A Brief History of English Usage

English usage today is an area of discourse—sometimes it seems more like dispute—about the way words are used and ought to be used. This discourse makes up the subject matter of a large number of books that put the word *usage* in their titles. Behind usage as a subject lies a collection of opinions about what English grammar is or should be, about the propriety of using certain words and phrases, and about the social status of those who use certain words and constructions. A fairly large number of these opinions have been with us long enough to be regarded as rules or at least to be referred to as rules. In fact they are often regarded as rules of grammar, even if they concern only matters of social status or vocabulary selection. And many of these rules are widely believed to have universal application, even though they are far from universally observed.

To understand how these opinions and rules developed, we have to go back in history, at least as far back as the year 1417, when the official correspondence of Henry V suddenly and almost entirely stopped being written in French and started being written in English. By mid-century many government documents and even private letters were in English, and before 1500 even statutes were being recorded in the mother tongue. This restoration of English as the official language of the royal bureaucracy was one very important influence on the gradual emergence of a single standard dialect of English out of the many varied regional dialects that already existed. English now had to serve the functions formerly served by Latin and French, languages which had already assumed standard forms, and this new reality was a powerful spur to the formation of a standard in writing English that could be quite independent of variable speech. The process was certainly not completed within the 15th century, but increasingly the written form of the language that modern scholars call Chancery English had its effect, in combination with other influences such as the newfangled process of printing from movable type.

But the rise of Standard English did not by itself generate concern over usage. There was no special interest in language as such at that time. Indeed, the English historian G. M. Trevelyan called the 15th century, until its last fifteen or twenty years, the most intellectually barren epoch in English history since the Norman conquest. Not until Henry VII had established himself on the throne near the end of the century did the intellectual ferment of the European Renaissance begin to be felt in England. By the middle of the 16th century the English Renaissance was in full flower, and the revival of learning and letters brought with it a conscious interest in the English language as a medium for literature and learned discourse. There were those who had their doubts about its suitability. Still, the desire to use the vernacular rather than Latin was strong, and some of the doubters sought to put flesh on the bare bones of English by importing words from Latin, Italian, and French—the European languages of learned and graceful discourse. Among those who enriched English from the word stock of Europe were Sir Thomas Elyot and Sir Thomas More. Opposed to these enrichers of the language were purists such as Roger Ascham and Sir John Cheke, who preferred their English, rude as it might be, untainted by foreign imports. The imported learned terms became known as *inkhorn terms,* and their use and misuse by the imperfectly educated became the subject of much lively satire—some of it written by Shakespeare, among many others.

In addition to the controversy over imported words there were other concerns, such as the state of English spelling. In those days people mostly spelled things the way they sounded, and there was little uniformity indeed. A number of people consequently became interested in spelling reform. Among these was the schoolmaster Richard Mulcaster, who may have served as the model for Shakespeare's pedant Holofernes. Mulcaster and the somewhat later Edmund Coote were interested in regularizing spelling as best they could. There were more radical reformers, too—John Hart, Sir Thomas Smith, and William Bullokar are examples—who devised phonetic alphabets to better represent English speech sounds. Bullokar is worthy of note for another reason: in 1586 he published *Bref Grammar for English*—the first English grammar book. It was probably intended as an introduction to the subsequent study of Latin grammar.

So 16th-century interest in language produced two of the basic tools of the writer on usage. Bullokar, out of his interest in regularizing and reforming, had been moved to write a grammar of English. And the vocabulary controversy—the introduction of inkhorn terms by the enrichers and the revival of English archaisms by the purists (of whom the poet Edmund Spenser was one)—led another schoolmaster, Robert Cawdrey, to produce the first English dictionary in 1604.

The 17th century provides several more signposts on the way to the treatment of usage as we know it. One of these is the expression of a desire for regulation of the language by an academy similar to the ones established in Italy in the 16th century and in France in 1635. Calls for the establishment of an English academy came as early as 1617; among the writers to urge one were John Dryden in 1664, John Evelyn in 1665, and Daniel Defoe in 1697.

More grammar books were also published at this time. Ben Jonson's appeared posthumously in 1640. It is short and sketchy and is intended for the use of foreigners. Its grammar is descriptive, but Jonson hung his observations on a Latin grammatical framework. It also seems to be the first English grammar book to quote the

Roman rhetorician Quintilian's dictum "Custom is the most certain mistress of language."

John Wallis, a mathematician and member of the Royal Society, published in 1658 a grammar, written in Latin, for the use of foreigners who wanted to learn English. Wallis, according to George H. McKnight, abandoned much of the method of Latin grammar. Wallis's grammar is perhaps best remembered for being the source of the much discussed distinction between *shall* and *will.* Wallis's grammar is also the one referred to by Samuel Johnson in the front matter of his 1755 dictionary.

John Dryden deserves mention too. He defended the English of his time as an improvement over the English of Shakespeare and Jonson. He is the first person we know of who worried about the preposition at the end of a sentence. He eliminated many such from his own writings when revising his works for a collected edition. He seems to have decided the practice was wrong because it could not happen in Latin.

C. C. Fries tells us that 17th-century grammars in general were designed either for foreigners or for school use, in order to lead to the study of Latin. In the 18th century, however, grammars were written predominantly for English speakers, and although they were written for the purpose of instructing, they seem to find more fun in correcting. A change in the underlying philosophy of grammar had occurred, and it is made explicit in perhaps the first 18th-century grammar, *A Key to the Art of Letters . . .*, published in 1700 by a schoolmaster named A. Lane. He thought it a mistake to view grammar simply as a means to learn a foreign language and asserted that "the true End and Use of *Grammar* is to teach how to speak and write well and learnedly in a language already known, according to the unalterable Rules of right Reason." Gone was Ben Jonson's appeal to custom.

There was evidently a considerable amount of general interest in things grammatical among men of letters, for Addison, Steele, and Swift all treated grammar in one way or another in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* in 1710, 1711, and 1712. In 1712 Swift published yet another proposal for an English academy (it came within a whisker of succeeding); John Oldmixon attacked Swift's proposal in the same year. Public interest must have helped create a market for the grammar books which began appearing with some frequency about this same time. And if controversy fuels sales, grammarians knew it; they were perfectly willing to emphasize their own advantages by denigrating their predecessors, sometimes in abusive terms.

We need mention only a few of these productions here. Pride of place must go to Bishop Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar,* 1762. Lowth's book is both brief and logical. Lowth was influenced by the theories of James Harris's *Hermes,* 1751, a curious disquisition about universal grammar. Lowth apparently derived his notions about the perfectability of English grammar from Harris, and he did not doubt that he could reduce the language to a system of uniform rules. Lowth's approach was strictly prescriptive; he meant to improve and correct, not describe. He judged correctness by his own rules—mostly derived from Latin grammar—which frequently went against established usage. His favorite mode of illustration is what was known as "false syntax": examples of linguistic wrongdoing from the King James Bible, Shakespeare, Sidney, Donne, Milton, Swift, Addison, Pope—the most respected names in English literature. He was so sure of himself that he could permit himself a little joke; discussing the construction where a preposition comes at the end of a clause or sentence, he says, "This is an idiom, which our language is strongly inclined to."

Lowth's grammar was not written for children. But he did what he intended to so well that subsequent grammarians fairly fell over themselves in haste to get out versions of Lowth suitable for school use, and most subsequent grammars—including Noah Webster's first—were to some extent based upon Lowth's.

The older descriptive tradition of Jonson and Wallis was not quite dead, however. Joseph Priestley's grammar, first published in 1761, used false syntax too, but in the main Priestley was more tolerant of established usages that Lowth considered to be in error. In his later editions he politely but firmly disagreed with Lowth on specific points. Priestley's grammar enjoyed some success and his opinions were treated with respect, but he was not imitated like Lowth.

The most successful of the Lowth adapters was Lindley Murray. Murray was an American living in England—Dennis Baron informs us that he had made a considerable fortune trading with the Loyalists during the American Revolution and had moved to England ostensibly for reasons of health. Friends asked him to write a grammar for use in an English girls' school, and he obliged. Murray considered himself only a compiler, and that he was. He took over verbatim large patches from Lowth and teased them out with pieces taken from Priestley and a few other grammarians and rhetoricians. He removed the authors' names from the false syntax and stirred in a heavy dose of piety. He silently and primly corrected Lowth's jocular little clause to "to which our language is strongly inclined." The resulting mixture was one of the most successful grammar books ever, remaining a standard text in American schools for a half century.

George Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric,* 1776, is not a grammar book proper, but it contains a long discussion of grammatical proprieties. Campbell starts out sensibly enough; he says that grammar is based on usage, and he rejects notions of an abstract or universal grammar. But he then proceeds to examine usage, concluding that the usage that counts is reputable, national, and present use. He goes on to present nine canons of verbal criticism, by one or another of which he can reject any usage he chooses to. By the time all the discussions of barbarisms, solecisms, and improprieties are finished—the discussions are well supplied with examples from many of Bishop Lowth's favorite whipping boys—it is quite apparent that the reputable, national, and present use that passes all tests is simply whatever suits the taste of George Campbell.

Books of grammar and rhetoric had existed in English from the 16th and 17th centuries. The 18th century's new contribution was the book of unvarnished usage opinion, best exemplified by Robert Baker's anonymously published *Reflections on the English Language,* 1770. (Baker was apparently anticipated in this genre by *Observations upon the English Language,* 1752, another anonymous publication, ascribed by Sterling A. Leonard to one George Harris.) We know nothing of Baker except what he put down about himself in his preface. He says that he left school at fifteen, that he learned no Greek and only the easiest Latin, that he has never seen the folio edition of Johnson's Dictionary, and that he owns no books. He fancies he has good taste, however, and he clearly understands French. His book is patterned on *Remarques sur la langue françoise,* 1659, written by Claude Faure de Vaugelas, a leading member of the French Academy.

Baker's *Reflections* is a random collection of comments, mostly about what he considers misuses, based chiefly on books that he has borrowed or read. He brings forward no authorities to support his *ipse dixit* pronouncements, many of which are on the order of "This is not good English" or "This does not make sense." Yet a surprising number of the locutions he questioned are still to be found as topics of discussion in current books on usage. It is less surprising, perhaps, that the moderns are still repeating Baker's conclusions.

The 19th century is so rich in usage lore that it is hard to summarize. We find something new in the entrance of journalists into the usage field. Reviews had commented on grammatical matters throughout the 18th century, it is true, but in the 19th newspapers and magazines with wider popular appeal began to pronounce. One result of this activity was the usage book that consists of pieces first written for a newspaper or magazine and then collected into a book along with selected comments and suggestions by readers (this type of book is still common today). Perhaps the first of these was *A Plea for the Queen's English,* 1864, by Henry Alford, dean of Canterbury. Alford was vigorously attacked by George Washington Moon, a writer born in London of American parents, in a work that eventually became titled *The Dean's English.* The controversy fueled several editions of both books and seems to have entertained readers on both sides of the Atlantic.

On the American side of the Atlantic the puristic strictures of Edward S. Gould, originally newspaper and magazine contributions, were collected as *Good English* in 1867. Gould was apparently annoyed to find that Alford had anticipated him on several points, and devoted a section to belaboring the Dean, only to discover that Moon had anticipated him there. He acknowledged the justness of Moon's criticisms and then appended a few parting shots at Moon's English, before tacking on an assault on the spelling reforms of Noah Webster and a series of lectures on pulpit oratory. Moon replied with *The Bad English of Lindley Murray and Other Writers on the English Language,* 1868, listed by H. L. Mencken as being in its eighth edition in 1882, under the title *Bad English Exposed.* (Gould was one of the "other writers.") Language controversy sold books in America as well as in England.

The most popular of American 19th-century commentators was Richard Grant White, whose *Words and Their Uses,* 1870, was also compiled from previously published articles. He did not deign to mention earlier commentators except to take a solitary whack at Dean Alford for his sneer at American English. His chapters on "misused words" and "words that are not words" hit many of the same targets as Gould's chapters on "misused words" and "spurious words," but White's chapters are longer. Perhaps his most entertaining sections deal with his denial that English has a grammar, which is introduced by a Dickensian account of having been rapped over the knuckles at age five and a half for not understanding his grammar lesson. White, who was not without intellectual attainments—he had edited Shakespeare—was nevertheless given to frequent faulty etymologizing, and for some reason he was so upset by the progressive passive *is being built* that he devoted a whole chapter to excoriating it. These last two features caught the attention of the peppery Fitzedward Hall, an American teacher of Sanskrit living in England.

Hall produced a whole book—*Recent Exemplifications of False Philology,* 1872—exposing White's errors, and returned to the attack again with *Modern English* in 1873. Hall was a new breed of commentator, bringing a wealth of illustrative material from his collection of examples to bear on the various points of contention. Hall's evidence should have been more than enough to overwhelm White's unsupported assertions, but it was not. Partly to blame is the public's disdain of the scholarly, and partly to blame is Hall's style—he never makes a point succinctly, but lets his most trenchant observations dissipate in a cloud of sesquipedalian afterthoughts. White's books, Mencken tells us, remained in print until the 1930s; Hall's collection of examples became part of the foundations of the *Oxford English Dictionary.*

Two other 19th-century innovations deserve mention. William Cullen Bryant's *Index Expurgatorius,* 1877, is the start of the American newspaper tradition in usage—works written by newspaper editors. Bryant was editor-in-chief and part owner of the *New York Evening Post.* His *Index* is simply a list of words not to be used in the *Post;* there was no explanatory matter. Lists of forbidden words were popular for a time afterward, but the fashion passed. The newspaper editor as usage arbiter has continued to the present, however. The pseudonymous Alfred Ayres in *The Verbalist,* 1881, seems to have been the first, or one of the first, of these to arrange his comments in alphabetical order, creating a sort of dictionary of usage.

In the early decades of the Republic, many Americans patriotically supported the home-grown version of the language against the language of the vanquished British oppressors. There were proposals for a Federal English—Noah Webster was in the forefront of the movement—and for the establishment of an American academy to promote and regulate the language—John Adams made one such proposal.

The British, for their part, were not amused by the presumption of former colonials. Americanisms had been viewed askance as early as 1735, but the frequency and the ferocity of denunciation markedly increased in the 19th century, as British travelers, some of them literary folk like Captain Marryat, Mrs. Frances Trollope, and Charles Dickens, visited the United States and returned to England to publish books of their travels, almost always disparaging in tone. They seldom failed to work in a few criticisms of the language as well as the uncouth character and manners of Americans. British reviewers, too, were outspoken in their denunciation of things American, and especially Americanisms.

American writers put up a spirited defense for a time, but the writing class eventually began to wear down under the onslaught. By 1860, in an article crying up Joseph Worcester's dictionary, the *Atlantic Monthly* could call American English "provincial." The general attitude after the Civil War seems to have been one of diffidence rather than defiance. The diffident attitude is of interest here because it was in the second half of the 19th century that Americanisms began to make their way silently into American usage books as errors. Many of these, such as *balance* for *remainder* and *loan* for *lend,* are still denigrated by American usage writers and their native origin passed over in silence.

We have said nothing about 19th-century grammars, and not much needs to be said about them. If those grammars were computers, the most successful could be called clones of Lindley Murray. Some dissatisfaction with the older English traditions existed, especially in the first half of the 19th century in this country, but little seems to have resulted from it. Books with innovative systems met with little success. Goold Brown, in his *Grammar of English Grammars,* first published in 1851, collected most of the grammars published up to his own

time, and used them for his examples of false grammar. He also exhibited at length their inconsistencies and disagreements. Goold Brown permitted himself one mild observation (most were rather tart): "Grammarians would perhaps differ less, if they read more."

By the end of the 19th century, differences had developed between the ways usage issues were being treated in England and in the United States. Except for the fruits of the Alford–Moon controversy, there seem to be very few British books concerned exclusively with usage problems. The most frequently reprinted of these few was one written by a Scot: William B. Hodgson's *Errors in the Use of English,* 1881. British literati were not indifferent to such issues, but they seem mainly to have put their comments in reviews and letters and works directed primarily to other subjects. Walter Savage Landor, for instance, delivered himself of a number of idiosyncratic views about language and usage in one or two of his *Imaginary Conversations.* John Stuart Mill put a few of his opinions into *A System of Logic.*

America, on the other hand, saw the growth of a small industry devoted to the cultivation of the linguistically insecure, who were being produced in increasing numbers by American public schools using the grammar of Lindley Murray combined with the opinions of Richard Grant White. After the Civil War little handbooks for the guidance of the perplexed appeared with some frequency. We have mentioned one of these, Alfred Ayres's *The Verbalist.* Others bear such titles as *Vulgarisms and Other Errors of Speech, Words: Their Use and Abuse, Some Common Errors of Speech,* and *Slips of Tongue and Pen.* The production of popular books on usage topics continues to be common in the 20th-century United States.

The different approaches of the British and Americans to usage questions have continued along the lines evident in the last half of the 19th century. Fewer books devoted to usage issues have been produced in England, and the arena there has been dominated by two names: Fowler and Gowers. H. W. Fowler's best-known work is *Modern English Usage,* 1926, an expanded, updated, and alphabetized version of *The King's English,* which he had produced with one of his brothers in 1906. This book gained ready acceptance as an authority, and it is usually treated with considerable deference on both sides of the Atlantic. It is a thick book in small print, packed with a combination of good sense, traditional attitudes, pretension-pricking, minute distinctions, and a good deal of what Otto Jespersen, the Danish scholarly grammarian of the English language, called "language moralizing." Fowler, in the tradition of Alford and Richard Grant White, found much to dislike in the prose of contemporary newspapers. He had no gadfly like George Washington Moon to challenge his authority, although he did dispute a few constructions with Otto Jespersen in the pages of the tracts issued by the Society for Pure English. In some of these disputes a characteristic pattern emerges: the historical grammarian finds a construction in literature and wonders how it came to be; Fowler finds the same construction in the newspapers and condemns it.

Sir Ernest Gowers came into usage commentary from a different direction: he was asked to prepare a book for British civil servants to help them avoid the usual bureaucratic jargon of British official prose. The result was *Plain Words,* 1941. This slender book has gone through several editions, growing a bit each time. In 1965 a new edition of Fowler appeared, edited by Gowers, to which Gowers added a number of his own favorite topics. In addition to Fowler and Gowers, the work of Eric Partridge, particularly *Usage and Abusage,* 1942, has been influential.

In recent years, while some English books about usage have concerned themselves with traditional questions of propriety, others have taken a different path, explaining the peculiarities of English idiom to learners of English.

The treatment of usage in 20th-century America, however, hews steadfastly to the traditional line of linguistic etiquette. School grammars are elaborately graded and decked out with color printing, but the most successful are still solidly based on Lowth and Murray. College handbooks have proliferated since 1917, the date of the earliest one in our collection. The contents of these works have not changed greatly, however; the essential sameness of the "Glossaries of Usage" attached to them suggests that their contents are to some extent determined by a desire to carry over from the previous edition as much as possible and to cover what the competition covers. General-purpose guides for those whose schooling is complete are still produced regularly, and in a wider variety of shapes and sizes than in the 19th century. These have developed offshoots in the form of books aimed at business writers and others aimed at technical and scientific writers.

The newspaper tradition has also continued strong. Some usage questions are dealt with in house stylebooks (now often published for outsiders, as well), and newspaper editors have written usage guides for the general public, though these usually have a strong newspaper slant. Especially prominent among these are the several books of Theodore Bernstein, particularly *The Careful Writer,* 1965.

A characteristic of writing on usage has been, right from the beginning, disagreement among the writers on specific points. Various attempts at reconciling these differences have been made, especially in the 20th century. One of the earliest dates from 1883. C. W. Bardeen, a schoolbook publisher, put out a little book in which he tried to discover a consensus by examining some thirty sources, including a number of current usage books, some grammars, some works on philology, some on synonymy, and Webster's and Worcester's dictionaries. Roy Copperud has produced books on the same general plan in 1970 and 1980.

Another approach to the problem of varying opinion has been the survey of opinion. Sterling A. Leonard made the first in 1931. Leonard's survey was replicated in 1971 by Raymond D. Crisp, and a similar survey was conducted in England by G. H. Mittins and three colleagues and published in 1970. The results of these surveys are quantified, so that interested readers can discover the relative acceptability or obloquy of each tested item. Somewhat the same idea has also been tried with the usage panel, an assembled panel of experts to whom each individual item is submitted for approval or disapproval. Again, quantification of relative approval or disapproval is the aim.

The 20th century is the first in which usage has been studied from a scholarly or historical point of view, although Fitzedward Hall's *Modern English* of 1873 should probably be acknowledged as a precursor. Thomas R. Lounsbury collected a number of his magazine articles into *The Standard of Usage in English,* 1908, which examined the background of attitudes and issues. J. Lesslie Hall's *English Usage,* 1917, checked 141 issues drawn from the work of Richard Grant White and from several college-level grammars and rhetorics against evidence from English and American literature. Sterling A. Leonard in *The Doctrine of Correctness in*

English Usage 1700–1800, 1929, provided the first thorough examination of the origins of many attitudes about usage in the 18th century.

Looking back from the late 1980s we find that the 1920s and 1930s were a time of considerable interest in the examination and testing of attitudes and beliefs about usage and in a rationalization of the matter and methods of school grammar. Various publications written by Charles C. Fries and Robert C. Pooley, for example, seemed to point the way. They had relatively little influence in the following decades, however; the schoolbooks by and large follow the traditional lines, and the popular books of usage treat the traditional subjects. A notable exception is Bergen and Cornelia Evans's *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage,* 1957. The book takes the traditional view of many specific issues, but it is strong in insisting that actual usage, both historical and contemporary, must be weighed carefully in reaching usage opinions.

If the mainstream of usage commentary has continued to run in the same old channels, there have nonetheless been some undercurrents of importance. Serious examination of the received truths has continued. Margaret M. Bryant's *Current American Usage,* 1962, reported the results of the testing of many specific items against actual use as shown in current books, magazines, and newspapers. Articles in scholarly books and journals (like *American Speech*) evince continuing interest in real language and real usage in spite of a strong tendency in modern linguistics toward the study of language in more abstract ways. If the popular idea of usage is represented by the continuing series of books produced by the journalists Philip Howard (in England) and William Safire (in the United States) and by the continuing publication of traditionally oriented handbooks, there is also some countervailing critical opinion, as shown by such books as Dwight Bolinger's *Language—the Loaded Weapon,* Jim Quinn's *American Tongue and Cheek,* Dennis Baron's *Grammar and Good Taste,* and Harvey Daniels's *Famous Last Words,* all published in the early 1980s.

A historical sketch of this length necessarily must omit many deserving names and titles and pass over many interesting observers and observations. This we regret, but do not apologize for, as the need to omit what we would prefer to include seems almost omnipresent in our work as lexicographers. Much of the historical information herein draws heavily on materials available in Leonard's *Doctrine of Correctness;* Charles Carpenter Fries's *The Teaching of the English Language,* 1927; George H. McKnight's *Modern English in the Making,* 1928; H. L. Mencken's *The American Language,* 4th edition, 1936, and Supplement 1, 1945; Baron's *Grammar and Good Taste,* 1982; and Daniels's *Famous Last Words,* 1983. These books constitute a rich mine of information for the serious student of English usage and its history, to whom we also recommend a perusal of our bibliography.

Pronunciation Symbols

ə . . . . **banana, collide, abut**

ˈə, ˌə . . . . **humdrum, abut**

ᵊ . . . . immediately preceding \l\, \n\, \m\, \ŋ\, as in **battle, mitten, eaten,** and sometimes **open**\ˈōpᵊm\, lock **and** key \-ᵊŋ-\; immediately following \l\, \m\, \r\, as often in French **table, prisme,** titre

ər . . . . **further, merger, bird**

ˈər-
ˈə-r . . . . as in two different pronunciations of **hurry** \ˈhər-ē, ˈhə-rē\

a . . . . **mat, map, mad, gag, snap, patch**

ā . . . . **day, fade, date, aorta, drape, cape**

ä . . . . **bother, cot, and,** with most American speakers, **father, cart**

ȧ . . . . **father** as pronounced by speakers who do not rhyme it with *bother;* French **patte**

au̇ . . . . **now, loud, out**

b . . . . **baby, rib**

ch . . . . **chin,** nature \ˈnā-chər\ (actually, this sound is \t\ + \sh\)

d . . . . **did, adder**

e . . . . bet, bed, peck

ˈē, ˌē . . . . **beat,** nosebleed, **evenly, easy**

ē . . . . **easy, mealy**

f . . . . **fifty, cuff**

g . . . . **go, big, gift**

h . . . . **hat, ahead**

hw . . . . **whale** as pronounced by those who do not have the same pronunciation for both *whale* and *wail*

i . . . . **tip, banish, active**

ī . . . . **site, side, buy, tripe** (actually, this sound is \ä\ + \i\, or \ȧ\ + \i\)

j . . . . **job, gem, edge, join, judge** (actually, this sound is \d\ + \zh\)

k . . . . **kin, cook, ache**

k̲ . . . . German **ich, Buch;** one pronunciation of **loch**

l . . . . **lily, pool**

m . . . . **murmur, dim, nymph**

n . . . . **no, own**

ⁿ . . . . indicates that a preceding vowel or diphthong is pronounced with the nasal passages open, as in French *un bon vin blanc* \œⁿ-bōⁿ-vaⁿ-bläⁿ\

ŋ . . . . **sing** \ˈsiŋ\, **singer** \ˈsiŋ-ər\, **finger** \ˈfiŋ-gər\, **ink** \ˈiŋk\

ō . . . . **bone, know, beau**

ȯ . . . . **saw, all, gnaw, caught**

œ . . . . French **boeuf,** German **Hölle**

œ̄ . . . . French **feu,** German **Höhle**

ȯi . . . . **coin, destroy**

p . . . . **pepper, lip**

r . . . . **red, car, rarity**

s . . . . **source, less**

sh . . . . as in **shy, mission, machine, special** (actually, this is a single sound, not two); with a hyphen between, two sounds as in *grasshopper* \ˈgras-ˌhäp-ər\

t . . . . **tie, attack, late, later, latter**

th . . . . as in **thin, ether** (actually, this is a single sound, not two); with a hyphen between, two sounds as in *knighthood* \ˈnīt-ˌhu̇d\

t̲h̲ . . . . **then, either, this** (actually, this is a single sound, not two)

ü . . . . **rule, youth,** union \ˈyün-yən\, few \ˈfyü\

u̇ . . . . **pull, wood, book,** curable \ˈkyu̇r-ə-bəl\, fury \ˈfyu̇(ə)r-ē\

ue . . . . German **füllen, hübsch**

ue̅ . . . . French **rue,** German **fühlen**

v . . . . **vivid, give**

w . . . . **we, away;** in some words having final \(ˌ)ō\, \(ˌ)yü\, or \(ˌ)ü\ a variant \ə-w\ occurs before vowels, as in \ˈfäl-ə-wiŋ\, covered by the variant \ə(-w)\ or \yə(-w)\ at the entry word

y . . . . **yard, young,** cue \ˈkyü\, mute \ˈmyüt\, union \ˈyün-yən\

ʸ . . . . indicates that during the articulation of the sound represented by the preceding character the front of the tongue has substantially the position it has for the articulation of the first sound of *yard,* as in French *digne* \dēnʸ\

z . . . . **zone, raise**

zh . . . . as in **vision, azure** \ˈazhər\ (actually, this is a single sound, not two); with a hyphen between, two sounds as in *hogshead* \ˈhȯgz-ˌhed, ˈhägz-\

\ . . . . slant line used in pairs to mark the beginning and end of a transcription: \ˈpen\

ˈ . . . . mark preceding a syllable with primary (strongest) stress: \ˈpen-mən-ˌship\

ˌ . . . . mark preceding a syllable with secondary (medium) stress: \ˈpen-mən-ˌship\

- . . . . mark of syllable division

( ) . . . . indicate that what is symbolized between is present in some utterances but not in others: *factory* \ˈfak-t(ə-)rē\

A

a, an There is an article on the proper use of *a* and *an* in almost every usage book ever written, although hardly a native speaker of English has any difficulty with them—in fact one seldom thinks about them at all in speech.

The difficulty, when there is any, is to be found in writing. The basic rules are these: use *a* before a consonant sound; use *an* before a vowel sound. Before a letter or an acronym or before numerals, choose *a* or *an* according to the way the letter or numeral is pronounced: *an* FDA directive, *a* U.N. resolution, *a* $5.00 bill.

Actual usage, of course, is more complex than the simple rules would lead you to expect. Here is what actual usage shows:

1. Before words with an initial consonant sound, *a* is usual in speech and writing. This is in line with the basic rule.

2. Before *h* in an unstressed or weakly stressed syllable, *a* and *an* are both used in writing (*an* historic, *a* historic) but *an* is more usual in speech, whether the *h* is pronounced or not. This variation is the result of historical development; in unstressed and weakly stressed syllables, *h* was formerly not pronounced in many words where it is pronounced at the present time. A few words, such as *historic* and (especially in England) *hotel,* are in transition, and may be found with either *a* or *an.* You choose the article that suits your own pronunciation.

3. Occasionally in modern writing and speech and regularly in the King James Version of the Bible, *an* is used before *h* in a stressed syllable, as in *an* hundred. Again, we have the same historical change: many more words were pronounced with a silent initial *h* in the past than are at present. A few words, such as *heir, hour,* and *honest,* generally have silent initial *h;* some others, like *herb* or *humble* are pronounced both ways. Use *a* or *an* according to your own pronunciation.

4. Before words beginning with a consonant sound but an orthographic vowel, *an* is sometimes used in speech and writing (*an* unique, such *an* one). This use is less frequent now than in the past.

5. Before words with an initial vowel sound, *an* is usual in speech and writing. This is in line with the basic rule.

6. Occasionally, and more often in some dialects than others, *a* is used in speech before words beginning with a vowel sound. The Dictionary of American Regional English reports this to be frequent in the United States; the evidence suggests it may have been somewhat more common in the past.

7. *A* is normally unstressed, and pronounced \ə\. When stressed, as in "He's *a* vice president, not *the* vice president," it is pronounced \ˈā\ in the United States, but often \ˈa\ in Canada.

abbreviations Abbreviations have been receiving bad notices since the 18th century. Such writers as Addison and Swift satirized the fashionable practice of the time of using truncated or clipped forms of long words—such as *pozz, phizz, plenipo,* and *hippo* for *positively, physiognomy, plenipotentiary,* and *hypochondria*—in conversation. Ordinary contractions—*can't, haven't, shan't, isn't,* for instance—were likewise satirized. Campbell 1776 took notice of the practice, classing the clipped forms as barbarisms, but commenting that he thought the practice had fallen into general disgrace because of the attacks of the satirists and that it never showed itself in books.

Perhaps Dr. Campbell was premature in announcing the abandonment of the practice of abbreviating, for usage books down to the present day wag their fingers at the practice. MacCracken & Sandison 1917, for instance, lists several truncations disapprovingly—among them *auto, phone, photo, exam,* and *gym.* Guth 1985 continues the critical tradition but changes the truncations:

> Avoid informal abbreviations. Avoid clipped forms like *bike, prof, doc, fan mag, exec, econ.* (Other shortened forms, like *phone, ad,* and *exam* are now commonly used in serious writing.)

Aside from the social acceptability of clipped forms (Emily Post in 1927 disapproved *phone* and *photo*), there are other considerations to be taken into account. Handbooks in general recommend avoiding abbreviations in "formal" writing. Flesch 1964 disagrees, however:

> It's a superstition that abbreviations shouldn't be used in serious writing and that it's good style to spell everything out. Nonsense: use abbreviations whenever they are customary and won't attract the attention of the reader.

Flesch's advice seems sound; but care should be taken to observe what in fact is customary. It is obvious that what is customary in technical writing will be different from what is customary in journalism or in scholarly articles. If you are uncertain, you should consult an appropriate style manual or handbook. General advice can be found in any of a number of composition handbooks and in general style manuals, such as *Webster's Standard American Style Manual.*

See also ETC.; I.E., E.G.

abdomen This word may be pronounced with the main stress on the first syllable or on the second: \ˈab-də-mən\ or \ab-ˈdō-mən\. The former version predominates among laypeople; physicians are more evenly divided.

abhorrence Bernstein 1965 notes that *abhorrence,* when followed by a preposition, takes *of.* This is true in a large majority of cases.

> . . . an abhorrence of draughts —*Times Literary Supp.*, 14 Nov. 1968

> . . . my natural abhorrence of its sickening inhumanity —George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah,* 1921

The word has also been used with a few other prepositions, however, such as *to* (an instance of which was corrected to *of* by Lindley Murray in 1795), *against,* and *for.* These are less frequent by far, and are in the main to be found in older literature.

> He recognized her as "Goldy," famous in Hsi-Yu for her abhorrence to sleeping alone —*Sericana Quarterly,* April 1952

. . . abhorrence against relationship with Wickham —Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice,* 1813

. . . my unbounded abhorrence for this miserable wretch —P. B. Shelley, quoted by Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism, Second Series,* 1888

abhorrent When used with a preposition, *abhorrent* is almost always followed by *to:*

Not only was success abhorrent to their ethical prejudices —Lewis H. Lapham, *Harper's,* May 1971

. . . words like "unfair" whose very sound is abhorrent to him —Joseph Conrad, *Chance,* 1913

abide **1.** The original principal parts of *abide* are *abode,* past, and *abidden,* past participle. The OED notes that in time the past and past participle coalesced in *abode,* and *abidden* fell into disuse, although a few 19th-century writers tried to revive it. During the 19th century a regular past and past participle *abided* came into use. It is more likely to be used now than *abode* is. *Abode,* while not very much used by modern writers, is kept alive by its use in such familiar literary works as "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," and in works referring to an earlier era, as Samuel Hopkins Adams's *Grandfather Stories* (1955).
2. Except for *can't abide* and *abide by,* which are in continuing vigorous use, most senses of *abide* have a rather literary or old-fashioned flavor. They do, however, continue in reputable, if somewhat infrequent, use.
3. Evans 1957 comments that *can't abide* is "commonly disparaged." One source of the disparagement is Partridge 1942, who calls the expression "a low-class colloquialism"—he does allow that in American use it might be "homely or half-humorous," an opinion he may have derived from Krapp 1927, who commented on the expression's "somewhat archaic and rustic character." Evans defends *can't abide* as having force and flavor. Indeed it is hard to see what the objection was. The expression goes back to the 16th century; Shakespeare uses it several times in his plays:

She could not abide Master Shallow —*2 Henry IV,* 1598

It is true that Shakespeare puts it into the mouths of commoners—those who speak prose rather than blank verse. Modern evidence, however, shows that the usage is perfectly proper:

. . . which may have been intended to prove how open-minded and aesthetically susceptible Canaday is even to work he cannot abide —Harold Rosenburg, *New Yorker,* 1 Jan. 1972

This sense of *abide* is usually used in a negative construction or in one with negative implications:

My inability when I was young to abide most males of my own age disguised loneliness that no amount of variety assuaged —Donald Hall, *N.Y. Times Book Rev.,* 16 Jan. 1983

abject Nickles 1974 and Safire (*N.Y. Times,* 2 Sept. 1984) call the phrase *abject poverty* a cliché. Our evidence shows that *abject* is frequently used to modify *poverty;* in this use *abject* is not much more than an intensifier:

. . . the Place Maubert, still at the end of the nineteenth century the area of the most abject poverty —*Times Literary Supp.,* 14 Nov. 1968

Our earliest evidence for the phrase, however, does not refer to economic circumstances:

. . . while they profess to build upon Naturalism an edifying and attractive philosophy of life, they disguise from themselves and others the bare and abject poverty of the scheme —W. R. Inge, *The Church in the World,* 1928

Nickles strikes further at *abject* by claiming it "tends to generate clichés in clusters, vitiating any noun it accompanies." This is a patent overstatement. *Abject* connotes two kinds of low degree: one of low circumstances—abasement—and one of servility or spinelessness—debasement. It can be applied directly to persons:

Farmers who have to work 16 hours a day to pay rent and interest on mortgages in addition to buying necessities for their families are not free: they are abject slaves —George Bernard Shaw, *New Republic,* 22 Nov. 1954

. . . the time would come that no human being should be humiliated or be made abject —Katherine Anne Porter, *The Never-Ending Wrong,* 1977

. . . Bloom beholds himself, in a hideous vision, looking on at Blazes Boylan and Molly, an abject cuckold —Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle,* 1931

He was abject before Wolf Larsen and almost grovelled to Johansen —Jack London, *The Sea-Wolf,* 1904

. . . a sinner, and a repentant prostrate abject sinner —George Meredith, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,* 1859

More often it is applied to the actions and conditions of such persons:

. . . my critical intelligence sometimes shrivels to an abject nodding of the head —Lewis H. Lapham, *Harper's,* May 1971

. . . the aversion my person inspired even in its most abject and obsequious attitudes —Samuel Beckett, *Evergreen,* June 1967

The possibility of humiliation . . . touched a vein of abject cowardice in his composition —H. G. Wells, *Joan and Peter,* 1918

Then, what submission, what cringing and fawning, what servility, what abject humiliation —Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities,* 1859

. . . when the least sickness attacked her, under the most abject depression and terror of death —W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair,* 1848

The sensation of nameless terror and abject fear . . . overmastered me completely —Rudyard Kipling, "The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes," 1888

. . . having dictated to our enemies the terms of a most abject surrender —Archibald MacLeish, *Saturday Rev.,* 9 Feb. 1946

. . . without fear, but with the most abject awe of the aristocracy —T. S. Eliot, "Philip Massinger," *Selected Essays,* 1932

Conway survived and penned an abject apology to Washington —*American Guide Series: Maryland,* 1940

These examples are typical uses of *abject.* The most frequently modified nouns, after *poverty,* are *fear, terror, surrender,* and *apology.* It seems unlikely that any of the writers cited considered *abject* to have a vitiating effect.

abjure, adjure A number of commentators (such as Harper 1985, Shaw 1975, Bremner 1980, the Oxford American Dictionary 1980, Bernstein 1965, Evans 1957) warn that these words are confused with some frequency. Evidence of such confusion is not to be found in the Merriam-Webster files; if it does exist, it is apparently corrected in manuscript. *Abjure* means "to renounce, reject, avoid"; *adjure* "to urge or advise earnestly." Besides differing in meaning, the two words take different grammatical constructions. *Abjure* regularly takes a noun as direct object. The noun often is, but need not be, abstract; it is rarely a personal noun.

> Galileo was summoned before the Inquisition at Rome, and there he was made to abjure the Copernican theory —S. F. Mason, *Main Currents of Scientific Thought,* 1953

> Just one whiff of that vast butchery . . . is enough to make a sensitive person abjure meat forever —Ian Fleming, *Thrilling Cities,* 1963

Adjure, on the other hand, typically takes a personal noun or pronoun followed by *to* and an infinitive:

> The wives and daughters of the Germans rushed about the camp . . . adjuring their countrymen to save them from slavery —J. A. Froude, *Caesar,* 1879

> There is no use adjuring them to take part in it or warning them to keep out of it —Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return,* 1934

Adjure, incidentally, is used quite a bit less frequently than *abjure.*

ablative See INCOMPARABLE.

able to In constructions where *able* is followed by *to* and the infinitive, the infinitive is nearly always in the active voice, whether the subject is human or nonhuman. Human subjects are more common:

> . . . people have traditionally been able to walk into museums free —Huntington Hartford, *The Public Be Damned,* 1955

> So far, I have been able to keep my enthusiasm . . . under control —John Fischer, *Harper's,* November 1970

> But the City that lay between was not his ground, and Richard II was no more able than Charles I to dictate to its militia —G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History,* 1942

> She hopes to find Somebody able and willing to buy her freedom —Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan,* 1894

> There are those from whom not even death has been able to disconnect me —George P. Elliott, *Harper's,* September 1970

The passive infinitive is much less common. Some commentators (Longman 1984, Perrin & Ebbitt 1972) opine that the construction sounds awkward; perhaps it often does, and awkwardness may account for its being fairly uncommon. Here are three examples to show that it is used on occasion:

> . . . Mr. Doddington, from whose disapproval the story of Gavin and the Concannons' party had not been able to be kept —Elizabeth Bowen, *Horizon,* September 1945

> . . . so social and religious life would be able to be carried out on a normal basis —L. S. B. Leakey, *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu,* 1952

> . . . a simple experiment able to be performed by anyone —*Monsanto Mag.,* December 1953

Using the last example for illustrative purposes, we can avoid the passive infinitive by revising it to include *can* or *could:*

> . . . a simple experiment that anyone could (can) perform;
> *or*
> . . . a simple experiment that can (could) be performed by anyone.

abortive A love of etymology and the consequent dismembering of English words into their presumed constituent parts has led many a usage commentator down the primrose path of error (see ETYMOLOGICAL FALLACY). Safire 1982 seconds a correspondent's objection to the use of *abortive* to describe a failed mission to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran in 1979. Safire claims to see in the suffix *-ive* an implication of continuation or permanence, and he maintains that *abortive* must therefore "suggest a continuous process of aborting." This is, of course, a conclusion that could only be reached by ignoring the use of the whole word in English in favor of speculating about what it might mean. No "continuous process of aborting" is suggested by Shakespeare's line

> Why should I joy in any abortive birth? —*Love's Labour's Lost,* 1595

Safire further asserts that "'abortive efforts' should be used only when the emphasis is on a series of past failures." In actuality the word is often used to modify a plural noun, but emphasis on past failures may or may not be present:

> . . . a magazine existed,—after so many abortive attempts —Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England, 1815–1865,* rev. ed., 1946

> . . . and forget that abortive efforts from want of heart are as possible to revenge as to generosity —Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* 1886

> He knew it was like feeling over a chilling motor for loose wires, and after two or three abortive motions he gave it up —Wallace Stegner, "The Traveler," in *Perspectives USA,* Summer 1953

Moreover, many a writer from Shakespeare to the present has used the word of a single incident with no hint of recurrence or permanence:

> The power that had proved too strong for this abortive restoration —Arnold J. Toynbee, *Center Mag.,* March 1968

> After the abortive Decembrist insurrection in 1825 —George F. Kennan, *New Yorker,* 1 May 1971