



The Year 2004 in Grammar, Usage & Writing

Bryan A. Garner

January

Writing in the *Skeptical Inquirer* on New Year's Day, Jennifer Sherwood Olathe opined that the ambiguity of Nostradamus's predictions "comes from his frankly poor grammar, particularly his scanty knowledge of Latin grammar"; one might have thought, to the contrary, that the ambiguities were purposeful and have made his predictions more durable. In the *New Scientist*, Adrian Barnett reported that in the Amazonian language of Tariana, which is in danger of dying, it is a grammatical error to report a fact without citing your source; imagine how a switch to that language might affect American journalism and politics. In the journal *Marketing*, a press-release writer for a major company wrote this self-proving sentence: "Grammar and writing is not one of my strong points." Merriam-Webster reached the one-million mark in hard-copy sales of the 11th edition of its *Collegiate Dictionary*, published in the summer of 2003. The University of Chicago reached the 100,000 mark in sales of

the 15th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Meanwhile, Oxford University Press reported that individual subscriptions to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (at \$29 per month) are the most rapidly growing subscription type for the OED online; sales of the 20-volume hard copy, never especially brisk, had fallen off sharply.

February

A two-year study by the American Diploma Project reported that an American high-school diploma represents "little more than a certificate of attendance," according to one of its authors, Michael Cohen. Employers told researchers that high-school graduates lack basic skills in grammar, writing, and math; colleges told them that about half of the entering freshmen needed remedial education before they were ready for college-level work. In a 50-year retrospective, the (London) *Times Educational Supplement* reprinted a snippet from a February 1954 report in which

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college examiners said of the papers they graded: "The evidence of ignorance about the most elementary points of English was frightful and frightening." Tiger Wood's father, Earl, took up cudgels for Standard English in *Golf Digest*: "My mother insisted that I speak in good, clear English. No sloughing off my e's, f's, and t's. Learn good grammar. If I had said 'ax' when I meant 'ask,' she would have been all over my case. Today, I concur with Thurgood Marshall – there is nothing wrong with speaking the language of your culture when you're within that culture. But to be upwardly mobile in society, one must learn to speak the best English that one can." A conservative group in San Francisco asked a judge to issue an order barring gay marriages, but the judge refused because the proposed order contained a semicolon where the word "or" should have been used. Because of the error, the judge had no authority to issue the order.

March

While talking about the findings in his latest book, *America Behind the Color Line: Dialogues With African Americans*, Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. remarked on a poll in which "black kids were asked to list the things they considered 'acting white.' The top three things were: making straight A's, speaking standard English, and going to the Smithsonian." Then Gates added: "If anybody had said anything like that when we were growing up in the '50s, first, your mother would smack you upside the head and second, they'd check you into a mental institution." Barbara Wallraff published her second book, *Your Own Words*, a reference work about reference works; it compares dictionaries, usage and style manuals, and online sources, and teaches readers how to answer novel language questions for themselves. *The*

Elephants of Style, the second usage book by Bill Walsh, a *Washington Post* editor, arrived on bookshelves; though its advice is generally sound, Walsh commits a serious blunder on p. 60, where he states that "Whom will it be" is "technically correct." In London, the *Times Higher Education Supplement* reported that straight-A students show a shaky grasp of the nuts and bolts of English; senior English tutors asserted that undergraduates lacked the basics for intellectual communication, often misusing commas and apostrophes and frequently botching their spelling. The American Political Network reported that President George W. Bush's mispronunciation of *nuclear* "has become a flashpoint for his critics." In the *Chicago Daily Herald*, Norma S. Hass speculated: "President Bush knows perfectly well how the word 'nuclear' should be pronounced. He says it wrong on purpose, to seem less like the patrician he is and more like a regular feller. He wants to sound like a real guy's guy, not some effeminate liberal who cares about prissy, schoolmarmish things like correct pronunciation."

April

Jan Edwards, Mary Beckman, and Benjamin Munson reported, in an article for *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*: "Traditional models of grammar posit that phonological knowledge is instantiated in the form of rules or constraints operating on abstract mental representations of words." They failed to cite any traditional grammarians who said anything like this. Cambridge University Press released a thorough but quite permissive usage guide by the Australian linguist Pam Peters, *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*; it's the British English answer to America's ultrapermissive "guide," *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989). Lynne Truss's British

bestseller about punctuation, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, was released in the United States with an initial print run of 133,000; aficionados of fastidious punctuation were puzzled by the misspelled subtitle (*A Zero Tolerance [read Zero-Tolerance] Approach to Punctuation*), along with numerous other errors in the book. New evidence about how much poor writing can cost: U.S. Magistrate Judge Jacob Hart reduced attorney Brian Puricelli's court-awarded fees by \$31,450 for submitting written work to the court that was "careless," "full of typographical errors," and "nearly unintelligible."

May

On May 15, Professor Christopher Ricks of Boston University – formerly Regius Chair in English Literature at Cambridge – was elected the Oxford Professor of Poetry by a majority of the 531 Oxford graduates who showed up to vote; over the next five years, Ricks will give talks at Oxford with the idea of "generally encouraging the art of poetry in the University," extolling the merits of not just Milton and Tennyson but also Bob Dylan. In the *Journal of Teacher Education*, Carla R. Monroe and Jennifer E. Obidah reported disapprovingly that cultural biases in the classroom often take the form of "corrections for incorrect grammar usage." Do Monroe and Obidah correct their own mistakes? They'd better: the journal *Technical Communication* reported the heartening news that in online courses, students "quickly lose respect for instructors whose online communications are filled with misspellings and grammatical errors."

June

The eighth edition of *Black's Law Dictionary* was released by West Group; compiled by the

small team at LawProse (which I head), the book contains more than 17,000 terms new to this edition. *Better Homes and Gardens* recommended that parents teach their children online manners, including obeying this command: "Use good grammar when writing to authority figures." In her usage column in *The Spectator*, Dot Wordsworth pointed out that "sentence after sentence in the so-called Authorized Version of the Bible begins with *and*," adding: "The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives a tantalizingly short collection of quotations to illustrate the history of the usage, from the 9th century onwards." And she made a similar point about *but*, perhaps emboldening thousands of readers to reject the century-old superstition to the contrary. But don't hold your breath.

July

Bill Cosby drew cheers and jeers for criticizing the speech of black youths: "I can't even talk the way these people talk. 'Why you ain't,' 'Where you is' ... and I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. And then I heard the father talk. ... Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth." Robert W. Burchfield, the greatest English-language lexicographer of the latter 20th century and the chief editor of the *OED Supplement*, died at home in Sutton Courtenay, England, at the age of 81. William Safire marked the 26th anniversary of his *New York Times* "On Language" column with the publication of *The Right Word in the Right Place at the Right Time* – his 16th book on linguistic matters. The British journal *Accountancy Age* conducted a survey and reported that in business communications, "the trend for texting means that spelling and punctuation mistakes are common" and that the "correct

use of apostrophes and commas falls by the wayside"; one in three survey respondents reported using such abbreviations as "cd" for *could*, "cu" for *see you*, and "2" for *to or too*.

August

The *Times Higher Education Supplement* reported that British children did worse in spelling in 1996 than in 1976, as far as the two years could be compared; most disappointingly, research showed that a majority of children in East Tilbury, Essex, preferred to spell *thing* as *fing* and *nothing* as *nuffing*. The College Board announced that the new SAT, to be launched in March 2005, would test grammar, word choice, and usage in a 35-minute segment of multiple-choice questions, together with a 25-minute essay. In response, according to the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, school administrators around the country declared that high schools would begin to pay more attention to grammar. In *U.S. News and World Report*, Edward B. Biske and Bruce G. Hammond, authors of an SAT prep guide, wrote that "the rules of grammar and usage ... can be easily learned (or relearned) without great difficulty"; as for the new SAT essay, these authors wrote "the essay will be a standard state-an-opinion-and-back-it-up-with-evidence deal." That's the best kind of deal. *Kirkus Reviews* released its review of David Crystal's new book about the glories of dialectal varieties, summing up the book with this sentence: "A celebrated linguist argues that all versions of English are created equal and that the reign of Emily Post-prescriptivists who insist that Standard English is 'right' and all the rest 'wrong' is nearing its end"; yet in the 584-page book itself, Crystal cites no modern prescriptivists who supposedly take this "Emily Post" position, and he cites only three allegedly prescriptivist bugaboos – namely, "the use

of *and* at the beginning of a sentence [not really a bugaboo at all, since prescriptivists defend this usage], split infinitives [okayed to some degree by every reputable prescriptivist], and end-placed prepositions [ditto]" (p. 483). What is actually coming to an end is prescriptivists' patience with descriptivists' misrepresentations of their positions with the same old cliché shibboleths.

September

In *The New Yorker*, Philip Gourevitch argued that President Bush "is grossly underestimated as an orator by those who presume that good grammar, rigorous logic, and a solid command of the facts are the essential ingredients of political persuasion." In *National Review*, Sidney Goldberg took the writers and editors at *The New York Times* to task for "an ignorance of orthography and grammar," particularly for not knowing the inflection of the verb *to lead*: "Almost as often as not, the Timesmen spell the past tense as 'lead,' when 'lead' can only be the present tense ... or the name of the heavy metal. ... I don't think a day passes without the *Times* getting it wrong." Barbara Wallraff announced her resignation as editor in chief of *Copy Editor*, which under her editorship became the most informative and lively periodical about grammar and usage. The Hawaii department of education announced that sixth-graders there are expected to know how to "write and revise pieces several times for clearer meaning, more convincing language, stronger voice, and accurate grammar and usage." City officials in Livermore, California were red-faced over the \$40,000 mural they had commissioned for the city's beautiful new library. The mural depicts the names and likenesses of 175 icons of arts (e.g., Michelangelo) and sciences (e.g., Einstein). The only problem was that 11 of the names were misspelled (e.g., Mi-

chaelangelo, Eistein), and the city had to fork over another \$6,000 plus expenses to get the artist, Maria Alquilar, to correct her work.

October

In the first of three presidential debates, Senator John Kerry charged that President Bush had left America's alliances "in shatters across the globe," when he undoubtedly meant "in tatters"; the media didn't remark on this small gaffe. In the journal *Technology & Learning*, Saul Rockman reported that students' attitudes toward writing have improved: 76% of students say they prefer writing on laptops as opposed to on paper, 80% say that laptops make rewriting and revision easier, and 73% say that they earn better grades for laptop work; meanwhile, Rockman reported that laptops have done nothing to improve performance on standardized achievement tests. Adverbial inflation continues apace: *Forbes Global* reported that "in current English usage, it's not enough to say someone is rich; he must be 'seriously rich.'" *The 9/11 Commission Report*, written by 80 staffers and 10 commissioners, was chosen as a nonfiction finalist for the National Book Award; despite the tendency for such reports to sound bland and bureaucratic, the book has the tone of a thriller, amazingly free of acronyms, and staffers joked that they were not allowed to use an acronym without the personal sign-off of vice-chair Lee H. Hamilton. The *National Law Journal* reported that law firms had begun expunging commas from their names; Daniel Joseph, a partner at Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, argued that "to put in commas is to divide" – and apparently many others agree. As a marketing matter, perhaps the comma is going the way of the apostrophe – and punctuation generally may be slowly going the way of diacritical marks.

November

William Safire, 74, announced that he would end his political column at the *New York Times* in January 2005 but would continue his weekly language column. The *St. Petersburg Times* reported that a 2004 survey of the largest U.S. corporations found "widespread dissatisfaction with employee writing skills"; 40% of the companies said that they had to offer additional training in writing. In his *San Diego Union-Tribune* column, Michael Kinsman reported that American businesses spend \$3 billion annually to upgrade the writing skills of workers; two-thirds of salaried employees depend on those skills, and "an inability to write can severely limit workers as they try to climb into supervisory and management jobs." Wichita, Kansas, set off a grammatical furor with its PR slogan, "We got the goods"; Raleigh Drennon, the advertising consultant who invented the slogan, said that *We got* is sassier and more energetic than *We've got* (which he called "stuffy," "overly proper," and "overly literal"). Interviewed by the local newspaper, the chair of the Wichita State University English Department expressed resignation: "Generally, I wish I could carry an apostrophe around in my car and put it where it belongs, but who cares? It's hopeless."

December

NBC broadcast the Office Depot Father/Son Challenge golf tournament, in which veteran golfer Bob Charles and his son David were top contenders; the NBC scoreboard consistently labeled the team not the *Charleses* (as they should have been), but the *Charles'*. This is yet one more sign that (1) most people are increasingly ignorant of the only approved way of pluralizing names, and (2) the networks apparently be-

lieve that “most people” are qualified to prepare their scoreboards. Michelle Trute, the cooking columnist for the *Courier Mail* in Queensland, Australia, acknowledged that her favorite dessert is pumpkin pie, but she recommended not using commercial pumpkin-pie mix: “just substitute mashed pumpkin for the same quantity of tinned; use butternut or a good grammar, as they are nice and sweet and not too watery.” It would be interesting to try each of the two proposed recipes – since many grammars are known to be unpleasant and sour and quite runny. In Wellington, New Zealand, the *Dominion Post* reported that many first-year university students there are failing basic writing and academic-skills tests; only 77% of the physics, computer-science, and engineering students passed a basic literacy test earlier in

the year. Laura Vanderkam wrote in *USA Today* that good writing skills are increasingly important in the American workplace, but that “grown-up Johnny can’t write because young Johnny writes little beyond short book reports or haiku – and he rarely revises his work.” Vanderkam proposed two reforms to the No Child Left Behind Act to improve students’ writing – (1) require schools to boost the writing regimens of students, and (2) “pay to make grading fly,” i.e., let teachers demand and correct three drafts of each paper, and get the teachers some grading help in the form of freelance writers and grad students looking for cash. Meanwhile, reports Vanderkam, high-school students’ college-admission cover letters “sag with needless words, fuzzy logic, and grammatical mistakes.” *GB*