

Will English Survive?

By Jean Reynolds

Is the English language in trouble? A recent article in *Harper's Magazine* ("Semantic Drift," August 4, 2019) answers that question with a strong *yes*. Lionel Shriver, a novelist who cares passionately about English, lists a number of alarming trends, including grammar problems, punctuation mistakes, and careless word choices. English is in trouble, and she wants us to fight back.

I think Shriver is wrong, and I'm confident about the future of our language. But before I explain my position, let me assure you that I care very much about correct English. In addition to spending 30 years as an English professor, I've taught English in elementary, business, and prison schools. I'm also a writer, and I serve on the editorial board for an academic journal. I agree heartily with Shriver's aversion to comma splices, and I share her conviction that students need to learn to write "comprehensible, error-free sentences."

So why do I think she's wrong? My problems with her diagnosis of the state of English begin right in her first paragraph:

"Regarding the purported rules of English syntax, we tend to divide into mutually hostile camps. Hip, open-minded types...care about the integrity of our language only insofar as to ensure that we can still roughly understand one another. In the opposite corner glower the curmudgeons."

Shriver is so far off base here that her argument never gets any traction. First, the two groups she sets up aren't mutually exclusive. I've been known to glower about bad writing (ask any of my students!), but I'm also open-minded about changes in English.

More important, though, I don't think her two groups even exist. I've never met anyone who was willing to settle for the ability to "roughly understand each other." Even small children asking for their blankie want to be understood *exactly*.

I think Shriver is on shaky ground when she sets up opposing positions about “the integrity of the language.” She warns that “This degeneration spreads the blight of sheer ignorance.”

Almost every teacher, writer, and editor has said the same thing many times (in different words, of course). I’ve said it myself. But it’s a dubious principle, and all of us are dead wrong.

I know it seems counterintuitive. How can you be understood if your sentences have grammar mistakes? Isn’t grammar the foundation of language?

My answer is that grammar often has surprisingly little to do with clarity, precision, and comprehension. Our brains are wired to process information with a high degree of accuracy, even if some of the grammar is wrong. To prove it, here are three sentences with grammatical errors:

- I suggest that we donate this furniture to whomever has a use for it.
- We read the inspection report, talked to several tenants, and then the decision was an easy one.
- Carla felt badly when she saw Joe’s disappointment.

There’s an excellent chance you understood all three sentences perfectly, and you might not even have spotted all the errors. I know that’s true because even professional writers often make these mistakes.

- The first sentence requires *whoever*, not *whomever* (subjective case with “has a use for it”). Here’s the correct version: “I suggest that we donate this furniture to whoever has a use for it.”
- The second sentence lacks parallelism. Here’s a better version: “We read the inspection report and talked to several tenants, and then the decision was an easy one.”
- In the third sentence, *felt* is a copulative verb that requires an adjective (*bad*) rather than an adverb (*badly*). The correct sentence is “Carla felt bad when she saw Joe’s disappointment.”

Sticklers encountering those three sentences might run for their red pens. (I'm feeling that urge myself!) But nobody can say that we only "roughly" understood what was said.

Here's another example. English has a longstanding rule that we should avoid double negatives ("I don't want no spinach"). But the explanation that often goes with it is nonsense: two negatives make a positive, so you're really saying that you *do* want spinach.

English isn't math, and even a four-year-old knows you don't want that spinach. In fact double negatives are a standard feature of many languages, including Spanish and Russian. (Old English had them too.) Does anyone really think that Russians don't know how to do math?

Using a double negative at a job interview is wrong for the same reason that you wouldn't use a quill pen to fill out a job application. At some point in English history, they fell out of favor.

There have been plenty of studies to support my assertion that imperfect sentences can still communicate clear messages. Telephone companies have done extensive research into the deeper workings of English. They've discovered that even if you miss parts of a phone conversation because of background noise or a bad connection, you're likely to get most of the message at the other end of the telephone line.

That's how powerful English is. And our brains can work just as efficiently when we encounter a grammatical mistake.

Does Good English Matter?

Please note that *I'm* not saying that it's fine to make English errors. Language is a social tool, and good English is as important to everyday life as good manners are. Nor am I denying that there's plenty of bad writing today. It's not just students who are producing clumsy, garbled sentences; often the offenders are professional writers.

What I *am* saying is that the problems aren't new, and overstating the effects of a mistake doesn't point the way to effective solutions.

Grammar isn't always the problem. Many people write badly because they're afraid of plain words and straightforward syntax. I keep hearing sentences like "The Wilsons invited he and Mary" because *him* doesn't seem elegant enough.

Here's a painful sentence from a popular TV show about travel: "Many people associate Manhattan as the main reason to visit the Big Apple." How do you "associate Manhattan"? A bestselling novel describes a character who has "eyes in a focused squint." How do you focus a squint? Another character moves his head in "a sweeping nod." How can a movement as slight as a nod be "sweeping"?

I just read an interview with a mother who talked about the need to "incentivize my kids" to watch "cultural artifacts" on TV that "have cultural currency to them." What is she talking about?

And recently I came across this pompous assertion in a publication that's famous for its excellent writing: "online civility emerges from linguistic superfluity." (My translation: "Online writing sounds more polite when you add more words.")

The problems are so widespread that in 2010 Congress passed the Plain Writing Act requiring all federal documents to be written in straightforward English.

Advocates for better English often call for a return to old-fashioned teaching methods like diagramming sentences and labeling parts of speech. I disagree. Every minute spent drawing diagrams and underlining words is a minute that could better have been spent *writing, thinking about writing, and talking about writing.*

Here's a principle that should be adopted in every classroom: "The person who's doing the talking is the person who's doing the learning." Let's put students into groups and have them figure out the rules together.

There's no reason for teachers to edit students' writing: students can (and should) work together to do much of the work themselves. They

have access to spellcheckers and grammar checkers, and most schools have learning centers where students can get additional help. Teachers can give feedback, encouragement, and advice.

Was There a “Golden Age” of English?

Shriver is speaking for many people when she frets about the “lazy, convenient, and therefore wildly popular view that there is no such thing as correct English.” After decades of reading student essays myself, I know how she feels. But I also know that she’s wrong. Errors aren’t new, and English isn’t dying. There’s no need to wail that “there are no rules anymore!”

Part of the difficulty is that defining *good* English isn’t as simple as it seems. Shriver is looking back nostalgically to a golden age that never existed. Browse through old manuscripts and letters, and you’ll discover that it’s not just today’s college freshmen who make writing errors.

In 1819 the English poet John Keats used *of* instead of *have* in a letter he was writing: “Had I known of your illness I should not of written in such sorry phrase in my first letter.”

Ain’t was a popular word until the late nineteenth century; you’ll see it in novels and letters written by Swift, Byron, Fielding, Eliot, and Trollope.

A second problem is that Shriver assumes that all rules are created equal. For example, Shriver complains that *quicker* is displacing *more quickly* in mainstream newspapers. I am holding my head in bewilderment: no one—in all my years of education—ever told me that *quicker* is wrong.

The prohibition against *quicker* doesn’t appear in any of the books about writing I’ve read over the years. Even Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* doesn’t mention it. A Google search produced only a handful of contradictory comments about it.

I did some research and found out that *quicker* has been around for a long time: Tennyson used it as an adverb back in 1865. Why did

Shriver choose this obscure mistake (if it's a mistake at all) to build her argument? And can I really be accused of believing "there is no such thing as correct English" because I disagree with her?

After 40 years of teaching and editing, I can tell you that errors in English have changed very little. My nomination for the most common mistake is *its/it's*, followed closely by *your/you're*. Students struggled with those word pairs when I started teaching, and the problems are still there today.

If you want to complain about the deterioration of English, you should know that it had already happened before Chaucer and Shakespeare were born.

Old English had an elaborate grammatical infrastructure—genders, conjugations, and declensions—that faded away after the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Beowulf poet would weep if he saw the stripped-down grammar we use today.

Here's just one example of what was lost: Old English nouns had eight or ten case endings, while most of our nouns today have just four (*dog, dogs, dog's, dogs'*). I spent three semesters in graduate school trying to learn Old English, and I was still plodding along at the beginner's level when I finally gave up the effort.

Despite the vastly simplified grammar that remained, English survived as a powerful and beautiful language. We have the plays of Shakespeare and Shaw and the poetry of the Romantics, and every year writers produce books good enough to win Pulitzer Prizes. Our language has enough precision to explain how to land a spaceship on the moon.

What Are the Rules of English?

History shows that English was never a tidy and perfect language. Punctuation evolved slowly, and spelling was haphazard: Shakespeare used three variations when he spelled his own name.

Even today, compiling a list of the essential rules of English can be confusing. We tend to assume—wrongly—that English is based on

simple and solid principles: when you master terms like *singular*, *plural*, *subject*, and *object*, you have a solid foundation in English grammar.

We have the benefit of experts to guide us and teachers to give us feedback. With remedies so close at hand, there's no reason for any writer to make the mistakes that Shriver finds so troublesome. Or so it seems.

Take a look at the sentences below. Each one is free of errors, but they all challenge the widespread assumption that the rules of English are logical and orderly.

1. Mrs. Davis, you are my favorite teacher.
2. Every student will receive extra credit when he or she completes the activity sheet.
3. Despite several reminders, fewer than 15 people returned their budget requests.

Did you notice any controversies? Most people don't. But the issues are there, embedded within syntax that sounds normal to us.

Let's look at the first sentence: "Mrs. Davis, you are my favorite teacher."

The plural *are* in *you are* is correct, of course. But when you think about it, *are* doesn't make grammatical sense when there's only one person (*he is*, *they are*). In Shakespeare's day, people who spoke English were supposed to use the singular pronouns *thee*, *thy*, and *thou*. Verbs had to be singular too: "Thou art my favorite teacher."

But a quiet revolution was under way. Some people were switching to *you are* even when they were talking to just one person, and the trend soon spread. Although grammarians pleaded for *thee*, *thy*, and *thou*, they lost the battle. Today nobody worries about saying *you are* when there's just one person.

Why am I bringing up a dead controversy? A similar singular-versus-plural issue appears in the second sentence above—and that issue is very much alive today.

Here it is: “Every student will receive extra credit when he or she completes the worksheet.”

English teachers have long railed against the singular *they*. You’re not supposed to write, “Every student will receive extra credit when *they* complete the worksheet.” You can’t use *they* because it’s a plural pronoun, and *every student* is singular.

But there’s a difficulty: the singular *they* goes back to the 14th century and was used by Caxton, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Shaw, Thackeray, Austen, and many other classic writers. Our rule against the singular *they* is a latecomer, invented in the late 18th century by an American named Lindley Murray who thought that English should be more mathematical.

Murray was an attorney, not a linguistics expert, but somehow he acquired a huge following. The rule that he invented required substituting *he* for *they*, but later the women’s movement called for the addition of a feminine pronoun. We’ve been struggling with the clumsy “he or she” and “his or her” constructions ever since.

Unlike the singular *you are*, which is accepted by everyone who speaks English, the singular *they* is still controversial. If you argue that *old* rules are *good* rules (as Shriver does), you find yourself in a conundrum: which rule will you use—the one from the 14th century or the 18th century?

If you argue that *they* is wrong because it’s plural, someone is bound to remind you that we often say *you are* when we’re talking to just one person.

I’m a recent convert to the singular *they*, and there’s a chance that you use it too, even if you don’t like it. Mary Norris—author of the wonderful book *Confessions of a Comma Queen*—thinks the singular *they* is “just wrong.” But she uses it herself in *Confessions of a Comma Queen*: “Nobody wanted to think they were not essential.”

3. Despite several reminders, fewer than 15 people returned their budget requests.

This sentence challenges the common-sense assumption that expert opinions about English usage are always right. They're not, and Strunk and White's classic *The Elements of Style* is a case in point.

Chapter IV, "Words and Expressions Commonly Misused," offers this nonsensical rule: "The word *people* is best not used with words of number, in place of *persons*. If of six people five went away, how many people would be left? One people."

As we've already seen, math and English are different subjects that are best kept apart. A quick Google search will show you that numbers (12, 413, 3,000) are used with *people* all the time, for a good reason: "12 people" sounds more natural than "12 persons." You shouldn't feel obliged to obey Strunk and White's made-up rule, even though most of the other advice in *The Elements of Style* is excellent.

There's a second controversy hidden within this sentence. Shriver is upset because many people use *less* than instead of *fewer* with countable nouns (*apples, people, and cars*). But this is another example of one historical usage jostling against another.

Using *less* with countable nouns goes back to Alfred the Great in 888 A.D. The rule about using *fewer* didn't arrive until 1770, and even then it was just a casual suggestion in an obscure book rather than a grammatical edict.

It's almost impossible to eradicate a usage that's been around for hundreds of years (*ain't, less than nine, someone lost their book*). We may think that our language is dying when someone breaks a rule we learned from a beloved English teacher (or, in Shriver's case, from parents who cared passionately about English). But often what we're hearing is a usage that's been around for hundreds of years—and isn't going away any time soon.

What Will Happen to English?

Of course nobody—including me—is arguing that we should stop saying *you are* when we talk to Aunt Mary, or that it's a good idea to use *ain't* at a job interview. My point is that the ways we talk about the rules of English today aren't always helpful.

Thorny problems can arise when you use grammatical terms like *singular* and *plural*, or cite an expert like William Strunk, or don't have a historical perspective on our language.

Shriver has a number of complaints about the confusing definitions of many words we use today. What good, she asks, is a word like *literally* if it can also mean *figuratively*? *Nonplussed* means both *unperturbed* and *perturbed*, and *enervated* can mean both *drained* and *energized*.

She pleads for staying with the original meanings of words. But confusing definitions aren't new. "Cleave unto his wife" means "cling to her" in the King James Bible—but cleave can also mean split. And people have been using *literally* to mean *figuratively* since 1769—in a British novel, incidentally: you can't blame American writers for changing the meaning.

Shouldn't we hold firm against change as the English language moves into the future? Surely texting poses an enormous threat with *luv* and *nite*, LOL and BTW. But I see no reason to panic: people have always had fun with language, and spellings often change as time goes by.

Technology inevitably alters the way languages work. Our word *manuscript* comes from two Latin words meaning "written by hand," but nobody ever submits handwritten manuscripts nowadays.

Words evolve over time: it's a fact of life. No one got upset when *catalogue* turned into *catalog*. Americans (I'm one of them) have been spelling *honor* and *color* without the letter "u" for almost two hundred years.

Our language might even be better off if everyone adopted some texting practices. Spelling reformers like Bernard Shaw and Mark Twain would be delighted if everyone started using *nite* instead of night. (Teachers struggling to teach first graders how to read might welcome some spelling reform too.)

A Plea for Common Sense

I feel confident about the future of English. Despite Shriver's fears, we're not living in the "era of semantic anarchy." A more precise label would be the "era of semantic change"—but you could say that about any period in English history.

I will admit to sharing some of Shriver's feelings. It can be sad and scary to see a beloved rule go into the dustbin. I've done my share of grieving, and I still cling to some stubborn convictions.

I will spell *all right* as two words to my dying day, even though *alright* is rapidly becoming standard. I still refuse to use *impact* as a verb. But that doesn't mean I'm entitled to insult someone who disagrees with me.

Whom is a case in point. I think *whom* adds nothing to the clarity or meaning of a sentence, and I always tell writers to just use *who* for everything. But others think *whom* is worth fighting for, and I respect their position. In Shriver's eyes, though, people like me are *animals*. (She says that *who/whom* is "a perfectly civilized distinction the animals are now clamoring to revoke.")

I'm thinking about my mother, who never quite mastered *who* and *whom* when she was in high school almost a century ago. Was she an animal too? And were students in her graduating class more adept with *who/whom* than students today?

I have three serious problems with Shriver's article. First, she's perpetuating a myth about English—it used to be perfect, but now it's deteriorating, and it's all our fault.

We've all heard many of those myths about English: You can't start a sentence with *but*. (I did it 17 times in this article.) You can't split an infinitive. (I did that too.) Americans don't know how to speak English. (Does anyone from the United Kingdom want to translate this article into authentic English?) You can't end a sentence with a preposition. (There's no such rule and never has been.)

Second, Shriver is sending the message that the English language is a minefield, full of potential errors that you may never have heard of.

(Yes, I just ended a sentence with a preposition!) If I'd read her "Semantic Drift" article right after college, I might have been afraid to aim for a writing career. Nobody ever told me I wasn't supposed to use "quicker" as an adverb. What other land mines were lying in wait for me?

Third, she is espousing a linguistic value system that doesn't benefit our democracy. The uncomfortable truth is that English is taught differently in public and private institutions.

I earned a doctorate in English without ever being told that you're supposed to use a possessive noun with a gerund. There's an example in Shriver's article: "Education's having turned its back on teaching...." Most people would begin the sentence with *education* instead of *education's*.

It's an elegant sentence, and Shriver is an excellent writer. But is it helpful to make judgments based on obscure grammar issues that create categories on the basis of family income and other advantages? What happens if the people conducting job interviews share Shriver's opinions?

We're back to her declaration that people with imperfect grammar "care about the integrity of our language only insofar as to ensure that we can still roughly understand one another."

Is that a fair description of college graduates who are excellent writers but were never warned against using *quicker* as an adverb? (I've published two English textbooks. Neither one warned students against *quicker*.)

I think Shriver and I have much in common. We both want to ensure that English continues to be a powerful and versatile language. But we disagree about what needs to be done. Of course English is facing some serious problems, but there are solutions at hand.

One suggestion is to encourage students to ask thoughtful questions about the rules of English. Where did they come from? Are they helpful? Can we let go of some of them?

Another suggestion is to encourage English majors to take courses in linguistics and the history of our language. Most important, we need to emphasize the skills needed for careers and citizenship: critical thinking, evaluating evidence, and developing, organizing, and presenting ideas and information.

And we need to remain calm. It's fine to be a stickler (I'm one myself). But there's no reason to claim that the entire body of English grammar and usage will come tumbling down if one brick is removed. English has survived many challenges in its long history. Semantic drift is normal. Trust me: English is going to be just fine.