IS AMERICAN ENGLISH DEAD?
A LINGUISTIC AND EDITORIAL LOOK AT MODERN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Is American English Dead? A Linguistic and Editorial Look at Modern Language

is a thesis project that observes and critiques the current state of American English. As technology and culture develop, our version of the English language is perpetually in a state of change; words that are relevant one year are archaic the next. The Associated Press Stylebook, which journalists have used for decades to keep a consistent grammatical voice and tone in the news, is never finite upon publication, and it is difficult for AP editors to keep up with new words and phrases as they evolve throughout the year.

Copy editors are among those who lament the fact that English is changing so fast and are upset that it is rapidly becoming more informal and reliant on slang. However, linguists are among those who embrace the changes and observe our constantly-evolving language with fascination. This thesis explores the debate between these two sides, which essentially boils down to prescriptivism versus descriptivism, and offers critiques of these two approaches, noting arguments from both stakeholders and looking at English past.

An interactive version of this thesis is also available at isamericanenglishdead.wordpress.com.

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The debate

A taste of the problem between linguists and copy editors:

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The first speaker represents a linguist – specifically, a linguistic purist. He chooses not to speak words or phrases that are “right” as defined by society or historical use, but he is still able to communicate with his friend – who, arguably, represents a copy editor – effectively. Although he uses words in an unorthodox manner, the editor knows what he means: it’s cold outside, but his gloves and the sun keep him warm. Birds are singing in the trees. Although he understands him, the editor claims he is using “all the wrong words for those things.” Linguists counter that concepts of right and wrong in language are subjective; the ability to communicate is more important to them than following the rules. In fact, that is the linguist’s argument at the end of the comic: “Maybe [those are the wrong words], but the things themselves are all right. So who cares?”

Many of the arguments between linguists and editors boil down to prescriptivism versus descriptivism. Prescriptivists believe that one way of writing or speaking is better than another – a more popular idea among copy editors. Descriptivists attempt to observe both present and past language objectively without passing judgment on how language ought to be spoken or written – more popular among linguists. Ben Zimmer, a descriptivist linguist and contributor to well-known linguistics blog The Language Log, calls prescriptivists “a nefarious group of people…a terrible bunch.” In his post from May 29, 2012, “The New Yorker vs. the descriptivist specter,”
he railed at The New Yorker for publishing so many anti-descriptivist articles, claiming that prescriptivism encourages elitism. He cited Ryan Bloom’s then-recent article, “Inescapably, You’re Judged By Language,” as an example of this elitism:

“People who say otherwise, who say that in all situations we should speak and write however we’d like, are ignoring the current reality. This group, known as descriptivists, may be fighting for noble ideas, for things like the levelling of elitism and the smoothing of social class, but they are neglecting the real-world costs of those ideas, neglecting the flesh-and-blood humans who are denied a job or education because, as wrong as it is, they are being harshly judged for how they speak and write today” (Bloom).

Zimmer responded that Bloom had misjudged descriptivist linguists in his article; they aren’t unconcerned with these issues at all. In fact, they are highly concerned about these issues, but from a social standpoint rather than a grammatical one. Linguistic descriptivists look deeper than “incorrect” versus “correct” English by considering who or what determined the existing language rules, and how that determination has influenced society and communication. Rather than ask how to fix the grammatical problem, they ask questions like the following:

“Is a particular linguistic form considered to be erroneous? If so, what motivates the ascription of error? Would the person who produced the form in question recognize it as an error and chalk it up to a slip of the tongue or pen? Or is a linguistic variant disparaged because it is associated with a stigmatized dialect, and if so, how does the relationship between the ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ forms reflect broader social dynamics over time? And finally, which registers of a language are appropriate for which social situations, and how do speakers and writers navigate changes of register in their daily lives?” (Zimmer).
According to Dr. Andrew Carnie, a linguistics professor and dean of the Graduate College at the University of Arizona, many linguists see prescriptivism as “tyranny” because it sets the standard for an “acceptable” level of communication. Because prescriptive rules dictate educational and social status, they actually impede communication, and linguists tend to dismiss them because they tell people what to do.

“The reason [English grammar] changes is badly understood,” he said. “It’s kind of a fashion and social convention. Writing well and writing clearly and in a style one can enjoy and appreciate is a presentation of content, not grammar.”

He felt compelled to mention that linguists do have to follow some rules.

“Ironically, linguists must publish in APA style,” he noted.

Geoffrey K. Pullum, professor of general linguistics and head of linguistics and English language at the University of Edinburgh (and co-author of The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language), published a facetious article about sociolinguistics on The Language Log on Feb. 12, entitled “Whom loves ya?” In the article, he noted a study published by Wired magazine about online dating statistics. Among other things, the study noted that men who use “whom” on their profiles get 31 percent more contacts from opposite-sex respondents than those who don’t. He used this fact to demonstrate the social importance of language, which is much more linguist-centered than editor-centered: “This changes everything! It’s not just about the inflectional marking of relative and interrogative pronouns any more, people; it’s about getting more sex!” (Pullum).

Pullum’s article noted the correct and complicated uses of “who” versus “whom” in the article, but stated that correct grammar was probably not the reason the women in the study
responded to these men. Instead, he argued that women associate the use of “whom” with intelligence, even if the men used it incorrectly in their ad.

“It simply doesn’t matter whether you use whom correctly! In general, women won’t know any more about syntactic contexts for rare and marginal inflectional forms than men do. Sure, they are interested in seeking out intelligent men to have sex with: the idea of breeding with brainy guys who will think of good ways to protect the offspring and bring home food (yadda yadda yadda) is built into them by natural selection” (Pullum).

If Pullum’s theory is correct and communication is based in social convention rather than in innate grammatical correctness, then one could argue that a prescriptivist or copy editor’s job is obsolete. If grammar and language is truly entirely subjective, then we could all refer to singing birds as “flappy planes beeping in the stick towers” without consequence, as the comic portrayed. This is where the linguists and the copy editors conflict most in their tumultuous love triangle with the English language.

The linguist perspective

Most people know what copy editors do for a living: by looking closely at the content in a newspaper or publication before it is printed to make sure it’s right, they preserve the English language. A copy editor, then, looks at language as a knowledge system that has rules which need to be followed, and editors are tasked with following those rules.

Linguists, however, look at language through a different lens. They don’t see language as right versus wrong; they instead observe it as a form of communication with no objective truth. While editors follow the rules that language has already set, linguists take a step back and ask
why those rules exist. For example, when copy editors correct a misuse of who versus whom in the paper, linguists ask: What is the significance of who versus whom, and what makes one or the other wrong in context? What social implications exist from following that rule, or from mixing up the two? How does the use of who versus whom change over time, and how does that reflect society over time?

“Linguistics is a science,” said Carnie. “Chemists won’t say ‘these chemicals can’t combine,’ and linguists won’t say that about language. They observe it and describe how it works.”

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Although linguistics is a science, linguists do not all subscribe to a single black-and-white view of language; some are linguistic purists, sociolinguists, forensic linguists, etc., and they argue among themselves about the purpose and execution of language. However, they tend to agree on one key concept: unlike copy editors, most linguists have no intention of interfering with the natural evolution of grammar and vocabulary.

When linguists observe the evolution of language, they often make a distinction between the written and the spoken word. Since oral communication came before written communication, they say it is a more honest depiction of language than writing. Also, speech is generally spontaneous, whereas when people write their thoughts down, they have the ability to think critically about their choice in words, grammar, and style. According to Geoffrey Sampson, author of Educating Eve: The Language Instinct Debate, linguists can look to children to find the purest form of current communication:

“Speech is the natural mode of linguistic expression which is acquired universally at a young age. Written language is clearly a more artificial system: historically it is a recent
development, and there are languages which have no written form today; individuals learn to read and write later than they learn to speak, and some individuals find literacy challenging” (Sampson 73).

Many linguists are fascinated by the way that language creates and reinforces social barriers. For example, it is worth noting that most languages have predominantly phonetic spelling, meaning that the words are spelled the way that they sound. However, English spelling is often far from phonetic; in fact, English speakers often look down on phonetic spelling, and if a person attempts to spell an English word phonetically by “sounding it out,” that resulting misspelled word is often interpreted as a sign that the writer is unintelligent. For example, if a child spells “read” as “reed,” the teacher will not hesitate to mark it wrong. If that child continues to misspell the word, the teacher will likely become concerned about that child’s ability to learn.

This phenomenon was prominently portrayed in the 2006 film *Idiocracy*. In the movie, a man is frozen in 2005 for an army experiment, and he wakes up in 2505 to find that unintelligent people have taken over society; people with higher IQs were cautious about having children throughout those 500 years, so during that same time, promiscuous and unintelligent people overpopulated the earth. The resulting society is crude and dirty, and language reflects that: “But the English language had deteriorated into a hybrid of hillbilly, valley girl, inner city slang, and various grunts.” They do not understand the main character’s 2005-era language, but he understands theirs.
Words are constantly misspelled in this movie, which contributes to the setting and characterization. Usually the spellings are phonetic, as seen in the image above. This is notable because the movie is clearly meant to be taken as a cautionary tale; it shows the watcher that when a society doesn’t value education, restraint, or intelligence, culture will deteriorate. A descriptivist linguist like Ben Zimmer might not appreciate that message, since the idea that how you spell sets you apart from other social classes is prescriptivist. The movie takes a clear stand on what language ought to be, which probably doesn’t sit well with the average linguist viewer.

It is difficult to discuss sociolinguistics without mentioning Noam Chomsky and the linguistic nativism movement. Before Chomsky, linguists focused mostly on finding diversity in the world’s languages, but Chomsky instead looked for similarities in all languages. His findings – that world languages have a lot in common, perhaps too much in common to blame on coincidence – led him to believe that language is instinctive, built within all people regardless of the circumstances that created each world language:

“The common features can only be explained, according to Chomsky, as reflecting innate linguistic knowledge which specifies in considerable detail what human language is like, and hence ensures that creatures endowed with this knowledge are capable of developing and using only languages that conform to the innate specifications” (Sampson 8).
However, not all linguists agree with him. Linguists like Sampson don’t think language is instinctual; instead, he believes that people can only learn language through the experience of communicating with others. For some linguists, this theory leads to another idea: the “poverty of data” argument. Essentially, the poverty of data argument is that children cannot correctly learn their own language unless they are exposed to it from their elders. Therefore, a child learns everything from grammar to intonation while listening to others, and if the people around them speak language “incorrectly,” then children will not have any way of learning the “correct” way. Presumably, this means that when those children enter other societies who speak the same language in the “correct” way, they are subject to ridicule and are categorized into a lower class, likely seen as inferior to those who speak and write well.

American language is regional; not only does each area have different accents, but also different colloquialisms. Arizona natives often refer to Coca-Cola as “soda,” but Minnesota natives often call it “pop.” Texans don’t always pronounce the “g” and the end of a present participle. Southern California natives often say “hella” instead of “very” before an adjective. According to the poverty of data argument, each of these people learned his or her vocabulary and pronunciation from the people around them. That said, it is easy to see that each region makes generalizations about every other region’s level of education based on their language; for example, many joke that Southerners are uneducated because of the way they speak English. These judgments create social divisions and a sense of elitism, as they are also innately prescriptivist – when people create rules about language, they set a standard for what it ought to be. Most linguists who see language as a living, evolving entity disagree with these judgments.

*The copy editor perspective*
Copy editors are arguably the guardians of our evolving English language. When everyone else gets to let their spoken and written English slide, copy editors are paid to be sticklers. They are the ones who point out that the word “advisor” is spelled incorrectly – it’s actually spelled “adviser.” They are the ones who catch dangling modifiers – and, in the process, often have to give a definition for “dangling modifier” to the confused offender. They debate amongst themselves over things like the correctness of the Oxford Comma – it’s wrong according to the Associated Press, but many feel that an extra comma before an “and” helps the flow of a long sequential sentence.

In newspapers, magazines, and nearly every reputable website that relies on content production (note the Oxford Comma here), copy editors are essential to creating a sense of credibility and intelligence for every publication. Without them, publications would have rampant and often severe grammatical errors, which could lead a potential reader or customer to distrust the publication; after all, if the writers can’t even take the time to spell their words correctly, how can we trust that their facts are correct?

Although their cause is noble, it is important to note that copy editors are not normal. Most of them know much more about language than the average person on the street, and by nature of their careers, they must live and breathe the rules. Many attendees at the 2014 American Copy Editor Society convention demonstrated this brilliant quirk in March when the Associated Press announced a significant change to the AP Stylebook. Below is one of many tweets about the change, which went viral in the copy editing world:
The copy editors gasped about this new change, whereas most people probably didn’t even know there was a distinction between “more than” and “over” in the first place. This shows that editors have a higher standard for language and take it extremely seriously. Linguists often butt heads with copy editors because they tend to be prescriptivists, managing communication forms and determining what is right and wrong. But interestingly enough, copy editors have a lot in common with linguists. In fact, many actually agree with them.

“I used to be a stickler, but it has changed,” said Merrill Perlman, a retired New York Times editor and independent editing consultant. “Now I think of grammar in terms of correct versus incorrect in a certain context—is [the chosen form of communication] acceptable in this context?”

Perlman, who spent 25 years at the New York Times and is currently an adjunct lecturer at Columbia University, has worked as or with copy editors for most of her career. Despite this, she conceded that sometimes the linguists are right – perhaps because she’s experienced firsthand how editing rules can ruin a story.

“I remember when we wrote about the book Last Hired, First Fired, we had to change the word ‘Fired’ to ‘Dismissed’ in the title [due to New York Times style]. The word ‘fired’ was once seen as colloquial, so the Times wouldn’t use it,” she said. “The Times said ‘once the whole world passes us, we’ll use it, but we won’t lead it.’ It destroyed an idiom.”
She also noted that cursing is an example of communicating in context, since cursing must be tailored to the audience. For example, the New York Times won’t normally print any word more offensive than “hell” or “damn,” even though we often hear much more colorful words on the street.

Pat O’Connor, author of bestselling *Woe is I: The Grammarphobe’s Guide to Better English in Plain English*, agrees. In fact, she thinks copy editor style needs to be completely separate from normal speaking and writing.

“Language changing is a natural thing—it will never stop,” O’Connor said. “Language will keep evolving because people need words for different things, like in technology. But in papers conventions must stick and stay steady because it’s the style. They need to keep credibility and consistency with readers because otherwise they wouldn’t have a voice anymore.”

O’Connor is a well-known expert on the English language. In addition to writing her bestselling book, she also runs the *Grammarphobia* blog with Stewart Kellerman in which she advises people how to use language correctly and effectively. Although she is devoted to the cause, she is not a prescriptivist copy editor. She noted that part of the reason copy editors need a distinct voice is because, frankly, some language that copy editors care about has no meaning to non-copy editors.

“To normal people, there is no different between ‘compare to’ and ‘compare with,’” she gave as an example. “Many people never learned that difference.”

If Perlman and O’Connor’s opinions on language are the norm for copy editors, then that means the debate between linguists and editors is heavily one-sided. The two appear to agree much more than they disagree. Both sides may feel annoyed when they see glaring typos, when it
comes down to it, all have accepted that English will continue to change the way it has for its entire existence.

“Grammar is rule-based. That’s good for copy editors, but we need to know rules need to be broken,” Perlman said. “Grammar isn’t a law – it’s more of a rolling stop.”

Extra! Extra! Straight from the Associated Press

The Associated Press Stylebook, sometimes touted as “the journalist’s bible,” has been the authority on English grammar and style for decades. Most papers follow its elaborate rules to keep a consistent journalistic voice, and copy editors everywhere know it backwards and forwards. Once an annual publication, AP editors now return to the book constantly and have to reevaluate language based on colloquialisms, political and social changes, technology and other sources that continue to impact language.

David Minthorn, who retired as editor of the AP Stylebook in 2013 and is currently a consultant to the Associated Press, has witnessed language changes over the last 44 years as an Associated Press journalist. He described his experiences with AP and with the evolution of English language.

- What is your position at AP?

I retired Sept. 1, 2013, after 44 years with The Associated Press, including stints as a foreign correspondent in Germany and Russia, a news manager for international and domestic news in New York, and deputy standards editor and co-editor of The Associated Press Stylebook. Then I went right back to work as AP consultant on style and standards issues, working from my new
home in Washington state. I’m in daily contact with AP colleagues in New York and elsewhere advising on these topics. Every week I answer dozens of questions from AP Stylebook subscribers about writing and editing, and I continue as co-editor of the Stylebook. I also write and post AP Style quizzes for subscribers.

- In your opinion, what purpose does the Stylebook serve?

The Stylebook provides an A to Z resource on grammar, punctuation, word usage and definitions, spelling and journalistic style for AP writers and editors worldwide, as well as the many publications and broadcast outlets that adhere to AP guidance. The Stylebook includes practical advice on media law, news values and principles, social media and specialized coverage areas, including business, sports, fashion and food, plus advice on photos, broadcast and interactives. These guidelines underline accuracy, consistency and credibility in news reporting across all platforms served by AP. The overall objective of the Stylebook is to make AP news coverage from anywhere in the world understandable and valued everywhere.

- What is the process for changing AP Style? Roughly how many words and phrases are changed per year?

The AP Stylebook team of four editors keeps year-round watch on evolving language, style and usage issues. We scrutinize proposed new entries or refinements suggested by the AP staff, news outlets in the AP news cooperative, Stylebook subscribers and other followers in journalism schools, public relations agencies and the general public. We consult with AP news leadership on major changes, such as our redefinition of “illegal immigration” in 2013. We may also seek outside expertise for specialized topics such as weapons and mental health for entries
revised or added in 2013-14. Topics deemed highly relevant to breaking news coverage may be added to the online Stylebook immediately and then incorporated into the annual printed edition published at midyear with other new or amended entries that may require more time and research. The 2013 edition included more than 90 new and revised entries. The 2014 edition now in preparation is likely to have a similar number.

- What are your thoughts on language evolving and changing over time?

It’s a never-ending challenge to keep up with the evolution of English language vocabulary. The rise of social media has added to the explosion of new terms and words needed in news reporting. Some terms are faddish and don’t have lasting relevance, others have staying power and must be defined for inclusion in the Stylebook. Our big task is to pluck the wheat from the chaff, choosing the essentials for journalistic guidance. We must also refine existing entries as developments warrant.

- Do grammatical errors (like misuse of who vs. whom, compare to vs. compare with, etc.) bother you?

I wouldn’t include those two examples among the most grievous errors in written and spoken English. Both are rather arcane points and probably aren’t the big issues they once were for grammarians. Like most editors, I am concerned about misspellings, punctuation errors and usage mistakes that might mar the credibility of news reports if not caught before publication. Also, the growth of jargon in news reports, such as the tendency to pile hyphenated modifiers in front of nouns, can be an irritant or even disrupt reading comprehension. Long, complex
sentences are another challenge for audiences. News writing usually can be more compelling and understandable in short, crisp sentences with robust verbs to convey one idea per sentence.

- *Pat O’Connor, author of* Woe is I: The Grammarphobe’s Guide to Better English in Plain English, *said that there should be a distinction between journalism style and everyday person style. Copy editors should be responsible for keeping grammar and style consistent because news gets credibility from having a consistent voice, but because normal people don’t, it’s not important for them to be grammatically correct. What are your thoughts on this?*

That’s a realistic approach. I too believe that copy editors have a duty to adhere to accepted style, grammar and punctuation for the reasons you cite. We should strive to uphold standards without being overly prescriptive or seemingly superior about language. No one likes a grammar crab. Still, the public does expect certain language standards from the news media. When those standards slip in news stories, we hear about it. Just about everyone has a pet peeve about grammar or punctuation. When a particular issue shows up in a news story, it may be pointed to as evidence of supposedly lax standards – something the industry can’t afford in these times.

- *Has technology affected the speed at which AP style changes?*

Computerization revolutionized news coverage and led to many style and format changes during the years I worked in journalism. When I started with AP, reporters wrote on typewriters and news was transmitted rather slowly by teletype. There was a premium on word counts because transmission capacity was much more limited. Every word in a story counted. You had to write tight. There was no room for extraneous verbiage. Computers changed that, allowing much
greater speed and transmission capacity. It became easier to write long and with less discipline.

Now the situation is changing. Audience attention spans are shorter. Competition for readers is stronger than ever. Internet and social media emphasize tighter presentation with strong visuals.

The Stylebook has to provide guidance on these changes and technological advances. A decade ago, the updated printed Stylebook may have averaged a dozen or two dozen update a year. Nowadays, each annual edition includes several times that number to keep pace.

**Sorry, Mr. Webster.**

Noah Webster must be turning over in his grave right now.

Known as the “Father of American Scholarship and Education,” Webster’s name has been immortalized for centuries by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, first published in 1828. But he was a grammarian far before his synonymous dictionary entered history. In 1787, for example, he published the third part of an instructional book series for children. The full title is below:

*An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking. Calculated To improve the MINDS and refine the TASTE of YOUTH. AND ALSO To instruct them in the Geography, History, and Politics of the UNITED STATES. To which is prefixed, RULES in ELOCUTION, and DIRECTIONS for expressing the principal PASSIONS of the Mind. BEING THE THIRD PART of a Grammatical Institute of the English Language.*

This title speaks volumes (no pun intended). Without even looking at the first page, children who saw this book in the 18th century knew that they needed good language skills to
succeed in life, and not just for the sake of speaking and writing well. As Webster implied with the title, good language skills were crucial to gaining knowledge about the newly-founded United States, to communicating effectively, and ultimately to becoming a member of the most elite class in society. The chapters in this book are filled with sentences to pronounce and are interspersed with adages and historical facts, and it is clear from the content that Webster valued patriotism and morality in education. He saw that proper grammatical instruction could connect them.

The prefix to this book is equally telling. After reading this first page of the preface, imagine what Noah Webster might think if he observed a typical English language class today:

Webster’s approach to language instruction and execution is a stark contrast from today’s approach, as John McWhorter noted in Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like Care, published in 2003. Like some linguists, he explored the distinction between spoken and written word, and how our spoken word reflects the culture:

“We tend to see the oral languages as underdeveloped, not measuring up to the state achieved by the written ones...But since speech rather than writing is what all humans
share, we can also see the oral languages as representing the bedrock of what human language consists of. And that bedrock is something quite different from what we are conditioned to see as what language is” (7).

Because oral communication is more fundamental to language formation than written language, development of a language over time often depends on what words enter a spoken vocabulary. As time passes, people use new colloquialisms, and without capturing them in writing, the old words those colloquialisms replaced will gradually fade from vocabulary. Often, they eventually phase out of the language entirely (McWhorter).

That said, written language a completely different animal. We’ve given ourselves permission to let spoken language slide over time, but until the 1960s and its concurrent counterculture movement, written language remained formal (although the decline began as early as the 1920s). Formal writing was ingrained in culture, similar to the way Webster saw patriotism and morality ingrained into language. However, when someone wrote formally, it wasn’t necessarily a sign of elitism or educational status – as McWhorter notes, good writing was a sign of intimacy:

“Before the 1960s, that same kind of language could convey genuine intimacy or sincere respect among people at all levels of society…these people lived in an era when formal language occupied a different space in the American soul: It was, like flowers or a caress, one way of demonstrating esteem and affection” (McWhorter 126).

McWhorter compared formal writing before the 1960s to leaving a crowded room to blow our noses. If we leave the room, it shows the crowd that we respect them enough to keep our hygiene issues to ourselves, and the fact that we respect them shows intimacy. Similarly, if a man who lived before the counterculture movement wrote an eloquent, prosaic letter to the
woman he loved, it would show that woman that he respected her enough to write well (McWhorter).

Today, in our fast-paced, informal culture of text messaging, many of us have changed our thoughts on formal writing. Many women who received a similar love letter as the pre-counterculture woman might view the flowery language as cold and harsh, or even overbearing and intimidating. For many, informal language is more intimate today, to some extent, because if someone is comfortable enough with a person to speak informally, it means he or she knows that person well enough to have achieved intimacy with that person.

Unfortunately for Noah Webster, language instruction may never be as formal as it once was. When author W.E.B. DuBois attended Harvard in 1890, his first assignment in his first composition class was to write something about himself. A portion of his brilliant answer is below:

“For the usual purposes of identification I have been labeled in this life: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, on the day after Washington’s birthday, in 1868…As to who I really am, I am much in doubt, and can consequently give little reliable information from casual hints and observations. I doubt not that there are many who could supply better data than the writer. In the midst then of personal uncertainty I can only supply a few alleged facts from memory according to the usual way…I have something to say to the world and I have taken English twelve in order to say it well” (Du Bois).

His writing style is elevated and melodic, as expected in pre-1960s prose. Since the assignment was turned in to an academic institution, it makes sense that he would write so formally – although he probably didn’t feel an intimate connection with the teacher, he likely
wrote well to convey respect to the teacher and institution. Also, according to McWhorter, his last sentence is noteworthy: “I have something to say to the world and I have taken English twelve in order to say it well.” McWhorter believes that Du Bois’ expectations for this class date him:

“This neatly shows that refined craft in writing had a cultural currency at this time that seems almost otherworldly to us now. A crucial point: There exists no composition class in America that could do anything for Du Bois today. Modern composition classes are designed to teach students the very rudiments of written versus oral expression, and structuring their thoughts on paper” (McWhorter 146).

Mr. Webster, my sincerest apologies.

(Translation for 2014 English consumers: Sorry, Noah.)

The only English test I’ve ever failed

English majors, this section may come as a shock to you.

Imagine Kansas in 1895. You might be picturing an idyllic, simple prairie life, with many farmers and few college graduates. However, don’t let stereotypes influence your view of education before looking at the following 120-year old exam, which people had to pass in order to become schoolteachers in the Sunflower State:

Grammar

Give nine rules for the use of Capital Letters.

Name the Parts of Speech and define those that have no modifications.

Define Verse, Stanza and Paragraph.
What are the Principal Parts of a verb? Give Principal Parts of do, lie, lay and run.

Define Case, Illustrate each Case.

What is Punctuation? Give rules for principal marks of Punctuation.

Write a composition of about 150 words and show therein that you understand the practical use of the rules of grammar.

Orthography

What is meant by the following: Alphabet, phonetic orthography, etymology, syllabication?

What are elementary sounds? How classified?

What are the following, and give examples of each: Trigraph, subvocals, diphthong, cognate letters, linguals?

Give four substitutes for caret ‘u.’

Give two rules for spelling words with final ‘e.’ Name two exceptions under each rule.

Give two uses of silent letters in spelling. Illustrate each.

Define the following prefixes and use in connection with a word: Bi, dis, mis, pre, semi, post, non, inter, mono, super.

Mark diacritically and divide into syllables the following, and name the sign that indicates the sound: Card, ball, mercy, sir, odd, cell, rise, blood, fare, last.

Use the following correctly in sentences, Cite, site, sight, fane, fain, feign, vane, vain, vein, raze, raise, rays.

Write 10 words frequently mispronounced and indicate pronunciation by use of diacritical marks and by syllabication.
The full exam is actually five parts, including sections on history and arithmetic, but these two parts tested knowledge of English language. Even more shocking: the people who took this test were expected to pass it with an eighth-grade education (McWhorter).

[Note: As a journalism major and creative writing minor who will graduate from the University of Arizona with honors – and loves all things English – I can only confidently answer 9-10 of these questions].

But maybe our 21st century failures can’t be blamed on a lack of proper English education. Instead, it seems we just learn English differently. This test shows that the teaching of English has changed drastically in the last century; back then, teachers clearly focused more on structure, phonetics, and specific names for grammar than they do now. Because of this, it makes sense that most people who wrote flowery prose in the last few centuries usually had fewer than 10 years of education (McWhorter).

The schoolteachers in 1895 Kansas were extremely concerned about following the rules, and would likely be wonderful copy editors today. However, most of us living now arguably don’t know what a caret “u” is, but we are still able to communicate effectively. Perhaps this shows that as a society, we are gradually leaning toward the linguist side of this debate.

Have you been wrong all along?

Pat O’Connor, bestselling author and co-founder of Grammarphobia, must keep constant tabs on the evolving English language by virtue of her career. On her blog, she answers questions about correct grammar and usage, idioms and spelling from people who genuinely want to
improve their English language skills. Naturally, this kind of blog attracts a number of grammar sticklers – but many of these sticklers have a fatal flaw.

“Sticklers are often mistaken about what they are sticklers on,” O’Connor said, noting that many of them will actively fight about things like “none are” versus “none is,” and ultimately get it wrong.

Merrill Perlman, a former New York Times copy editor, agrees. In fact, she thinks that in some cases, people are actually taught incorrectly in the first place. So even if they are educated and use language to the best of their ability, they might still suffer the effects of the poverty of data argument.

The following are seven examples of concepts sticklers swear by that are just plain wrong – or even nonexistent.

1. Stickler: “It is wrong to split an infinitive.”

“There is no split infinitive rule. The rule exists in Latin, but not in English,” Perlman said.

In an article for The Week entitled “7 Bogus Grammar Rules You Don’t Need to Worry About,” author Ben Yagoda agreed with her. In fact, he noted that without split infinitives, some of our most popular quotes would not exist:

“Infinitives have been profitably split by many great writers, from Hemingway (‘But I would come back to where it pleases me to live; to really live’) to Gene Rodenberry (‘to boldly go where no man has gone before’). It’s okay to boldly do it” (Yagoda).

Although the rule technically does not exist, the Associated Press prefers to avoid splitting infinitives as much as possible. The 2011 AP Stylebook gives the following sentence as an example of a split infinitive: She was ordered to immediately leave on an assignment. The
Stylebook claims that it is awkward to place “immediately” before “leave.” The preferred sentence is: *She was ordered to leave immediately on an assignment.*

2. **Stickler:** “’Ax’ is – and always has been – this incorrect way to pronounce ‘ask.’”

   “Ask” versus “ax” is arguably one of the most recognizable questions of American sociolinguistics. “Ax” is black vernacular, and many African Americans have embraced it as a cultural marker. However, others have criticized it, claiming that using “ax” instead of “ask” makes the speaker appear uneducated.

   Interestingly, though, “ax” is not a new term, and it did not originate within the black community. According to an NPR article by Shereen Marisol Meraji, “*Why Chaucer Said Ax Instead of Ask and Why Some Still Do,*” “ax” has been around since the eighth century. It was even in the first complete English translation of the Bible: “Axe and it shall be given.”

   “Ax” may be incorrect by today’s American English, but at its most fundamental level, it is an example of our language’s centuries-long linguistic evolution.

3. **Stickler:** “It is wrong to end a sentence with a preposition.”

   According to Geoffrey K. Pullum, linguist and editor of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, the rule that states that we cannot end a sentence with a preposition was simply made up in 1672 by essayist John Dryden. However, Pat O’Connor offers another explanation in her book *Woe is I*: “We can blame an eighteenth-century English clergyman and Latin scholar named Robert Lowth for saddling us with this one. He wrote the first popular grammar book to say that a preposition…shouldn’t go at the end of a sentence. This idea caught on, even though great literature from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Milton is bristling with sentences ending in prepositions” (O’Connor 211). Regardless of its origin, the consensus is that the rule was simply made up without explanation.
Even though the rule’s origins have nothing to do with grammatical structure, English students have been learning this rule for centuries. The rule has become so prevalent that it even inspired an old wives’ tale about Winston Churchill, who supposedly told an editor who wanted to rearrange a preposition in his sentence that the edit was “offensive impertinence, up with which I will not put.”

[Note: according to The Language Log article “A Misattribution No Longer to be Put Up With,” Winston Churchill may not be responsible for this retort after all.]

Notably, the AP Stylebook does not take issue with sentences that end with a preposition, according to an “Ask the Editor” question posed to David Minthorn. The current AP Stylebook does not even address the issue.

4. **Stickler:** “’Irregardless’ is not a word.”

The sticklers are technically right on this one – “irregardless” is not correct in terms of proper English language. Logically, the word would not make sense because the prefix -ir implies that it negates the “regardless” that follows. However, the word has become so prevalent that it’s now an idiom, and even copy editors sometimes have difficulty marking it wrong. “The copy editor in me says ‘not logical,’ but it’s fallen between the cracks,” Perlman said. “Idioms eventually become grammar, so when enough people use it, it becomes grammar.”

Perhaps, then, it will become proper English as the language continues to evolve over time.

5. **Stickler:** “People constantly use the third person neutral pronoun incorrectly, and it drives me crazy.”

The sentence below is incorrect according to proper English:

*Everyone should have their book.*
The grammatical sin committed is that the third person neutral pronoun – their – is used incorrectly. Since “everyone” is a singular noun, the sentence calls for a singular third person neutral pronoun to reflect it – namely, “his,” “her,” or, in our politically correct society, “his or her.” The correct sentence is below:

Everyone should have his or her book.

But this is another rule that can drive copy editors crazy.

“People were often taught this wrong,” Perlman said. “The rule can twist you into knots. Adding his or her sounds clunky.”

Like criticism of “irregardless,” this rule may not last the long run. Making distinctions between third person neutral pronouns may disappear from English altogether as the language continues to evolve.

6. Stickler: “It’s wrong to start a sentence with ‘And’ or ‘But.’”

The consensus for this rule seems almost unanimous: Why not? In fact, journalistic articles are often littered with sentences starting with “and” and “but.” The AP Stylebook does not address the issue. The rule has no basis in grammar, and many call it a myth.

I addressed this phenomenon in my survey. Of the 89 who responded, 81 said that their teachers had taught them that it’s wrong to start a sentence with “and” or “but.” Clearly these teachers were not journalists.

7. Stickler: “The word is spelled ‘dilemma,’ not ‘dilemna.’”

This isn’t one of the big grammar debates like the previous six, but Perlman noted that she saw this issue frequently as a copy editor for The New York Times.

“People were taught that it was spelled with an ‘n,’ ‘dilemna,” she said. “People are often taught incorrectly. But it must have changed over time.”
**Professional correctors**

Copy editors are far from the only people who care about correct grammar. In fact, many of the most renowned correctors are average people—they simply take pride in accurate use of language in everyday life. By day, these people work or study, but by night, they run blogs about correct grammar, write instructional language books, and correct misspellings on their friends’ Facebook posts. They are the sticklers and the traditionalists, and in the case of some of the more abrasive correctors, the so-called “Grammar Nazis.”

Jeff Deck is an everyday corrector, and a famous one at that. His dedication to correcting English language led him and his friend Benjamin Herson to a road trip across the country, during which time they corrected over 400 typos on public signs and windows. The two collected their experiences in their bestselling book *The Great Typo Hunt: Two Friends Changing the World, One Correction at a Time*, published in 2010.

A creative writing major who graduated from Dartmouth, he said his studies did not influence the trip or his love of correcting at all.

“It was just from my experience as a regular person and always being bothered by typos, as just a general consumer of the English language,” said Deck, who offers freelance writing and editing services on the book’s website.

Bethany Keeley-Jonker is another corrector, but she has a background in rhetorical theory and criticism. A professor of communication at Trinity Christian College in Chicago, she has run the [Blog of Unnecessary Quotation Marks](http://www.unnecessaryquotemarks.com) since 2005, which gets up to 1,000 readers a day. The
site isn’t dedicated to bad grammar per se, but it mocks those who use punctuation incorrectly, so it attracts a readership of sticklers.

“I was finishing my senior year of college, and I tried blogging because it was a new medium at the time,” said Keeley-Jonker, who also published The Book of “Unnecessary” Quotation Marks: A Celebration of Creative Punctuation in 2010. “I didn’t have ‘forever’ in mind when I started the blog.”

Interestingly, neither Deck nor Keeley-Jonker describes themselves as sticklers. In fact, though both appreciate copy editors and their purpose in preserving language, both sympathize with linguists.

“I generally have a descriptivist position, “said Keeley-Jonker. “I value clear writing and I appreciate copy editors, but people should maybe be less concerned with following [grammar] rules for their own sake. Some people are nervous about emailing [examples of unnecessary quotation marks to her for the blog] because they might make an error in the email, but I’m not going to correct it – I want to be a fun person.”

In The Great Typo Hunt and in interviews since its publication, Deck has elaborated on his position in the prescriptivist-descriptivist debate. In the book, he and Herson called it “hawks versus hippies.” Despite taking extremes to correct typos on his trip, he does not necessarily call himself a hawk.

“It can be decisive to look at language as one or the other – things do evolve and change over time, and it depends on broad use to determine spelling,” he said. “But we do need a stylebook for consensus and professionalism. We need a working definition of correct.”

While on the road trip, Deck and Herson noted that although typos were everywhere, some parts of the country had more than others. He admitted that in some cases, a lack of good English
education was “definitely” to blame. However, in many other cases, it appeared that the offenders were just careless.

Although he is not a hawk, he’s not a hippie, either. His views on language do not align with sociolinguist descriptivists – when it comes to professional situations, he is a prescriptivist. He told National Public Radio in 2010 that typos can impede communication, especially when they are present on résumés – an assertion that directly contradicts sociolinguist descriptivists who believe that grammar rules are what impede communication. When asked if he still agreed with his comments in that interview four years later, he said yes.

“It’s important to avoid typos to preserve the image you put forth, like on a résumé or store windows,” he said. “You have to look from a practical perspective – people will judge you if your spelling is poor, whether it’s fair or not, and that person could be an employer or customer.”

Like the copy editors, these correctors haven’t picked a clear side in the great language debate. If even the sticklers and Grammar Nazis avoid a black-and-white approach to language, then perhaps it is time to rethink the debate entirely.

“We need to find a middle ground,” he said. “In language, we need a balance between construction and preservation, like a city.”

_The ugly truth_

Readers, I have a confession to make: I do not stand neutral in the prescriptivist-descriptivist debate.
Although I am fascinated by linguistics, I’ll admit that I am a stickler. I am one of the women who would respond to a man who used “whom” on his online dating profile, but not just because using “whom” makes him seem smart – I know and exercise the correct uses of who versus whom, and would be delighted to see a man who uses it correctly. I appreciate good grammar and spelling, and in most cases I believe that correct English language should be preserved as long as possible.

I’m a corrector, and I have been a corrector for many years. So is my dad. We’ve often read Bethany Keeley-Jonker’s Blog of Unnecessary Quotation Marks and other grammar blogs, and we mock bad grammar when we see it in public. For years, we’ve shared or texted pictures of cringe-worthy examples of the English language to each other when we’ve seen them. Call it father-daughter bonding.

Below are some of the pictures from our collection of offenses. I’ve categorized the examples into three levels which determine how anal we are about language:

“passable” (the offense isn’t that bad, and perhaps we overreacted by mocking it),
“annoying” (the offense is wrong, but probably not that harmful to society), and
“egregious” (the offense is unacceptable, and the offender needs to be shamed immediately).

All credit goes to Lauren Shores or Bill Shores, 2010-2014.

Source: LivingSocial.
Offense: The site asks for the recipient’s name, then for “their” email address.

Why it’s an offense: “Recipient” is a singular noun, and “their” is plural. It should be “his or her” email address.

Level of stickler: passable. Even journalists are lax when using “their” for singular nouns.

Source: A bathroom stall in London.

Offense: Misuse of single quotes (possibly another offense, depending on your personal opinion on political correctness).

Why it’s an offense: Single quotes are only supposed to be used within double quotes.

Level of stickler: Passable. What could the British possibly know about English, anyway?

Source: Google Images.

Offense: Misuse of “complement” versus “compliment” (note that I had typed “complement” in the search bar, but Google “corrected” it for me).
Why it’s an offense: “Complement is a noun and a verb denoting completeness or the process of supplementing something…compliment is a noun that denotes praise or expression of courtesy” (Associated Press Stylebook 2011, 65).

Level of stickler: annoying. Most people probably never learned the difference between the two words.

Source: a gas pump in Ontario, Calif. (also seen at other gas stations in Southern California).

Offense: printing the word “suspisious.”

Why it’s an offense: Obviously the word is spelled “suspicious.”

Level of offense: egregious. Someone should have proofread the sign before mass-producing it.
Source: Cactus Grill, a restaurant on the University of Arizona campus.

Offense: Do I really need to say it?

Why it’s an offense: The word is spelled “boiled,” not “boild.”

Level of offense: egregious. This was printed within the bounds of an institution that prides itself on academic excellence, and that pride should be reflected everywhere on campus.

Source: A J.C. Penney in Chandler, Ariz.

Offense: printing the word “seperates.”

Why it’s an offense: Although many people seem to misspell it, the word is spelled “separates.”

Level of offense: egregious. J.C. Penney is a huge company – it can probably afford a proofreader.
Survey results

The survey was created in order to research both interest and proficiency in American English. Participants in this survey had to fit three criteria:

1. English must be the participant’s native language.
2. The participant must have at least a high school degree or G.E.D.
3. The participant must have received K-12 education in American schools.

The participants were asked to take one of two identical surveys. One survey was for participants who were currently enrolled in college or had graduated college within the last ten years. The other survey was for participants who had at least a high school degree or G.E.D. and ended their formal education more than ten years ago.

Fifty-one participants identified as college students or students who graduated college within the last ten years. Thirty-eight identified as people who ended their formal education over ten years ago.

The survey demonstrated three particularly interesting trends:

1. Everyone who took the survey for college students or students who graduated college within the last ten years either slightly or strongly agreed that people should use correct grammar in order to be taken seriously in the real world. Four of the 38 (10.5%) who took the survey for people who ended formal education over 10 years ago disagreed.
2. Of the 51 who took the survey for college students or students who graduated college within the last ten years, 32 (62.7%) believed that English, science and math are all
equally important to learn. Nine (17.6%) thought English was more important than science and math, and ten (19.6%) thought science and math were more important than English. Of the 38 who took the survey for people who ended formal education over ten years ago, 32 (84.2%) believed that English, science and math are all equally important to learn. Three (7.9%) thought English was more important than science and math, and another three (7.9%) thought science and math were more important than English.

3. Only three of the 51 (5.9%) who took the survey for college students or students who graduated college within the last ten years did not believe that it was important for scientists and engineers to have good English skills. One of the 38 (2.6%) who took the survey for people who ended formal education over 10 years ago agreed.

The detailed results of the surveys are below. The first number after each answer is the number of participants of those total 51 who chose than answer who identify as current college students or students who graduated from college within the last ten years. The second number is the number of participants of the total 38 with at least a GED who ended their formal education over ten years ago.

1. My field of study is
   a. Math or engineering-based: 5 (9.8%), 5 (13.2%)
   b. Science-based: 20 (39.2%), 6 (15.8%)
   c. English or communication-based: 10 (19.6%), 5 (13.2%)
   d. Arts-based: 2 (3.9%), 1 (2.6%)
   e. Technology-based: 3 (5.9%), 2 (5.3%)
   f. Other: 11 (21.6%), 19 (50.0%)

2. It is important for companies to proofread their written content
   a. Strongly disagree: 10 (19.6%), 4 (10.5%)
   b. Slightly disagree: 0 (0.0%), 0 (0.0%)
   c. Neutral: 0 (0.0%), 1 (2.6%)
   d. Slightly agree: 5 (9.8%), 1 (2.6%)
   e. Strongly agree: 36 (70.6%), 32 (84.2%)
3. When I notice a typo in a magazine or newspaper
   a. The typo does not influence how I view the publication’s credibility: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)
   b. The typo catches me off guard, but probably does not influence how I view the publication’s credibility: 6 (11.8%), 5 (13.2%)
   c. The typo somewhat affects how I view the publication’s credibility: 19 (37.3%), 15 (39.5%)
   d. The typo negatively affects how I view the publication’s credibility: 25 (49.0%), 18 (47.4%)

4. When I discover that I’ve turned in a document with a typo…
   a. I’m rarely disappointed: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)
   b. I’m only disappointed if the document was important (i.e. a resume): 7 (13.7%), 4 (10.5%)
   c. I’m somewhat disappointed about it: 21 (41.2%), 12 (31.6%)
   d. I’m mortified: 22 (43.1%), 22 (57.9%)

5. There is no need for scientists or engineers to have good English language skills.
   a. Strongly disagree: 43 (84.3%), 32 (84.2%)
   b. Slightly disagree: 3 (5.9%), 5 (13.2%)
   c. Neutral: 2 (3.9%), 0 (0.0%)
   d. Slightly agree: 2 (3.9%), 1 (2.6%)
   e. Strongly agree: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)

6. People should use correct grammar in order to be taken seriously in the real world
   a. Strongly disagree: 0 (0.0%), 3 (7.9%)
   b. Slightly disagree: 0 (0.0%), 1 (2.6%)
   c. Neutral: 0 (0.0%), 0 (0.0%)
   d. Slightly agree: 12 (23.5%), 3 (7.9%)
   e. Strongly agree: 39 (76.5%), 31 (81.6%)

7. American schools and universities are failing at teaching English skills to students
   a. Strongly disagree: 0 (0.0%), 1 (2.6%)
   b. Slightly disagree: 8 (15.7%), 3 (7.9%)
   c. Neutral: 10 (19.6%), 10 (26.3%)
   d. Slightly agree: 22 (43.1%), 14 (36.8%)
   e. Strongly agree: 11 (21.6%), 10 (26.3%)

8. It is important for future generations to write well and have good language skills
   a. Strongly disagree: 0 (0.0%), 2 (3.1%)
   b. Slightly disagree: 0 (0.0%), 0 (0.0%)
   c. Neutral: 0 (0.0%), 0 (0.0%)
   d. Slightly agree: 6 (11.8%), 0 (0.0%)
   e. Strongly agree: 45 (88.2%), 35 (92.1%)

9. I struggle with writing essays or other long forms of writing
   a. Strongly disagree: 25 (49.0%), 13 (34.2%)
   b. Slightly disagree: 13 (25.5%), 4 (10.5%)
   c. Neutral: 4 (7.8%), 8 (21.1%)
   d. Slightly agree: 11 (21.6%), 10 (26.3%)
   e. Strongly agree: 3 (5.9%), 3 (7.9%)

10. On reading:
a. I hate reading: 0 (0.0%), 1 (2.6%)
b. I enjoy reading only books like The Hunger Games or Fifty Shades of Grey: 8 (15.7%), 3 (7.9%)
c. I enjoy reading news articles, novels, and/or the occasional nonfiction book: 34 (66.6%), 17 (44.7%)
d. I am addicted to reading: 10 (19.6%), 17 (44.7%)

11. On linguistics:
   a. I have no idea what linguistics is: 6 (11.8%), 6 (15.8%)
   b. I know a little bit about linguistics: 22 (43.1%), 14 (36.8%)
   c. After reading this thesis or another linguistics-themed resource, I realized my previous definition of linguistics was wrong: 2 (3.9%), 1 (2.6%)
   d. I could briefly argue about linguistics during a casual happy hour: 19 (37.3%), 17 (44.7%)
   e. I have well-formed opinions about prescriptivism and Noam Chomsky: 2 (3.9%), 0 (0.0%)

12. On English grammar:
   a. I have terrible grammar skills and it doesn’t bother me: 0 (0.0%), 0 (0.0%)
   b. I have terrible grammar skills and I want to improve: 0 (0.0%), 1 (2.6%)
   c. My grammar skills are passable: 4 (7.8%), 2 (5.2%)
   d. I have good grammar skills: 23 (45.1%), 24 (63.2%)
   e. I have excellent grammar skills: 24 (47.1%), 11 (28.9%)

13. On the dangling modifier:
   a. I’ve never heard of a dangling modifier: 7 (13.7%), 3 (7.9%)
   b. I’ve heard of it, but I don’t know what it is: 13 (25.5%), 1 (2.6%)
   c. I’ve heard of it and I know vaguely what it is: 13 (25.5%), 15 (39.5%)
   d. I know what it is and I know how to fix it in a sentence: 18 (35.3%), 19 (50.0%)

14. On the study of linguistics:
   a. As I told you earlier, I have no idea what linguistics is: 5 (9.8%), 4 (10.5%)
   b. Linguistics is not very interesting: 6 (11.8%), 3 (7.9%)
   c. I do not have a strong opinion about linguistics: 11 (21.6%), 12 (31.6%)
   d. Linguistics is somewhat interesting: 15 (29.4%), 13 (34.2%)
   e. Linguistics is fascinating: 14 (27.5%), 5 (13.2%)

15. My teachers taught me that it’s wrong to start a sentence with “and” or “but.”
   a. Yes: 45 (88.2%), 36 (94.7%)
   b. Not sure: 1 (2.0%), 1 (2.6%)
   c. No: 5 (9.8%), 1 (2.6%)

16. On the importance of English skills:
   a. Science and math are more important than English: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)
   b. Science and math are more important, but English is still an important skill to have: 9 (17.6%), 3 (7.9%)
   c. All three are equally important to learn: 32 (62.7%), 32 (84.2%)
   d. English skills are more important, but science and math are still important skills to have: 8 (15.7%), 3 (7.9%)
   e. English skills are more important than science and math skills: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)

17. In school, my grades are:
   a. Mostly As: 29 (56.9%), 22 (57.9%)
b. Mostly Bs: 20 (39.2%), 16 (42.1%)
c. Mostlly Cs: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)
d. Mostly Ds: 0 (0.0%), 0 (0.0%)
e. Other: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)

18. I know how to use “who” and “whom” correctly in a sentence
a. Strongly disagree: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)
b. Slightly disagree: 0 (0.0%), 2 (5.3%)
c. Neutral: 3 (5.9%), 4 (10.5%)
d. Slightly agree: 26 (51.0%), 12 (31.6%)
e. Strongly agree: 21 (41.2%), 20 (52.6%)

19. I read your thesis before taking this quiz
a. I did not read your thesis: 45 (88.2%), 35 (92.1%)
b. I read part of your thesis: 3 (5.9%), 2 (5.3%)
c. I read about half of your thesis: 0 (0.0%), 0 (0.0%)
d. I read most of your thesis: 2 (3.9%), 1 (2.6%)
e. I read the whole thing: 1 (2.0%), 0 (0.0%)

20. You and your dad are jerks for shaming people with bad grammar
a. Strongly disagree: 11 (21.6%), 4 (10.5%)
b. Slightly disagree: 8 (15.7%), 7 (18.4%)
c. Neutral: 22 (43.1%), 21 (55.3%)
d. Slightly agree: 7 (13.7%), 5 (13.2%)
e. Strongly agree: 3 (5.9%), 1 (2.6%)

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