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## About the book

“This book is one of the most interesting I've read in the 20-odd years since I took up my profession [as an editor]. It is a high heroic counterattack on behalf of those people whose lives have been blighted by the overweening authoritarianism of prescriptive linguists. The author is clearly a skilled, intelligent and experienced writer, and in my opinion his heart's in absolutely the right place. [It is] a highly recommended book ... with treasures for any writer, editor or proofreader. Read it and learn from it!”

Caroline Petherick, *Editing Matters*, July/August 2015, p. 13.

“*Correct English: Reality or Myth?* is an important book. As far as I know, it is the first of its genre that can justifiably be regarded as being significantly a work in applied philosophy. The issues it addresses, as well as those it hints at in passing (e.g. national policies for language), deserve further study and should become part of a more broadly envisaged philosophy of language.”

Professor Emeritus Karl Pfeifer, Department of Philosophy,  
University of Saskatchewan, *Metapsychology*, 2017, vol. 21, iss. 10.

## From the back cover

*Writing is a form of expression, as is painting and composing music. No-one has the right to tell artists to paint in a particular way or composers to compose in a particular way. So don't we have a right to talk and write as we please?*

“Appallingly ignorant!” “Standards are plummeting!” Such are the cries of many a purist when they encounter language they do not like. But perhaps it is the purists who are ignorant for failing to see that language cannot be correct or incorrect, right or wrong. As this book shows, to call any way of writing incorrect—such as starting a sentence with *and* or *but*—is just as silly as calling a lampshade dishonest. It is what philosophers call a *category mistake*. Writing can be unconventional or ambiguous, but not incorrect or wrong.

Despite the purists' fears, the English language is not going to the dogs. Change does not necessarily dilute a language. If it did, English speakers would have lost the ability to communicate centuries ago. Instead, English has become the *lingua franca* of the world.

Language is an evolutionary gift and, like all gifts, we should be allowed to do with it what we please. So a more tolerant attitude towards language is needed, one that respects the creativity and lust for novelty that defines *Homo sapiens*—and one that will eradicate the anxiety many suffer when they have to put pen to paper or give a talk. What this attitude should be is explored in this book.

## About the author

Geoffrey Marnell has a masters degree and doctorate from the University of Melbourne, gained by research in philosophy at the universities of Melbourne and Oxford. He has published widely—on such topics as language, technical writing, psychology and mathematics—and is the author of three books on recreational logic and mathematics.

Geoffrey tutored in philosophy at the University of Melbourne in the late 1970s and early 1980s before leaving academia to establish *Abelard Consulting*, a company that has, for close to 30 years, provided writing services, resources and training to organisations worldwide.

Geoffrey returned to the University in 2005 when, at the invitation of the English Department, he designed a course on technical writing and editing. He taught the course for nine years as part of the University's Publishing and Communications Program in the School of Culture and Communication.

In addition to language, Geoffrey's interests include literature, music, film and travel.

## By the same author

*Mindstretchers*

*Think About It!*

*Numberchains*

*Essays on Technical Writing*

*Mathematical Doodlings*

# Synopsis

## *Chapter 1: The inevitable revolution*

Explores why the cultural warriors of the 1960s and 70s rejected the teaching of English (with numerous examples to show that much of what was taught was prejudice, wrong or illogical).

## *Chapter 2: The myth of correctness*

Analyses the concepts of *correctness* and *wrongness* and shows that language use, even if understood as following a mere convention, cannot be right or wrong, correct or incorrect.

## *Chapter 3: Prescriptivists fight back*

Is the English language becoming corrupt? Is it losing its power to communicate effectively? This chapter looks at various arguments put forward for keeping language pure (or at least stopping it from changing).

## *Chapter 4: Taking language seriously*

If no-one owns the English language and no-one has the authority to control it, perhaps we need to rethink what makes good writing good. Perhaps the criterion should be not what is correct, but what best meets our needs as *Homo sapiens*. By that criterion, is the absolutism of prescriptivism or the relativism of descriptivism the better approach?

## *Chapter 5: The bedrock of good writing*

Explores the primacy of communication skills over knowledge of the rules of language-use in ensuring writing that is not self-defeating. Illustrates the importance of clarity, familiarity, economy, conceptual lightness, neutrality and consistency in writing that meets the needs of both writer and reader.

### *Chapter 6: Can the quality of writing be measured?*

Writers have been sued for expecting their readers to understand documents that have a low readability score. This chapter considers the value of the readability scores provided in various word-processing software and concludes that there is none. The quality of writing cannot be measured.

### *Chapter 7: Learning the lingo*

If we are to prevent another backlash against teaching the basic mechanics of the English language—of the sort we saw in the 1960s and 70s—another approach to teaching is needed. This chapter discusses how active descriptivism is a better philosophy for developing the communicative prowess of students.

### *Epilogue*

Writing is a form of expression, as is painting and composing music. No-one has the right to tell artists to paint in a particular way nor tell composers to compose in a particular way. So perhaps we have a right to talk and write as we please. But how can we accommodate creativity—or even improve the English language—if our primary purpose is to communicate and there are boundaries to communicative success?

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