned growing up.

My grammatical heart transplant was completed the following year when I took Modern American Usage from Dr. Royal Skousen, a strong descriptivist. He taught us about several prescriptive rules, where they came from, and why they are silly. He said that the rules that had been invented by the prescriptive grammarians, usually from the 1700s, caused frustration for millions (people who had to learn to apply them) and caused delight for thousands (the prescriptivists, like my former self). I realized how foolish it was to apply rules that some pedant had made up hundreds of years ago—rules that weren't even grounded in reality. Most of them were based on Latin. Why should I follow the rules of a language I don't even speak?

I remember one day when I heard my roommate answer his phone. The person on the other end asked for him, and my room-

mate said, “This is he.” I asked him later if he naturally said “This is he” instead of “This is him,” or whether he had been trained to say it that way. He told me that when he was ten years old, he had said “This is him” on the phone and his mom yelled at him, saying “*This is he!*” Well, Mrs. Roommate’s Mom, and anyone else who insists on that phrasing, do you even know where that rule comes from? Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time in England, smart people would learn Latin. They loved Latin, even though it was a dead language. This linguistic necrophilia led scholars to study Latin more than they studied English—but eventually they turned around to study English. The problem was that they applied the rules of Latin to English, even though English is a Germanic language and Latin is an Italic language. They knew that in Latin you would use the nominative form in the predicate position, so they decided that you should say something like “It is I” instead of “It is me.” Never mind that in French, which is a Latinate language with a more direct influence on English, you would say “*C’est moi*,” which is closer to “It’s me” than it is to “It is I.” So insisting on using the predicative nominative, as it is called, is based on an arbitrary rule that has no basis in intuitive English structure.

## Problems with prescriptivism

The problem with prescriptivism is that it doesn’t seem to account for register or formality. Prescriptivism says there is one right way, and it is always the right way. But that is wrong. I remember seeing a blurb in an informal newspaper in which the writer was lamenting the use of *fail* as a noun. One of her examples was a soccer player missing the goal and saying something like, “That was such an epic fail!” She said that *fail* was an example of undignified speech, and she insisted on always using dignified speech, even in a soccer game. I suppose she expects soccer players to trade their mid-thigh shorts for black pleated slacks, too.

Looking back, I must say that I am absolutely shocked that I had never heard of the idea of prescriptivism versus descriptivism until I was in college. I heard terms like *standard* and *nonstandard* in my high school English classes, but they never told us what those really meant. I was under the impression that *standard* meant “correct.” The public school system was shamelessly promoting prescriptivism.

What scares me even more is that there are people who went through the prescriptive public school system but never got another opinion; they will go through life applying these prescriptive rules to the detriment of both themselves and those around them. I had no idea of descriptivism until my ELang classes. People who major in math or history or—most terrifying—English and who never touch linguistics will continue to make people feel dumb about themselves. I think prescriptivism is really just a way for people to brag about how much smarter they are than everyone else. And then other people are sucked into the trap of thinking there is only one correct way of speaking.

It only seems logical that if you are going to follow a rule, you should know why it exists. When you learn a lot of grammatical rules, you will learn how foolish they are and you will no longer want to follow them. If I were to travel back in time and meet my former self, the younger me would probably correct me on my “improper” use of *who* or my “incorrect” use of the predicate accusative. But now that I have an even greater knowledge of the English language, I could get in a linguistic argument with the younger me—and the older me would win. (Yes, I know the subject should be *I*.) People tend to think that knowing these rules makes them so educated. But we descriptivists know better.

Becoming a descriptivist has given me many freedoms. I now put prepositions at the end of sentences whenever I want to, since I know where that rule against doing so comes from. I no longer try to carefully avoid splitting infinitives. It was me that was one of the biggest advocates of the predicate nominative, but now I don’t care. And

I use conjunctions however I want to. Being a descriptivist is much funner than being a prescriptivist.

## The linguistic dress code

Now, you may wonder, “How can you be an editor if you’re such a descriptivist? As a descriptivist, doesn’t that mean you accept anything that a native speaker of English says to be grammatical? And isn’t the whole point of editing to correct people’s writing?” Now, I will admit that at times I find my identity as an editor at odds with my identity as a descriptivist. But I try to find a good balance between the two.

When I edit, I do find myself fairly permissive. I’m more likely to create a style sheet that permits certain forms than to create one that changes them. In fact, if I see an instance of *they* used with a singular referent, I will flag it—not because I want to change it, but because I *don’t* want it to be changed. I don’t want anyone else “fixing” *they* into the clunky *he or she*, and I’m doing my best to make sure that singular *they* becomes standard. (I think it’s on its way there already.)

Now that I have studied editing and gained experience as an intern, I see the issue differently. Editing is not about making writing “correct”; it is about making it *clear*. If an author creates an ambiguity, it is my responsibility to get rid of the ambiguity so that the readers will understand. If an author creates a sentence that is so convoluted and complicated that it can’t be understood, it is my job to recast the sentence to make it clearer. My job is to make writing as easy to understand as possible.

However, there are times when I have to edit things not to make the writing clear but because convention calls for it. For example, I could not care less whether a number range uses a hyphen or an en dash. I think hyphens are perfectly clear to show a range of numbers, and I think the only people who will notice hyphens where there “should” be en dashes are people who have learned about them—

namely, other editors. But despite my apathy toward en dashes, I know that it is my job as an editor to fix them simply because of convention, so I do.

Changing things simply because convention calls for it makes me feel like a prescriptivist. And that bugs me. But I have come to think of it as enforcing a dress code. In society, we have expectations about clothing. We expect people to wear shiny leather shoes to church, colorful sneakers to the grocery store, and flip-flops to the beach. It's not that any one of those shoes is necessarily better than the others, it's just that there are societal norms that we follow. (And yes, I know I just used a comma splice.) There can be definite consequences for violating these societal norms, whether they are fair or not. You might get kicked out of the five-star restaurant for wearing your dirty overalls, but if you showed up at the local barn-raising ceremony wearing a tuxedo, they would probably tell you to go home and change.

This is the way I think of language and editing. I need to apply conventions to certain writings, not because the conventions are “right” or necessary, but because they are expected in different settings. A tie may be a pointless piece of cloth, but it is expected in formal settings. Using *whom* instead of *who* in a given sentence may not make the sentence any clearer, but it is expected in a formal setting. If I am editing something particularly formal, I may need to apply prescriptive rules. However, if I am editing something that is more lighthearted, I can break as many prescriptive rules as I want.

Now, I must admit that there are some rules that have a place because they aid clarity. Punctuation is a good example. There are some rules about commas that I really don't care about, but generally punctuation crucially helps understanding. Consider the YouTube singing sensation Jan Terri. When she announced that she was working on a new album, someone asked her if she was going to have songs as great as her masterpieces “Get Down Goblin” and “Excuse My Christmas.” Her response was, “No new songs.” What she meant was, “No,

new songs.” But because she omitted the comma, she actually said the opposite of what she meant.

That’s where an education in both prescriptivism and descriptivism is helpful. I know which rules and guidelines actually help writing, and I know which rules are pure nonsense and could even hinder writing. I also hope that I can spread my knowledge of descriptivism. I can discuss it with other editors and authors who may be unaware of the concept of descriptivism. And if I allow certain forms that go against the prescriptive rules, I will be able to help them become more standardized and less stigmatized. And if any prescriptivists judge me because I put prepositions at the end of sentences, phooey on them!

## The End

I have known that I wanted to be an editor since I was in high school. But if I had gone into editing straight out of high school, I would have been a terrible editor. I would have applied all sorts of nonsensical rules. I would have insisted on no split infinitives, no sentence-final prepositions, no predicate accusative forms, and so on. I think in many cases I would have made the writing worse. But now I actually know what editing is all about. I know that language is something dynamic and powerful. We can communicate all sorts of amazing, beautiful ideas with our language. And it is my responsibility to make sure that those brilliant ideas are communicated to the world. It is quite the heavy responsibility.

But I feel I am up to the challenge.