

Grammar and the Great Divide



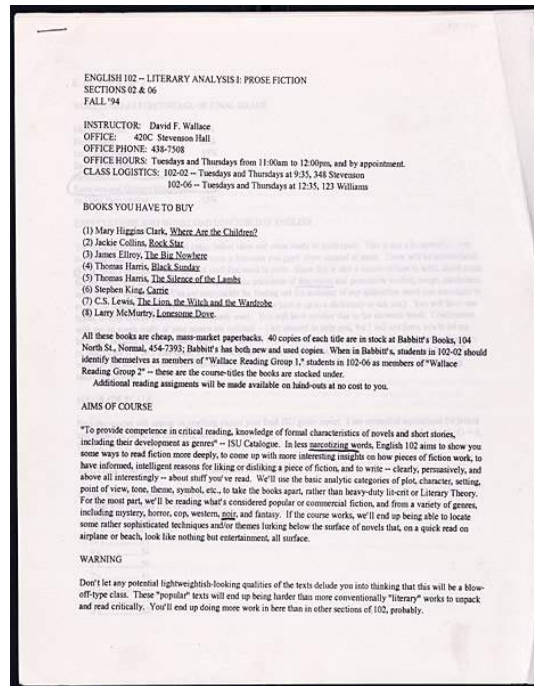
'Yes well, legibility and correct punctuation might not be "street"... but that's how I roll, motherfucker.'

Anyone who dips regularly into the on-line offerings of *3quarksdaily* will have noticed a savage war brewing. Actually, the war is savage in the same way it is civilized, in the same way WWI was savage for the about-to-be-gassed slogging around in the corpse-bloated trenches, and civilized for the lords and generals who drank toddies and tea while sending millions of young men to their deaths against the newly-developed machine gun. The two protagonists, representing their respective sides, are distinguished psychology scholar Steven Pinker, who launched the first volley with a book titled *A Sense of Style*, parts of which later appeared in the *Guardian* in an article titled "Steven Pinker: 10 'grammar rules' it's OK to break (sometimes)"; and now squaring off with Pinker is Nathan Heller, Harvard Hipster by-way-of All that is Cool in the Bay Area, writing an article in the *New Yorker* with the clear-as-can-be title "Steven Pinker's Bad Grammar." If Pinker's first shot was wide into the woods, Heller's put a hole in Pinker's waistcoat, and, knowing as we do that no one has more capacity for harboring fumaroles of hostility than a psychologist (only psychiatrists have greater), we await the next exchange, which surely must come. I want to say to both of them, "Gentlemen, Language!" in the same voice Siri says it to me when I suggest to her that she should come over and suck my enormous dick, which every male who owns an iPhone has done at least once, and do not let him protest otherwise.

A Shakespeare scholar must either identify himself as an Oxfordian or a Stratfordian, just as, perforce, fans of Van Halen are either Rothians or Hagarians. (Which, by the way, makes me a rare Stratfordian/Hagarian, rather like having type AB negative blood, and should any other S/H's like to start a club, I say we could meet the second Sunday of each month, noon, at the Coronado Brewing Company.) Similarly, both grammarians and lexicographers must take a position: are ye a *prescriptivist* or a *descriptivist*? That is, do you

claim the authority to tell people what is *correct* as far as meaning and usage, or do you simply report how actually people *use* the words they use and write and *speak* they way they write and speak? Only so we can put some uniforms on the two soldiers, a reading of both Pinker's article and Heller's response to it, suggests that Pinker is a descriptivist (sort of) and Heller rather firmly on the side of firm rules and firm reasons for following them.

But first it might be fun to imagine being in one of David Foster Wallace's English



classes at Pomona College, where he was a notorious stickler for some finer points of grammar and usage, although a few of his objections seem pedantic. But, pedantic to whom? Certainly to my eighth graders who roll their eyes with timeless exasperation when I correct their use of an object pronoun for the nominative case. When I will not let Annabel say, "Can me and Nicolette go to the library?" she looks at me like she undoubtedly looks at her mother, who has just told her to clean her room, change her baby brother's diaper, and that she can't ride to Burning Man that weekend with the local Satan's Slaves chapter: you know, the Evil Eye-Roll of Exasperation. And DFW was apparently exasperated too by his advanced students who were apparently cavalier with the clear and codified rules of Standard English. Here is DFW's 2002 Pomona College handout on five common word usage mistakes for his advanced fiction writing class:

ENGLISH 183A, 25 SEPTEMBER 2002—YOUR LIBERAL-ARTS \$ AT WORK

1. The preposition towards is British usage; the US spelling is toward. Writing towards is like writing colour or judgement. (Factoid: Except for backwards and afterwards, no preposition ending in -ward takes a final s in US usage.)

2. And is a conjunction; so is so. Except in dialogue between particular kinds of characters, you never need both conjunctions. “He needed to eat, and so he bought food” is incorrect. In 95% of cases like this, what you want to do is cut the and.

3. For a compound sentence to require a comma plus a conjunction, both its constituent clauses must be independent. An independent clause (a) has both a subject and a main verb, and (b) expresses a complete thought. In a sentence like “He ate all the food, and went back for more,” you don’t need both the comma and the and because the second clause isn’t independent.

4. There are certain words whose appearance at the beginning of a clause renders that clause dependent. (They basically keep the clause from expressing a complete thought.) Examples include since, while, because, although, and as. You may have learned to call these kinds of words Signal Words or Temporal Adverbs in high school. They, too, affect the punctuation of a compound sentence.

The crucial question is whether the clause that starts with a Signal Word occurs first in the sentence or not. If it does, you need a comma:

“As the wave crashed down, the surfer fell.” “While Bob ate all the food, Rhonda looked on in horror.”

If the relevant clause comes second, you do not need a comma:

“The surfer fell as the wave crashed down.” “Rhonda looked on in horror while Bob ate all the food.”

5. In real prose stylistics, though, the Signal Word thing can get a little tricky. If you look at the last sentence of item (3) above, you’ll notice that there is no comma between “and” and “because” in the compound “...you don’t need both the comma and the and because the second clause isn’t independent.” This is because of the basic rule outlined in (4). But because is a funny word, and sometimes you’ll need a comma before its appearance in the second clause in order to keep your sentence from giving the wrong impression. Example: Say Bob’s been murdered; the question is whether Rhonda did it. Look at the following two sentences:

- a. “Rhonda didn’t do it because she loved him.”
- b. “Rhonda didn’t do it, because she loved him.”

Sentence a, which is grammatically standard, here really says that Rhonda did kill Bob but that her reason for the murder wasn’t love, i.e., that the reason Rhonda killed Bob was not her love for him. Sentence b says that Rhonda did not kill Bob and that the reason she didn’t is that she loves him. In 99% of cases, what someone’ll be meaning to say is what b says. So, though nonstandard in the abstract, b can be semantically correct, correct in a meaning-based context.

And then there is DFW’s by-now-infamous ten-item grammar quiz (his own answers at the end of this essay) and before you take it on, I’d suggest you remember that there are many ways to re-write these sentences; what you are looking for, however, is some major structural problem: with agreement, parallelism, redundancy, etc. Wallace prefaces his quiz: “IF NO ONE HAS YET TAUGHT YOU HOW TO AVOID OR REPAIR CLAUSES LIKE THE FOLLOWING, YOU SHOULD, IN MY OPINION, THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT SUING SOMEBODY, PERHAPS AS CO-PLAINTIFF WITH WHOEVER’S PAID YOUR TUITION”

1. He and I hardly see one another.

2. I’d cringe at the naked vulnerability of his sentences left wandering around without periods and the ambiguity of his uncrossed “t”s.

3. My brother called to find out if I was over the flu yet.
4. I only spent six weeks in Napa.
5. In my own mind, I can understand why its implications may be somewhat threatening.
6. From whence had his new faith come?
7. Please spare me your arguments of why all religions are unfounded and contrived.
8. She didn't seem to ever stop talking.
9. As the relationship progressed, I found her facial tic more and more aggravating.
10. The Book of Mormon gives an account of Christ's ministry to the Nephites, which allegedly took place soon after Christ's resurrection.



I forget the professor's name—let's call him "X"—but I remember distinctly the first paper I wrote at Berkeley, and his comment made in savage red pen across the top. And now I can see him, fortyish, foppish, with long black hair going grey, a long aquiline nose; really, he reminded me of Olivier's Richard III. (Could his name have been Albers?) He was a good teacher, and I liked him. I think the course was Restoration Literature, and I know the class met in a clammy room on the first floor of Wheeler Hall. I'd been told I was a good writer in high school, had been told the same in other college classes I'd already taken; so, when it came to the written word, I thought of myself as rather a hotshot, you know, able to serve up a horse-flooring cocktail of prose: equal measures of Proust and Kerouac, with a dash of Hemingway for smoothness, muddled and served with a teaspoon of sugar and spring water, like Faulkner's afternoon toddy. So imagine my shock when Professor X swooped down the aisles in his flowing October trench coat, handing back student papers, and my paper landed on my desk with what looked like a threatening ransom note written in blood across the top:

Mr. Roemmich--I notice you use the word "thusly" in the middle of your third paragraph. When we remember that "thus" is an adverb in itself, and "-ly" an adverb suffix, we realize we have no idea of what you hope to accomplish by putting the two together. Is this some trendy neologism of which I am unaware, or your own unawareness of what is Standard English and has been for centuries? For you to be successful in this class, I would advise you obtain a copy of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and stick to its recommendations religiously. Dr. X

If I recall, there were no other comments on the paper, except for a kissing-your-sister B+ at the bottom. (Let the record speak, however: I did get an “A” in the class.) I wrote a staggering number of papers for English classes as an undergraduate and graduate student, and, when I was finished with college for good, I lugged them all around with me in a milk crate for years when I moved from here to there. Then when I was about thirty-five years old I think, on some empty night filled with a bottle of wine and a need for something to do, I pulled the crate out from a closet and started to read some of the papers I had painstakingly typed out on good bond paper with my venerable Olivetti-Underwood portable typewriter. I was horrified. The writing was so bad, so affected, so derivative, so full of borrowed phrases, and archaic locutions, and critical jargon...Each paragraph must include, it seemed, a smattering of “to wit’s,” and “as it were’s,” and “albeit’s”; and each paragraph had to begin with some preposterous, unnecessary and heavy-handed transition, including the deadly “In conclusion, and “By way of summary,” and the sniffingly condescending “However so much we might like to view Mr. Sidney’s prosodic choices in a positive light...” That hour I spent with those old papers was an illuminating humiliation. True, I had managed some nice touches: from Sir Thomas Browne I had grown to love exceedingly elegant parallel structures and what some disparage as his purple prose, which I still find beautiful today, which I still use for excessive effect, which to me are the anthemic elements of prose, where language becomes music and the music soars with ethereal argument.

Although I suspect I have always written, as a practicing frequent habit, more than most people (which is different from this sentence: *although I have always written, as a practicing frequent habit, more than most people I suspect*, and it is *different from*, rather than *different than*, because what follows the preposition is a noun, not a clause, although this usage is also fiercely debated) the writing I did was largely personal correspondence—I was once a formidable epistler (until I became both busy and indolent, and my circle of friendship tightened, and finally, now, fuck it, just easier to send out a tweet) and I most certainly became more aware of writing as I started writing seriously myself, about ten years ago. And when I say seriously, I mean writing a document, an essay, a diatribe, and seeing, when finished, if it will stand up to the light, to scrutiny, to my own standards, which are really the only ones I care about. And my standards, in turn, were formed through equally important formative considerations: literary models, non-literary models, and what I will call the rules of English grammar.

At its highest level, there is little distinction between non-literary and literary writing. While reading Camille Paglia is like eating a box of gravel, the essays on literature by Jorge Luis Borges comprise some of the most accomplished, intriguing and accomplished prose ever written. However, if writers of non-fiction write for rhetoric, writers of imaginative literature write for effect, as Edgar Allan Poe so emphatically reminded us. So for the novelist, the writer of short stories, the poet, all bars are down and all rules up for suspension. Some experimental writing is barely intelligible. Consider “Semiotic Theory,” by Kitasono Katue, 1929:

SEMIOTIC THEORY

*white tableware

flower

spoon

spring, 3 p.m.

white

white

red

*prism architecture

white animal

space

*blue flag

apple and noblelady

white landscape

*flowers and musical instruments

white window

wind

*shell and wreath

slipperd young girl

a portrait of a canary's ripening steamship

*hothouse's boy

distant moon

white flower

white

*cosmetics and fireworks

doll's blue window

white socks

esthetics

white esthetics

*silver cubist doll

silver cubist doll

flower and mirror

statics

*white architecture

far suburban sky

far

*sky
sea
rooftop garden
cigarette smoking boy, decolorized boy
alone
space

*magic-making noblelady's magic-making silver boy
magic-making noblelady's magic-making silver boy
reflected in red mirror
reflected in red mirror
white hands and eyebrows and flowers
I
space

*blue sky
can't see anything
can't see anything
white residence

*white distant view
faint pink flag
hopelessness

*decolorized boy
distant sky
hyacinth
window
white landscape

*it is happy lifestyle and me
it is happy ideas and me
it is transparent pleasures and me
it is transparent manners and me
it is fresh appetite and me
it is fresh love and me

memories of blue past
all dumped in ink bottle

*mechanics is dark
plants are heavy

*white tableware
bouquet and book of poems
white
white
yellow

*white residence
white
pink noblelady
white distant view
blue sky

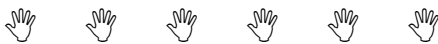
*trumpet aristocrats all wear red bandannas

*evening formalwear
evening formalwear
evening formalwear
evening formalwear
evening formalwear
boring

...and Faulkner's concatenated clauses and disdain for punctuation—which practices he vehemently defended from editors—push the limit of the English language. Interestingly, a recent interview with Cormac McCarthy reveals that he developed his style of dialogue punctuation and attribution from Faulkner; and more interesting is William Gaddis's dialogue style, which he pioneered in *The Recognitions*, and which obviated the need for quotation marks and unnecessary dialogue attributions. So then, as far as style and usage, one can learn from great writers and stylists, but only how to break the rules purposefully, and only if the rules are known to you well. There is an immense difference between the barely-articulate swamp-speak of I.O. or Mink Snopes, a deliberate abomination on Faulkner's part, and the inane patois and unintentional solecisms of writers who started to write *before they learned the language*. And here I am thinking of a diverse, mongrel bunch: Ayn Rand, Stephanie Meyer, L. Ron Hubbard, Dean Koontz, and, of course, Joseph Smith and John the Apostle.

"The essence of a sound style is that it cannot be reduced to rules—that it is a living and breathing thing with something of the devilish in it—that it fits its proprietor tightly yet ever so loosely, as his skin fits him. It is, in fact, quite as seriously an integral part of him as that skin is. . . . In brief, a style is always the outward and visible symbol of a man, and cannot be anything else."

H. L. Mencken



But what about grammar? Are the rules of grammar and usage unchangeable pillars of human communication which must be defended from the obscurantist, barbarian hordes, or simply quaint left-overs from your spinster grandmother's sewing basket, which we can and should dismiss with a casual, "Yo, man, 'sup?" And here note that I wrote of the "rules" of grammar, not the "laws." The Laws of Nature are immutable: The Early Bird Gets the Worm, but the Second Rat Gets the Cheese; Crazy in the Head, Crazy in the Bed, for just two examples. The Laws of Physics are equally severe: He Who Smelt It,

Dealt It; Good Friends Help You Move, Great Friends Help You Move Bodies, axioms which, for all purposes, will not be amended even by the ravages of eternal time. “Rules,” however, are just directives for convenience. For example, it is not a *law* that you cannot kick the cherry ball on the playground, but it is a *rule* that you cannot kick the cherry ball on the playground, and if you did launch that red rubber ball into the stratosphere with a perfect kick and follow-through of the leg, and that bitch Mrs. Meyer saw you from her harpy-perch on recess duty, she’d lean into you with that rotting adenoid breath, with those adipose arm-flaps swinging, and you would be really glad that you stopped to hock a loogie into her coffee cup on her desk before the bell rang that morning. No: *rules*, especially for the constitutionally recalcitrant, are to be despised and broken with anarchistic contempt, and shouldn’t this apply especially to the rules of language, where the tongue of Mary Poppins, or the diction of William F. Buckley, are nothing more than Czarist statues to be toppled by the liberated serfs, who *don’t need no education*? Let’s go the main bout, Pinker vs. Heller, who exchange some blows, some dangerously low, and then I will weigh-in with the decision after the last bell. This match is scheduled for ten rounds, each round corresponding to one of Steven Pinker’s “Ten Grammar Rules it is OK to Break.”

1.) and, because, but, or, so, also

Pinker says that the proscription against starting a sentence with a conjunction is old school teacher nonsense; he is correct, and Heller would not disagree. The idea against starting a sentence with “and” or “because” probably stems from dependent clauses being asked to stand for complete sentences. And even that solecism can be used for style, if not in formal situations. Where would we be if we could not write, “And you suck.”

2.) dangling modifiers

Here is what Pinker says:

The second conclusion is the right one: some dangling modifiers should be avoided, but they are not grammatical errors. The problem with dangling modifiers is that their subjects are inherently ambiguous and sometimes a sentence will inadvertently attract a reader to the wrong choice, as in “When a small boy, a girl is of little interest.”

But some so-called danglers are perfectly acceptable. Many participles have turned into prepositions, such as “according”, “allowing”, “concerning”, “considering”, “excepting”, “following”, “given”, “granted”, “owing”, “regarding” and “respecting”, and they don’t need subjects at all. Inserting “we find” or “we see” into the main clause to avoid a dangler can make the sentence stuffy and self-conscious. More generally, a modifier can dangle when its implied subject is the writer and the reader. The decision of whether to recast a sentence to align its subject with the subject of a modifier is a matter of judgment, not grammar. A thoughtlessly placed dangler can confuse the reader or slow them down, and occasionally it can lure them into a ludicrous interpretation. Also, even if a dangler is in no danger of being misinterpreted, enough readers have trained themselves to spot danglers that a writer who leaves it incurs the risk of being judged as slovenly. So in formal styles it’s not a bad idea to keep an eye open for them and to correct the obtrusive ones...

And here Heller’s response, taken from a general comment:

...It is difficult to shake the suspicion that Pinker's list of "screwball" rules simply seeks to justify bad habits that certain people would rather not be bothered to unlearn.

I agree with Heller. Don't dangle those modifiers, don't do it! The practice is a symptom of fuzzy thinking. And, for that matter, do not *misperce* modifiers: Though it tasted yummy and smelled delicious, his fiery buttock did not appreciate the jalepeño chile a few hours later."

3.) like, as, such as

Pinker's whiff:

...Like many usage controversies, the brouhaha over "like a cigarette should" is a product of grammatical ineptitude and historical ignorance. The ad's use of "like" with a clause was not a recent corruption; the combination has been in use for 600 years. It has been used in literary works by dozens of great writers (including William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, HG Wells and William Faulkner) and has flown beneath the radar of the purists themselves, who have inadvertently used it in their own style guides. This does not show that purists are only human and sometimes make errors; it shows that the alleged error is not an error. The RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company was confessing to the wrong crime; its slogan was perfectly grammatical. Writers are free to use either "like" or "as", mindful only that "as" is a bit more formal, and that the Winston-tastes-good controversy became such a bloody shirt in the grammar wars that readers may mistakenly think the writer has made an error...

Heller's counterpunch:

...English is complex. To help reduce ambiguity, modern usage attaches specific words to specific functions. The restrictive-nonrestrictive division between "that" and "which"—two particularly common and shifty words—is one attempt at clarity. Another is the rule that "like" joins noun phrases, while "as" or "as if" is for verb phrases. ("It looks as if my date is here!" "You look like Mom in that dress.") Pinker doesn't see the point of that one, either. Why shouldn't we use "like" as we please, he asks, as it's been used in "literary works by dozens of great writers (including William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, HG Wells and William Faulkner)"? He offers versions of this justification—if Faulkner did it so can you—in both the article and his book. At one point in "The Sense of Style," Pinker urges us to follow the example of his novelist wife:

Heller is correct: Shakespeare gloriously broke every rule of grammar and usage in the (then non-existing) book, and Faulkner as a grammar model is like learning to drive from a teenage boy with a bottle of Wild Turkey between his legs. In the names of accuracy, precision, and as a testament to the care of the writer, why not use "like" as an introduction to nominative phenomena, and "as" when the introduction is to a verb phrase. How hard is that? And the benefit then is that there is no confusion over correctness, usage, and the skill of the writer.

And, by way of digression, "like" is apparently the only one, or one of few, words in English that can be used as all eight parts of speech:

Noun: She had her likes and dislikes.

Pronoun: She dated scoundrels and the like.

Adjective: They were like creatures.

Adverb: She is more like nineteen than fifteen

Verb: He likes the way they play.

Preposition: She sings like an angel

Conjunction: The summer seemed like it would never end.

Interjection: She is so, like, skanky!

Probably the only word more flexible in use is *fuck*, and its various forms, including the mysterious *fuckin'-A*. As Bill Bryson remarks (*The Mother Tongue: English and How it Got That Way*) this second-most-foul expletive can convey elation (Fuck yes!), dejection (Fuck no!), awe (Fuuuuck!), exasperation (Fuck me!), mystification (What the fuck?), it can be used as a meaningless intensifier either post or mid-position (It was fucking unbelievable; It was unfuckingbelievable), and can be used in combination for effects varied and colorful: *fucktard*, *clusterfuck*, *fuckweasel*. Some people never use the word *fuck*, such as Mormons...and, really, when is the last time you have ever heard colorful and expressive speech from a Mormon? They do seem to fuck a lot, however, for what that is worth. Shakespeare knew that English comprises the sacred, the profane, the vulgar, the formal, the exalted, and the obscene: and his genius was partly his ability to use all shades and levels of the language to great effect and where and when appropriate. No word or language is obscene; *people* are obscene, especially those who limit their understanding of the world through proscriptions on language. For the most part my classes are filled with very nice boys and girls, although I do have some feral savages that would become reigning terrors in the *favelas* of Rio were they transported there. And I have asked these shining kids with the little crosses around their necks, "How many of you have used the f-word already sometime today since waking up?" And the hands go up like trees in a forest as they look around at each other and laugh.

4.) preposition at the end of a sentence

Pinker insists that the proscription against ending a sentence with a preposition is based on trying to apply the same rules to English as apply to Latin. He is correct. In fact, it is impossible to end a sentence with a preposition in Latin, just as it is impossible to split an infinitive. There is no reason not to end a sentence with a preposition in English, if sound and sense are not compromised; in fact, it is often the only method to assure clarity. Heller does not take this one up, so the round goes to Pinker.

5.) split infinitives

As above, in English infinitives can be split ("to boldly pillage"); in Latin, it is impossible, because the infinitive is one word ("futurare.") So, there is no reason why infinitives cannot be split, and sometimes, as in several Pinker examples, it is unclear as to meaning if the verb is not divided by a qualifier. Pinker is a bit weaselly when it comes to practicing advice, so the round is a draw.

6.) predicative nominative

Pinker:

When you come home after a day at the office, do you call out, "Hi, honey, it's I"? If you do, you are the victim of a schoolteacher rule that insists that a pronoun serving as the complement of "be" must be in nominative case (I, he, she, we, they) rather than accusative case (me, him, her, us, them). According to this rule, Psalms (120:5), Isaiah (6:5), Jeremiah (4:31), and Ophelia should have cried out, "Woe is I," and the cartoon possum Pogo should have reworded his famous declaration as "We have met the enemy, and he is we." The rule is a product of the usual three confusions: English with Latin, informal style with incorrect grammar and syntax with semantics. Accusative predicates have been used for centuries by many respected writers (including Samuel Pepys, Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf), and the choice between "It is he" and "It is him" is strictly one of formal versus informal style.

Heller:

It's for grammatical consistency, not beauty or gentillesse, for example, that correct English has us say "It was he" instead of "It was him." Pinker calls this offense "a schoolteacher rule" that is "a product of the usual three confusions: English with Latin, informal style with incorrect grammar, and syntax with semantics." He's done crucial research on language acquisition, and he offers an admirable account of syntax in his book, but it is unclear what he's talking about here. As he knows, the nominative and accusative cases are the reason that we don't say gibberish like "Her gave it to he and then sat by we here!" No idea is more basic to English syntax and grammar. In the phrase "It was he," "it" and "he" are the same thing; they're both the subject, and thus nominative. This is not "Latin." (Our modern cases had their roots in tribal Germanic.)

Devastating combination to the body by Heller. I always teach the predicate nominative to my students by using the analogy of a math equation. Take the expression $2+3=5$ and the English expression "I was I." Linking verbs, and all forms of the verb "to be," perform the exact function of an equal sign. When we say "I feel sick," the verb connects the subject and attribute: one equals the other. So, both sides of the verb must be equal, just as both sides of an equation must be equal by sheer definition. "It was me" is an inequality; it cannot exist. The nominative case is not equal to the accusative case. That is the logico/grammatical reason for the predicate nominative, and it is unquestionable. Pinker's argument suggests that it does not matter, because we understand what is meant when someone says, or writes, "No one knew it was them who fired the shots"; but we understand all sorts of barely intelligible nonsense, including the lyrics of any song sung by Ozzy Osborne and the grunted post-game interview with an all-pro defensive tackle, who, miraculously, graduated from a respectable university with a degree in "Communications," despite not being able to utter a sentence that is not utterly mystifying. Following this most delightful rule, based on symmetry if nothing else, is simply not at all hard, and only applies to situations involving the first and third personal pronouns and "who" and "whoever." Learn it. Live it. Believe it.

7.) that and which

Pinker's lead:

So what's a writer to do? The real decision is not whether to use "that" or "which" but whether to use a restrictive or a nonrestrictive relative clause. If a phrase that expresses a comment about a noun can be omitted without substantially changing the meaning, and if it would be pronounced after a slight pause and with its own intonation contour, then be sure to set it off with commas (or dashes or parentheses): "The Cambridge restaurant, which had failed to clean its grease trap, was infested with roaches." Having done so, you don't have to worry about whether to use "that" or "which", because if you're tempted to use "that" it means either that you are more than 200 years old or that your ear for the English language is so mistuned that the choice of "that" and "which" is the least of your worries.

If, on the other hand, a phrase provides information about a noun that is crucial to the point of the sentence (as in "Every Cambridge restaurant *which failed to clean its grease trap* was infested with roaches", where omitting the italicised phrase would radically alter the meaning), and if it is pronounced within the same intonation contour as the noun, then don't set it off with punctuation. As for the choice you now face between "which" and "that": if you hate making decisions, you won't go wrong if you use "that".

Heller's parry:

English is complex. To help reduce ambiguity, modern usage attaches specific words to specific functions. The restrictive-nonrestrictive division between "that" and "which"—two particularly common and shifty words—is one attempt at clarity...

And here Heller ducked the blow but did not counterpunch. The problem, Mr. Pinker, in allowing both "that" and "which" in restrictive and non-restrictive functions...is which do you write, and why? And if you use one word for one function, shouldn't you do it consistently, without fail? Or will you switch back-and-forth, and if so, what are we to think, who are reading and parsing every sentence religiously, about your caprice? And, really Stephen? If it comes to vagaries of *intonation* to determine punctuation and restrictive/non-restrictive status, we might as well use the Magic 8-Ball at every keystroke in favor of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. (And, I have to say, my recent acquisition of a Magic 8-ball—thanks, Amazon—for use in my classroom is genius. I'll say, "Hmm, will Jackie, Isabel and Shelby be sitting together at the end of the period? I know, let's ask the Magic 8-Ball! Uh oh, it says, *Extremely Unlikely*...) One beauty of the English language is that no two words have exactly the same nuance of meaning, even, I suggest, function words. And if we abandon the rule of using "which" for non-restrictive clauses and "that" for restrictive clauses, we lose a nuance of meaning, an intentional observance of usage by the writer, and while it is a small loss, so is the final eradication of the Ruby-Throated Twat Guzzler from the rainforest of New Guinea: the rule governing "that" and "which" is part of the larger linguistic ecosystem, and we all remember, or should, the Butterfly Effect.

8. who and whom

Pinker:

Like the subjunctive mood, the pronoun "whom" is widely thought to be circling the drain. Indeed, tabulations of its frequency in printed text confirm that it has been sinking for almost two centuries. The declining fortunes of "whom" may represent not a grammatical change in English but a cultural change in Anglophones, namely the informalisation of writing, which makes it increasingly resemble speech. But it's always risky to extrapolate a downward slope all the way to zero, and since the 1980s the curve seems to be levelling off. Though "whom" is pompous in short questions and relative clauses, it is a natural choice in certain other circumstances, even in informal speech and writing. We still use "whom" in double questions like "Who's dating whom?", and in fixed expressions like "To whom it may concern" and "With whom do you wish to speak?". A scan of my email turns up hundreds of hits for "whom" in unmistakably informal sentences such as "Not sure if you remember me; I'm the fellow from Casasanto's lab with whom you had a hair showdown while at Hunter College."

The best advice to writers is to calibrate their use of "whom" to the complexity of the construction and the degree of formality they desire. If William Safire, who wrote the New York Times' "On Language" column and coined the term "language maven" in reference to himself, could write, "Let tomorrow's people decide who they want to be president," so can you.

Heller:

...As he knows, the nominative and accusative cases are the reason that we don't say gibberish like "Her gave it to he and then sat by we here!" The same is true of "who" and "whom," another nominative-accusative pair to which Pinker objects, sort of. He writes, "The best advice to writers is to calibrate their use of 'whom' to the complexity of the construction and the degree of formality they desire." Yet who wants to undertake that calibration all the time? The glorious thing about the "who" and "whom" distinction is that it's simple. This tendency to add complexity, ambiguity, and doubt is a troubling feature of Pinker's rules. He fights pedantry with more pedantry...

Heller gaining strength in the late rounds. True, if the distinction between "who" and "whom" were erased today, little if any compromised understanding would result. But then, little or any compromised understanding would result from the loss of distinction between the nominative and objective case of pronouns either. So, if the aim is to simplify, we should eliminate *him, her, us, and them*. After a few decades, after the last tea-sipping grandmother has died off, no one would flinch at *Kick them in the ass!*, or *Jury duty again?* *Fuck it!* But what would we have lost? Some music, some capacity for fine distinction, some subtlety of usage that contributes to the beauty, literature, and historical evolution of our language, the language of Shakespeare, the King James Bible, Sir Thomas Browne, Vladimir Nabokov. English is simplifying itself already. As Nicholas Ostler has pointed out in *Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin*, all languages seem to become simpler over the centuries: they lose inflections, forms, and cases. Latin itself, though we think of it as immutable and frozen forever on the livid lips of a sputtering Caesar, evolved into a more simple language from 400 B.C. to the Church Latin of the Middle Ages (diabolically, and for reasons too arcane to discuss here, the notorious Third Declension grew more complex and difficult.) But along with simplicity comes a lessening ability to make fine distinctions, to think and write clearly, and, as anyone who has experimented with Esperanto knows,

when we attempt to make a language so universal, so regular, so simple, so broad, so able to reach around different situations with its all-encompassing, capable arms, it is like trying to illuminate a manuscript with a wall-paper brush, and we will all start to sound like a priapic Tarzan rutting around in the orangutan troupe (I know, o-tans do not live in Africa; but I like the image, the word.) What is so hard about using “who” and “whoever” as the subject of verbs and predicate nominatives; and using “whom” and “whomever” as direct objects, indirect objects, and objects of prepositions? And if it is just the least bit hard to learn these rule (taught clearly on 1½ pages of an 8th grade language book), I suppose this doesn’t say much about our willingness to understand, use well, and appreciate the most sophisticated intellectual and cerebral tool we will every have to master: the language in which we think.

count nouns, mass nouns and "ten items or less," very unique, blah, blah, blah

I seem to have suddenly lost the spirit of this exercise. Low blows, the fight has been fixed, the match called a draw. Pinker would suggest that we are overly-persnickety pedants to insist on writing “less” for mass nouns (*less* water) and “fewer” for count nouns (*fewer* problems.) And here he smacks me just as roundly as I am smacked when my school district tells me I need no longer teach grammar, or literature, or poetry, because grammar study has gone the way of Latin instruction, and the Common Core Standards de-emphasize imaginative literature to the point that it is a quaint, affected anachronism. Sometimes things should get more regulated, more complex; evaporating standards and relaxed judgments do not necessarily represent progress; as Robert Frost said of free verse, it is *like playing tennis without the net*. Similarly, anyone who has gone out on the basketball court, say the public outdoor courts at Merritt Park, and found himself in a game of Oakland Jungle Ball, knows that rules exist in the game to make it more interesting, not less; more fun, not less; more likely to create situations where brilliance can triumph and flourish, and mediocrity, or luck or brute bullying, take a seat on the bench.

The level of grammar proficiency for which I, and Nathan Heller, I think, are both militating, is not some elitist expertise, or impossible mastery. Really, although seriously erudite and obtuse discussions can take place about the rules and structure of English, as is true about the grammars of all languages, all one needs to know to follow all important rules and observe all correct usages can be reduced to perhaps twenty pages in a manual. That’s it. Twenty pages. The brevity is largely because there is so little inflection in English, so few cases, so few inflected pronouns, and truly troublesome irregular verbs are only a handful. Every skill, or matter, or concept, or term discussed in the pages above by Heller, Pinker, and Roemmich (sounds like a skeezy law firm, or the defendants listed in a judicial summons) I teach to my eighth grade students in the course of a year. (OK, not the concept of non-restrictive/restrictive clauses, partly because of time constraints, and partly because, in a further effort to simplify what is simple enough, which only results in confusion, some educationists decided to change vocabulary after centuries of use, and “non-restrictive/restrictive” has been replaced with “non-essential/essential”, which is a terminology-shift I have a hard time wrapping my tongue around.) If I work hard enough at it, most or all of them “get it.” Do they still “get it” twenty years out of my classroom? Who knows. I’d like to think so. But as I wrote recently, I remember days in 8th Grade English

when all I could truly concentrate on with any dedication was the comely back of Melanie Eskew's neck.

Here is a Letter to the Editor of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* I fired-off a few weeks ago:

Dear Editor:

I am curious: who proofreads your stories? A few months ago, a victim was described "...laying on the ground..." Today (January 6, "Mother Sings of Forgiving Killer of her Teen Son") we are told that "...her son Richard 'Richi' Knight III laid in a hospital for five days..."

As anyone who paid attention in the 8th grade should know, and remember, the forms of the intransitive verb "to lie" (meaning "to recline") are: lie, lay, lain, lying. The forms of the transitive verb "to lay" (meaning "to place or put") are: lay, laid, laid, laying. Like subject/verb agreement, agreement of pronouns with their antecedents, and spelling words such as "receive" correctly, writing the correct forms of irregular verbs is a sign of the writer's care and knowledge of the craft he practices, and the editor's acuity.

That there might be some carelessness afoot at the editor's desk is troubling; that perhaps the writer and/or editor do not know, or remember, how to use "lie" and "lay" correctly is disturbing. I have always believed that small solecisms betray larger, systemic problems in concept and ability.

Not to worry: when winter break ends at my school on January 12, I am starting a unit on irregular verbs for my 8th grade students, and all or any from the UT are welcome to audit. I promise the lessons will be whip-smart, snappy, and full of humor, some of which is culled from the UT. Please stop by the office for a visitor's pass!

William Roemmich
Descanso

The key sentence in the letter, which the newspaper has declined to publish, is: *I have always believed that small solecisms betray larger, systemic problems in concept and ability.* That is why grammar matters, and why Pinker's mild relativism and objections to standards of usage which have existed reasonably and usefully for centuries, probably make him popular with his graduate students who cannot write, but should make him dismissed by serious writers and thinkers about language. If someone is not able or willing to learn the rules and guidelines in those twenty pages, if someone forgets, or is careless, we may be sure that is not all the writer is not willing to learn, it is not all he forgets or is careless about. When the superintendent of my school district, in his weekly EdBlog, commits an error of usage, punctuation, or sentence structure, I am reminded that the Ed.D after his name is an ornament, and his thinking must be considered in light of the ubiquity of his writing errors.

I had a delightful lunch with Bill Schultz last Saturday, an old friend I had not seen for 43 years. Bill has been and is still a master builder of high-end custom homes in Santa Cruz. He spoke of his craft, his search for balance and perfection, the long journey of a lifetime to the level of understanding he has now, understanding of design, concept, materials, planning, erection and installation, and the final polish before the project is ready for the cameras and movers. And I told Bill about Leo, who had built my front stairs two summers ago...how he had done nothing but measure and mark and think for two days, until the first stake was driven. And from that stake the entire assembly was oriented and centered. And how when Leo was finished, he pointed to a small gap at the bottom runner, that I could hardly notice, and he said, "That fucking 1/8" really pisses me off." And Bill chuckled and said, "Yes, we old-school carpenters really hate those eighth inches." That is because Bill and Leo are craftsmen, artisans, highly skilled and highly experienced in the engineering and aesthetics of raising beautiful and functional things into the air for humans to inhabit. For Bill and Leo, that 1/8" is the equivalent of an incorrect punctuation of the possessive case for the writer, or using "there" for "their": I might not notice the gap in my stairs, and Joe Blow might not notice "artist's" when it should be "artists'," but Bill and Leo notice because they are craftsmen, and I notice the wrong punctuation, and I surmise the writer was not a craftsman, which makes me wary of the quality of the rest of his work, including the quality of the thinking behind it, just as a 1/8" error might be a sign of underlying structural problems with my stairs. And we should care about grammar as we should care about the quality of the work we contract to build our world, because the world of the mind is the world of the language with which it operates, and lessening our standards will have about the same effect as lowering any professional or artisanal bar: no good will come of it.

And here are David Foster Wallace's answers to his grammar quiz:

1. He and I hardly see ~~one~~ each ~~an~~ other.
2. I'd cringe at the naked vulnerability of his sentences left wandering around without periods and *at* the ambiguity of his uncrossed "t"s.
3. My brother called to find out ~~if~~ *whether* I was over the flu yet.
4. I ~~only~~ spent *only* six weeks in Napa.
5. ~~In my own mind~~, I can understand why its implications may be somewhat threatening.
6. ~~From w~~Whence had his new faith come?
7. Please spare me your arguments ~~of~~ *as to* why all religions are unfounded and contrived.
8. She didn't seem *ever* to ~~ever~~ stop talking.
9. As the relationship progressed, I found her facial tic more and more ~~aggravating~~ *irritating*.

10. The Book of Mormon gives an account of Christ's ministry to the Nephites, which allegedly took place soon after ~~Christ's~~ *his* (or *His*) resurrection.

Scoring:

9-10 Correct: You are ready to diagram *Infinite Jest* on a chalkboard the size of the Mojave Desert

7-8 Correct: You must have paid attention during freshman English.

5-6 Correct: Re-take Roemmich's 8th Grade English

3-4 Correct: PE Major?

1-2 Correct: No hablas ingles?

0 Correct: School Administrator Material

William Roemmich

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