Good Writing and Good English: The Shared English of Writing Studies, Prescriptivism, and the History of the English Language

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Abstract: Prescriptive discourse, which favors certain variants over others, like *different from* vs. *different than*, has usually been characterized in terms of correctness in spelling, punctuation, word meaning, or grammar. Yet usage guides in the 20th century have added numerous entries that focus more on style considerations than correctness, such as claims that neither new-fangled nor old-fashioned words should be used, that euphemisms and clichés should be avoided, or that pretentious or pompous variants should not be used. The style claims go so far as to condemn entire registers, like journalism, business writing, and government writing. The style that serves as a model for such prescriptive advice is typical of the style prized in 20th-century writing instruction. The Good English (i.e. "correct English") popularly thought to be the basis of prescriptive rules in the 20th century was apparently supplemented by Good Writing typically taught in English departments. This same kind of Good Writing was also an important factor in defining the kind of English to be taught in typical history of the English language classes. By the end of the 20th century, the idealized English language serving as the basis of writing instruction and the history of the English language had expanded considerably from the Good Writing typical of English departments. The Good English serving as the basis of prescriptive advice seems to be following suit.

Introduction

Some writing, like journalism, could get no respect from 20th-century usage guides. In 1926, H. W. Fowler sneered that "a synonym dictionary . . . is to some journalists what the rhyming dictionary is to some poets" ('simile'). Sixteen years later, Eric Partridge (1942) wrote "*Blue-print* (or *blueprint*) is one of those vogue words which have been spawned by officialdom and journalism acting in unholy conjunction" ('Blue-print'). And twenty-three years after Partridge, Theodore Bernstein (1965) wrote "*Unprecedented* is a favorite word of the 'gee-whiz' school of newspapering, but its careless use is by no means restricted to journalism" ('unprecedented'). Even nearly one hundred years after Fowler, Bryan Garner (2022) could write "To use *went* as a straight-faced participle is to engage in low DIALECT that isn't appropriate even for the sports pages" ('go'). In common to all these is a low opinion of journalists' writing. 20th-century usage guides added business writing and government writing to the heap of disparaged writing. Usage guides in the twentieth century also regularly denigrated certain stylistic features, like clichés, genteelisms, elegant variation, and euphemisms. The main question of this paper is why these prejudices against certain registers and stylistic features

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share such widespread acceptance in usage guides of the 20th century. In a genre widely considered to be about correctness in language, why are so many rules included that turn principally on stylistic considerations?

I conceive these questions as primarily flowing within the stream of prescriptivism, joining other studies that have examined the types of prescriptions and the justifications for them (Leonard, 1929; Algeo, 1991). Language prescription is a deceptively complex cultural phenomenon, but the crucial notion that I will be assuming in this paper is that prescriptivism primarily treats variation and judges some variants better than others, like *different from* instead of *different than*. A usage item (or what most people would call a rule), then is any pair or set of variants for which one variant has been judged superior. A usage guide is a collection of usage items ranging across many different domains of language, such as grammar, word meaning, spelling, pronunciation, and punctuation (Weiner, 1988; Straijer, 2018; Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020). Usage guides arose in the 18th century and became more common in the 19th century (Straijer, 2018). In the 20th century, H. W. Fowler's (1926) *Dictionary of English Usage* stands at the fountainhead of a stream of large, authoritative usage guides that followed. I will be drawing most of my examples from such guides that flourished in the second half of the twentieth century, like Evans and Evans (1957), Gowers (1965), Bernstein (1965), Follett (1966), Copperud (1970), and Wilson (1993).

Anne Curzan (2014) has aptly noted that prescriptivism is not monolithic, but instead encompasses numerous practices, attitudes, and aims that can be identified and distinguished from each other. Curzan offers a four-fold division in types of prescriptivism: standardizing, stylistic, restorative, and politically responsive. Her term stylistic prescriptivism, which focuses on "rules/judgments that aim to differentiate among (often fine) points of style within standard usage" (p. 24), is especially useful for this paper, and a main contribution of this paper to the study of prescriptivism is meant to be a greater understanding of stylistic prescriptivism in 20th-century usage guides.

In a journal issue dedicated to the confluences of writing studies and history of the English language, the connections between stylistic prescriptivism and those disciplines are also important. For history of the English language (HEL), the history of prescriptivism has long been an important stream, especially for English after 1500. Typical HEL narratives have focused on the development of Standard English, including the controversy about inkhorn terms in the 16th century and the development of dictionaries in response. Another plot line is the development of grammars and prescriptive rules in the 18th century. This paper will extend the history of prescriptivism into the 20th century and focus mainly on usage guides instead of grammars and dictionaries.

For writing studies, the connections start with correctness, one of the C's historically taught in writing instruction (Carbone, 1994, p. 190). The emphasis of prescriptive discourse on choosing one variant over another easily leads to binary labels like right and wrong, and correct and incorrect. The prescriptive advice given in usage guides would presumably serve as the basis for teaching correct punctuation, spelling, word choice, and grammar in writing. In that regard, prescriptivism would be a tributary stream feeding in to writing studies. On the surface, a question about prescriptive discourse in the 20th century constitutes at the same time a continuation of an important HEL stream and a tributary to writing studies.

But the connections run deeper. A more fundamental issue for the stylistic prescriptivism question of this paper is the type of English that serves as a basis for prescriptive rules. In favoring one variant over another, prescriptive discourse must be based on some notion of Good English. The typical popular metalanguage for such Good English is correctness—correct vs. incorrect, right vs. wrong, proper vs. improper, and so on. Prescriptive discourse presumably tells us which forms are correct and which are incorrect. But the basis of prescriptive rules in the 20th century is not limited to claims of correctness; they extend to judgments about felicitous style. The inclusion of style considerations

in prescriptive discourse draws it closer to the discourse of writing studies. Like prescriptive discourse, writing instruction also relies on some idealized notion of what Good Writing must be. Both discourses aim for some target in their pedagogy, which we can call Good English and Good Writing.[1] With the inclusion of style considerations in prescriptive rules, it is as if Good English is joined by Good Writing as two important bases for prescriptive rules. In that regard, writing studies becomes a source, not just a receiving stream, of prescriptive discourse. To press the confluences trope of this special issue, prescriptivism isn't just a feeder stream for writing studies, but is itself fed by the eddies and back channels of writing studies. Thus prescriptive discourse has intertwined itself more fundamentally with writing studies, and examining the relationship between writing studies and prescriptivism in the 20th century helps account for the many rules treating stylistic preferences in usage guides in the 20th century. This paper will further argue that the history of prescriptivism stream of HEL did not flow forth by accident. It was an important part of the narrative that legitimized the kind of English taught in universities—the kind of English, broadly speaking, that looks like the English prescribed by the prescriptive rules and taught in writing classes in the 20th century. All three discourses—writing studies, prescriptive discourse, and HEL more broadly—essentially envisioned a similar object of their study: Good Writing. So at the confluence of the history of prescriptivism, the history of writing studies, and the history of HEL, several insights should emerge to help account for why stylistic prescriptivism became more frequent in 20th-century usage guides.

Stylistic Claims vs. Correctness Claims

Integral to my research question is the contrast between style and correctness as a justification for prescribing one variant over others. A justification based on correctness claims that a proscribed variant should not be used because it somehow violates some principle, norm, or convention of language. A spelling variant, like *auxillary* instead of *auxiliary*, for example, is a violation of a spelling convention, so it is incorrect. Using *noisome* to mean noisy is an incorrect meaning attached to the word. Using *whomever* as a subject violates a supposed grammar rule that says subjects should be in the subject case while *whomever* is in the object case. Correctness claims are common in prescriptive discourse, especially in popular prescriptive discourse, where complainers assume spelling, punctuation, word meaning, and grammatical variants can all be correct or incorrect. Even in usage guides, which are more careful about characterizing variation as correct or incorrect, correctness is still frequently suggested. The popular assumption is that prescriptive rules in usage guides tell us what is correct English. Correctness is the most important criteria for the Good English thought to be the basis of the prescriptive rules.

Stylistic claims, on the other hand, claim that the proscribed form violates some convention of style, not a convention or principle of language. Stylistic claims depend on some conception of a preferred style, which is more characteristic of Good Writing than Good English. Such style conventions can be widely shared, such as the convention that writing should be concise, but they are not assumptions that the proscribed variant is somehow incorrect English or "bad grammar." It appears, then, that the prescriptive rules concerned with Good English are augmented by rules concerned with Good Writing. It's as if the basis of prescriptive rules went beyond the *recte* (correctly) in the ancient definition of grammar—*ars recte scribendi* (art of writing correctly)—to the *bene* (well) in the ancient definition of rhetoric—*ars bene loquendi* (art of speaking well).

Stylistic Prescriptivism

Stylistic prescriptivism, a term coined by Anne Curzan (2014), serves as a useful cover term for the stylistic claims I discuss in this paper. On the surface, her term standardizing prescriptivism looks like it could also be a cover term for the correctness claims that I discuss. But the difference between

Curzan's standardizing prescriptivism and stylistic prescriptivism does not exactly capture my distinction between correctness claims and stylistic claims. Curzan's distinction is not necessarily based on the justifications or arguments made for prescribed forms, but instead depend at least partly on the empirical distribution of the variants. According to Curzan, if both the prescribed and proscribed variants "arguably fall within standard usage" (p. 27), the prescriptive rule is stylistic. For Curzan, case mismatch in "me and my mom drove over to Chicago" falls within standardizing prescriptivism because the use of *me* as a subject in this construction does not occur much in Standard English, but the case mismatch in "for Michelle and I" falls within stylistic prescriptivism, because *I* used as an object in this construction does occur fairly frequently in Standard English. But when the focus is on the reasons justifying the prescribed forms (i.e. the focus of this paper), both the "me and X" and the "for X and I" constructions would be more susceptible to correctness claims than style claims. They would more likely be characterized as violating some supposed principle of grammar that says the case of the pronoun must agree with its use.

For the stylistic claims in this paper, both of Curzan's (2014) two main characteristics of stylistic prescriptivism are useful, but the second is particularly applicable:

1. It does not distinguish Standard English from nonstandard English, but instead "focuses on finer points of formal written (and to some extent spoken) usage" (p. 33)
2. It relies "on stylistic reasoning, such as the reduction of ambiguity, aesthetic appeal, or similar criteria" (p. 36)

The remarks in 20th-century usage guides that disparage journalism, business writing, and government writing overwhelmingly rely on stylistic reasoning and they arguably do not distinguish Standard English from nonstandard English. Table 1 shows Fowler (1926) disparaging journalism with just such stylistic reasoning (salient terms have been underlined; bold emphasis is original; entry name in parentheses):

Table 1 Fowler's (1926) Complaints About Journalistic Style (Underlining Emphasis Added)

Stylistic Criticism	Quotation
Botching grammatical parallelism	**Bastard Enumeration**. There is perhaps no blunder by which journalistic & other hasty writing is so commonly defaced at present as the one exemplified in *He plays good cricket, likes golf & a rubber of whist* ('and')
Using vulgar (i.e. common) words	A vulgarism that has made its way, probably through the advertisement column, into journalism, & is now of daily currency, is the use of claim in the senses of *assert, maintain, or represent* ('claim')
Inflating one's importance	Of c[ourse], as the herald of an out-of-the-way fact that one has just unearthed from a book of reference, is a sad temptation to journalists ('course')
Overusing foreign phrases	The British journalist finds it so amusing that the Frenchman should say *penser furieusement* where we say *think hard* . . . that he bores us intolerably with his discovery ('furiously')
Clumsily imitating a more talented writer	the journalist, aware that Whistler made a hit with *the gentle art*, & failing to see how he did it, has now, by rough handling on inappropriate occasions, reduced it to a BATTERED ORNAMENT ('gentle')

Clumsily imitating periodic style	When a journalist of today does try his hand at it [postponing the verb after naming the subject], he is apt, being a novice in the period style, to overdo things ('hanging up')
Using vogue words	The nearest parallel to this queer development [using hectic to mean 'intense'] seems to be the use of CHRONIC for severe, the only difference being that while that is confined to the entirely uneducated this has had the luck to capture the journalists ('hectic')
Showing off to readers	**include**) (**comprise**. As used in the newspapers, these may be called a pair of WORKING & STYLISH words. The one used in ordinary life is *include*; the inferior kind of journalist therefore likes to impress his readers with *comprise*. ('include comprise')
inventing clumsy constructions	The false first-personal pronoun one is a new invention of the self-conscious journalist, & its suppression before it can develop further is very desirable. ('one')

Fowler invokes journalists (probably because he was finding his objectionable examples in newspapers) to complain about a variety of style faults. Similar tables could be compiled from Fowler and other usage guides for faults attributed to business writing and government or bureaucratic writing. Bernstein (1965), for example, complains about using fad words in business writing: "Deprive your businessman of *contact* and he would be unhappy, but deprive your practiced writer of *contact* and he should be able to make out very well" ('contact'). Similarly, Gowers (1965), who built his career on encouraging plain English in government and bureaucratic writing, frequently complains about style faults in what he usually calls official writing:

> ceiling, floor. These words had a great vogue during and after the second world war, especially in officialese, as picturesque terms for the upper and lower limits of the permissible. . . . The trouble is that these metaphors are too fascinating; they are *worked to death in all sorts of incongruous contexts*. . . . in the end these well-meant attempts to brighten the official vocabulary may do more harm than good. ('ceiling, floor'; italic emphasis added)

Usage guide editors name several reasons for their complaints about these registers, such as the need to write fast in both journalism and business writing, or the desire to impress readers or customers in both journalism and business writing, or the desire to avoid responsibility in business writing and official writing. Much more research could be done on the reasons prescriptive discourse has disparaged each register. For this paper, the important point is that the complaints largely treat faults of style, not issues that would be more typically thought of as correctness in grammar or mechanics. There is nothing incorrect about being pretentious, vulgar, or clumsy with foreign phrases or old styles. Instead such rules expose faults with style.

The same concern for style, not correctness, pops out of individual entries whose justifications for proscribing certain forms include claims that the proscribed forms are vogue words, old-fashioned words, dull expressions, wordy expressions, or euphemistic expressions. Table 2 shows examples of proscriptions based on style preferences for several usage items across several usage guides (salient terms are underlined).

Table 2 Criticism of Style in Usage Guides (underlining emphasis added)

Style Criticism	Quotation
Clichés	"**threadbare excuse** is a threadbare phrase for an excuse made so often (usually by the same person) that it can no longer be accepted with even the pretense of credence" (Evans and Evans, 1957, 'threadbare excuse')
Pretentiousness	"**effect**, v.t. **A. Generally**. This verb—meaning 'to bring about, make happen'—is increasingly rare in English generally. Besides sounding pretentious, it often spawns wordiness" (Garner, 2022, 'effect')
Manipulative language / Euphemism	"Many specialist terms are pretentious jargon from the start. Does a *human resources manager* really need to ask that a sales director be *results orientated*? Will the new appointee really prefer a rewards package to the salary with other benefits that he had in his previous company?" (Hutchinson, 1994, 'clichés, pretentious language, and jargon')
Archaic	"The expression by the same token is derogated by Copperud, Fowler, and Flesch as pompous and archaic" (Copperud, 1970, 'token')
Clumsiness with foreign phrases	**assist**. 1 The sense 'to be present (at a ceremony, entertainment, etc.)', now uncommon and sounding affected, is a Gallicism" (Butterfield, 2015, 'assist')
Genteelism	"**expectorate** is a genteelism for *spit*, convenient for the writer fond of INELEGANT VARIATION" (Garner, 2022, 'expectorate')

The objections to cliches, pretentiousness, euphemisms, and genteelisms found in this table all go beyond a concern for mechanics or correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. These are rules based on stylistic reasoning and have more to do with some notion of good style than with correctness.

Stylistic Claims in Prescriptive Discourse

Just when style considerations entered prescriptive discourse remains an open question. Typical histories of prescriptivism in HEL emphasize grammars and grammatical variation as the basis of prescriptive rules in the eighteenth century much more than rhetorics and stylistic advice. Swift, Lowth, Priestley, and Murray, all known for their grammars or discussion of grammar, are regularly mentioned in HEL textbooks, while the lone rhetoric frequently mentioned is Campbell (1776), and then usually to report on his championing of actual usage as an authority. Baugh & Cable's (1993) summary of prescriptivism in the 18th century is typical in its emphasis on grammars and correctness:

> There was undeniably a coherent prescriptive tradition, within which eighteenth-century grammarians aimed to do three things: (1) to codify the principles of the language and reduce it to rule; (2) to settle disputed points and decide cases of divided usage; and (3) to point out common errors or what were supposed to be errors, and thus correct and improve the language. All three of these aims were pursued concurrently. (pp. 271-272)

All three of these aims also settle easily into notions of correctness. The role of rhetoric and the discussion of style as a basis for prescriptive pronouncements has been much less noted, with a notable exception being Nuria Yáñez-Bouza's (2015) work on sentence-ending prepositions, which combined investigations into 18th-century grammars with investigations into 18th-century rhetoric.

While it is not the purpose of this paper to trace the history of stylistic claims in 18th- and 19th-century prescriptivism, we can still get a preliminary idea from *The Dictionary of English Normative Grammar* (Sundby et al., 1991), which documents a few stylistic proscription claims from the 18th century, such as complaints about foreign words, vulgar expressions, wordiness, affectation, new-fangled words, and old-fashioned words. Filling in details of the rhetorical basis of prescriptive rules in the 18th and 19th century is open to much more study.

By the 20th century, explicit reliance on Good Writing, not just Correct English is clear in the usage guides. Ebbitt and Ebbitt (first edition 1939 and most recent 1990) include several entries that they group under "Logic and Rhetoric in Composition," "Building Paragraphs and Essays," and "Grammar and Style." Fowler includes 30 pages of technical terms, nearly all from an English classroom, focusing on rhetoric, logic, prosody, grammar, and literature (Fowler, 1926, 'technical terms'). Garner explicitly includes rhetorical effectiveness in his bases of usage rules (Garner, 2022, x) and lists several features of good writing. So the 20th-century usage guides are not exactly hiding their reliance on Good Writing as the basis of their rules.

At the same time, the nature of the Good Writing that stands as the basis for prescriptive advice in the 20th century is not as explicit in the usage guides and requires further examination. To begin with, Good Writing looks to have become more specialized in the 20th century. As Carbone (1994) documents, earlier stylistic advice for Good Writing had emphasized features that could be useful for any register, such as attention to clarity, effectiveness, and focus. But by Fowler (1926), a kind of stylistic advice had emerged that could dismiss entire registers, like journalism and business writing. Somehow the prescriptive rules came to be designed for a kind of Good Writing that is different from the writing in journalism, business writing, and official writing. In a word, the stylistic advice in 20th-century usage guides is more closely tied to literary style, as the next section will demonstrate.

Good Writing and Literature in 20th-Century Prescriptivist Discourse

Garner's (2016) preface hints at the importance of literature as a basis of his prescriptions. Garner claims that "the ideal usage commentator needs to be both a scholar and a critic" (p. xvi). By critic, he seems to mean someone with fine—perhaps literary—taste, since that is how he describes Fowler, his ultimate model: "H. W. Fowler embodied the qualities of the scholar-critic. He was a lexicographer, true, but he was also a literary critic." (, xvii). Garner's conception of usage goes far beyond adjudicating between correct and incorrect or even adequate and better uses. The usage commentator's role involves critical judgment, and tellingly, Garner uses literary to name that critical ability. Somehow an important virtue in the Good Writing that is the target of Garner's usage guide involves literary sensibility.

This same commitment to literary sensibility in Good Writing comes out strongly in prescriptivist discourse for several kinds of stylistic advice. I will illustrate with advice about clichés. Most guides have a separate entry devoted to clichés, and while a few prescribers acknowledge that repetitive phrases can be useful (Bernstein, 1965; Copperud, 1970), most prescribers rail against clichés. Prescribers give several reasons for avoiding clichés. Sometimes they claim that the clichés are meaningless:

> Historical changes have made many clichés utterly meaningless. What does *fell* mean in *one fell swoop*? Or *halcyon* in *halcyon days*? Or *moot* in *moot point*? Yet these and hundreds of other phrases, totally devoid of meaning to those who speak them, are heard every day. (Evans & Evans, 1957, 'cliché')

A frequent complaint building on such meaningless phrases is that the clichés do the thinking for the writer. The writer plops down familiar phrases without stopping to think whether the phrase expresses what the writer wants it to. Butterfield (2015), for example, says "phrases are wildly overused and, as one writer on clichés has put it, 'do your thinking for you'" ('cliché'). Bernstein (1965) likewise urges writers to "scrutinize thoughtfully every phrase that eases itself almost mechanically onto the paper" ('cliché').

So far, so good. This writing advice will apply to anyone trying to be clear and precise. But the raillery against clichés goes beyond clarity and precision to qualities that might be better thought of as perhaps literary. One of them is that clichés may lead to insincere writing, as Evans and Evans (1957) claim: "A cliché is a phrase that has become meaningless with overuse; for example, it is now meaningless to wish someone a nice day because a once sincere intention has become an empty cliché" ('cliché'). The irritation with clichés extends to the author's creativity and originality. A common complaint is that clichés are dull and lifeless. Wilson (1993) defines a cliché as "a usage label meaning that an expression, figure, or word is shopworn, predictable, and possibly ineffective" ('cliché'). Words accompanying cliché include "weary" (Bernstein, 1965, 'ilk'), "dead metaphor" (Wilson, 1993, 'acid test'), and "graceless phrase" (Wilson, 1993, 'and/or'). Even worse, in the eyes of the prescribers, writers who use clichés aren't as clever as they think they are.

> And their use is doubly bad because it characterizes the user as one who thinks he is witty, or would like to be thought witty, and yet is a mere parroter of musty echoes of long-dead wit. His very attempt to sound clever shows him to be dull. (Evans & Evans, 1957, 'cliché')

Bernstein (1965) spells out the same objection: "In the same way the writer who says something is *of the common or garden variety* or speaks of the *inner man* is not being scintillating. If the writer cannot be witty on his own, let him not try to be witty at all. ('cliché'). These prescribers don't explain how we are to know when writers think they are witty. But who says that writers need to be witty, fresh, or original? Of course we all like engaging writing more than dull writing, but Standard English doesn't have to be clever, and advice meant for Standard English does not need to include advice meant for this kind of Good Writing. That prescribers believe the Good Writing of their advice should be close to literary writing comes out in Burchfield's (1996) entry on clichés quoting a parody: "He was, however, on the whole, taking all things into consideration, by and large, not to put too fine a point on it, reasonably well self-sufficient. Thus Anthony Burgess, in a classic mocking of clichés, in *Inside Mr Enderby* (1963)" ('cliché'). Importantly, Burgess was a literary writer. For Burgess and other literary writers, originality, cleverness, and wit do matter. They are highly rewarded stylistic values. It appears that the prescribers value these features of style, too, without much reflection on what kind of writing they are guiding their readers to. The high-brow nature of their stylistic values also comes out in their judgments of people who are less skillful at managing the inherited chunks of language, as seen in Copperud's (1970) entry: "Ill-read and dull-witted writers will always be proud of having picked up expressions that the finer-grained despise" ('clichés'). Copperud captures a prevalent attitude about the use of clichés—they reveal less discrimination, less reading, and less wit, as if Good Writing should be undertaken by the discriminating, well-read, and witty.

It is not just that usage guides give advice on writing style; the writing style they champion approaches literary writing. Such writing values originality, freshness, and artistry. We appreciate such writing from great literary writers. Perhaps no prescriber has articulated this style as the target of usage rules more intensely than Wilson Follett. According to Erik Wensberg, who edited Follett's revised edition, "Follett was a teacher, a writer, and an editor, and the book he compiled . . . combines the knowledge and point of view of all three professions" (Wensberg, 1998, viii). Follett (1966) freely uses words like *vivid* and *easy* to characterize Good Writing: "language is made logical and clear by

observing the norms of grammar and syntax; and it is made precise, vivid, and easy ('readable') by respecting the demands of idiom connotation, tone, rhythm, and the other more fugitive virtues" (p. 5). Follett couples skills in "grammar and syntax" with ability to manage connotation, tone, and rhythm. There is something almost romantic about his "other more fugitive virtues," which suggests that for Follett Good Writing will probably always be just beyond the skill of students. It is an ideal they can strive for, but never master, because there will always be a more skillful way to write.

Follett explicitly connects Good Writing to literature. At one point Follett (1966) writes, "Only the reading of literature . . . will tell the uninformed what that distinction is" (p. 7) and at another point he writes that "good usage is what the people who think and care about words believe good usage to be. They have–and their critical reading and listening verifies–the impression that *dearth* means *scarcity*, that *concept* is pedantic" (Follett, 1966, p. 6). Good writers will have the flair and sophistication that comes from critical reading. Follett draws on all his roles—teacher, writer, and editor—to recommend good usage. Correctness isn't enough; his rules also aim for Good Writing.

Good Writing and Literature in 20th-Century Writing instruction

The Good Writing that Follett and other 20th-century prescribers take as a basis of some of their advice reminds me of the writing instruction I received from the English department at my university in the 1980s, and for that reason I call this writing style English-department writing. This was the style encouraged by John R. Trimble (1975) in *Writing with Style*, a popular guide assigned in my writing classes, during what Butler (2008) calls the "'Golden Age' of style study" (p. 7). Trimble provides much insightful advice for anyone wishing to write better, and he readily demonstrates the readable style he encourages. His advice is not limited to style nor is it less valuable when emphasizing style. At the same time, the English-department style that he promotes is always easy to detect in his book. Trimble includes an entire section on diction and readability, which emphasizes creativity: "Each time we write we have opportunities to delight our reader with arresting phrases" (p. 64) he writes at one point and adds soon after "To write creatively—to come up with "a constant succession of tiny surprises"—we must *want* to. . . . Each time we set down a sentence we must ask ourselves, "*Now how can I express this more memorably*?" (p. 65). This is writing that goes beyond utilitarian virtues of clarity and correctness: this is a style that appreciates degree of difficulty and awards style points.

Trimble's advice was spot-on for my English department classes. Somehow it wasn't enough for our writing to be clear; it also had to be skillful, cultured, and elegant. While focus and signposting were expected, for example, useful techniques like headings, first-person pronouns, and self-reference, were somehow forbidden. The explanation was that these techniques were not sophisticated enough; good writers could signal important points and effect transitions without them. Such writing advice was probably useful—I certainly appreciate the suggestions on how to give my writing more life—but there was also a price to pay in time and effort to produce such writing and acquire such skills. Beyond that, there was not a little snobbishness about what constitutes Good Writing, and it always seemed to be writing beyond a student's abilities.[2]

That Trimble could so confidently pronounce on style in a book about writing and that writing courses could so readily adopt such a book (Trimble's book had run through 32 printings in its first 25 years (Trimble, 2011, p. xi)), speak to the values in writing instruction in the second half of the 20th century. Writing for different registers was taught to some degree throughout the twentieth century (see Weeks (1985) for a history of business writing in the early 20th century). But the majority of writing classes were taught in English departments, a source of some tension to this day (Gunner, 1998). Susan Miller (1991), for example, argues that the relationship between literature and composition in an English department is seen as a high-low relationship, with composition being

low (p. 53). James A. Berlin argues that one reason English departments have kept composition around is for it to be a foil to the meritorious writing of literature (1987, pp. 28-30). In such a situation, there would naturally be pressure to judge Good Writing of composition courses by some of the same criteria as the Good Writing embodied in literature. Hence it would seem natural for Trimble to foreground advice on making one's writing fresh and arresting.

The teaching of literature and writing remained in tension throughout the twentieth century. At the beginning of the 20th century, according to Berlin, three major approaches to writing instruction emerged: one that emphasized correctness, one that emphasized the study of literature, and one that emphasized participating in the democratic process. Berlin labels these respectively as "current-traditional rhetoric", "rhetoric of liberal culture," and "transactional rhetoric" (Berlin, 1987, p. 35). The labels do not reflect our current political notions encapsulated in the terms traditional and (especially) liberal. Instead, liberal culture, according to Berlin, emphasized good taste and good judgement. Its rhetoric was "aristocratic and humanistic" (p. 43). It was advanced most prominently by such universities as Yale, Princeton, and Williams (p. 35). The study of literature featured prominently, partly as a basis for writing literature, but also as a means to promote judgment and taste: "courses in literature should provide lessons in taste, emphasizing appreciation, contemplation, and self-expression" (p. 35). In contrast, the current-traditional rhetoric emphasized "superficial correctness and forms of discourse" (p. 37). According to Berlin, it originated at Harvard and was the predominant "form of college writing instruction in the twentieth century" (p. 36). This approach emphasized mechanical correctness and aimed to give students the writing skills they would need to "serve society and to enjoy the professional success of the new middle class" (p. 39). These two approaches—current-traditional and liberal culture—roughly correspond to the correctness/style distinction that I have been using throughout this paper and reflect the tension between literature and writing. The tension can be seen in an early MLA report explicitly contrasting clear and correct writing with literary writing:

> English composition is already taught in the schools, but it connotes the art of writing clearly and correctly about ordinary matters and with such limitations as you expect in a good business letter; whereas, this book (Cornford's English Composition) . . . sets out to teach schoolboys to think literary thoughts and write them down with literary force and grace. (Proceedings, 1902, p. viii as cited in Stewart, 1985, p. 742)

Writing with "literary force and grace" certainly could refer to composing literature, but it also could refer to incorporating a literary style into writing about "ordinary matters" as Stewart's (1985) summary of the responses captures it: "Generally, most students need to learn mechanics and habits of clear and correct expression when very young and gradually develop to a stage at which they express themselves with force and grace and some degree of literary sophistication" (p. 744).

In this liberal-culture approach, writing instruction in English departments was closely aligned with the study of literature, emphasizing the study of literature over the study of writing:

> Here, then, is the central paradox of the liberal culture's view: it is the study of literature, not of rhetoric, which ultimately improves students' rhetoric. And the role of English departments in writing instruction is thus to teach liberal culture through belle lettres. (Russell, 2002, pp. 175-176)

There was a degree of Romanticism associated with the prized style; it was the style of the talented writer, and talent was innate, not developed. Characterizing Thomas R. Lounsbury's position, Russell (2002) writes "Good writing, he argued, is too mysterious, too individual, to benefit even from 'the mastery of all the rhetorical rules ever invented'" (p. 175). But the value of literary instruction for

those who were talented enough to absorb the lessons was better critical judgment and more refined taste. Russell argues that "as the professionalization of the humanities grew, the rationale for humanistic studies shifted from expression to appreciation, from formal training in public discourse to informal cultivation of private taste and individual critical acumen" (p. 173).

Even though the liberal-culture approach played second fiddle to the current-traditional approach in the early 20th-century, an emphasis on literature inherited from the liberal-culture approach continued throughout the 20th century. In the 1920s, it took the form of "expressionist rhetoric," in Berlin's terms. Berlin (1987) cites enthusiastic supporters from the time celebrating "the literary nature of all writing" (p. 75) and the "inherent metaphoric nature of language that the writer is to cultivate—striving, of course, for the fresh and original" (p. 77). Russell (2002) calls it traditional at this time for students to read and write "belletristic essays" (p. 193).

By the 1940s and 1950s, the study of literature was tightly linked to the study of writing. According to Berlin (1987), "English department members began to protest any method of teaching writing that was not based on the study of literature" (p. 107). There would have been utilitarian reasons for combining the study of writing and literature: "if the department was to be saddled with the service course in writing, went this reasoning, it should at least organize the course around what it knew best—the literary text" (pp. 107-108). By the second half of the 20th century, according to Russell (2002), "the single writing course that nearly always remained in the curriculum, freshman composition, was often taught as a course in imaginative literature" (p. 182). As Robert J. Connors (1997) writes, "style in this century [i.e. 20th century] became literary, and something of a mystery" (p. 281).

The Good Writing promoted by English departments in the 20th century apparently wove in these values of originality, fine taste, artful sensibility, and ingenious expression. These are not the only features of writing taught in English departments—they still taught more mundane features like mechanics, cohesion, coherence, and so on—but these high-brow features became important, continuing to show up in books like Trimble's.

The Confluence of Good Writing and Good English in the English Department

Not surprisingly, since prescriptive discourse about correctness also came out of English departments, these high-brow stylistic features also found their way into the values in prescriptive discourse. The confluence becomes apparent in comparing passages from usage guides with comments about writing in the 20th century. The prescribers' complaints about clichés doing the thinking for writers given earlier in this paper may well have grown out of the association between good writing and good thinking prevalent at the time. Russell characterizes this attitude as common in the liberal-culture approach quoting Lounsbury and Campbell from the early 20th century:

> "Clear thinking precedes clear writing," said Lounsbury, and does not follow it" (874). "One cannot write any better than he can think," Campbell insisted. "Bad writing is nothing more than the outward and visible sign of bad thinking" (179)." (2002, p. 175)

A similar confluence shows up in the conception of an "orderly mind" as the goal of writing instruction and presumably the basis of prescriptive advice. For Follett, the teacher-writer-editor who wrote a prominent usage guide, the single most important skill for Good Writing is the "orderly mind":

> Its difficulty consists in the ceaseless pursuit of the thousand ways of rectifying our mistakes, eliminating our inaccuracies, and replacing our falsities—in a word, editing our prose. When we do this habitually (even though it never becomes easy) we shall find ourselves honoring the faculty that can do more toward this end than the mastery of prescriptive grammar, more than the study of etymology and semantics, more than an observance of idiom and the maxims of rhetoric. And what is this faculty? It is the blessing of an *orderly mind* [emphasis added]. (1966, p. 14)

Follett's "orderly mind" echoes terms that literature professors used to respond to attacks from other disciplines. According to Russell (2002), those professors claimed that they were helping students shape an orderly mind, not just a full one: "the literary generalists answered by charging that specialists ignored the deeper meaning of education and produced in students 'a full mind rather than an orderly one'" (p. 183). According to this contrast, specialists outside literature departments may have produced a full mind, but presumably the teaching of literature was necessary for developing the orderly mind. It seems that the streams of writing instruction and prescriptive advice come together in their attention to careful writing and reading.

The same confluences can be seen in the comments in usage guides that call for fresh expression, the apt metaphor, proper tone, and artful use of foreign language. It is likely the preference for cultured, skillful writing in the liberal-culture approach led to the strictures in usage guides against euphemisms and genteelisms. A skillful writer doesn't have to resort to euphemism or try too hard to sound sophisticated. The skillful writer can manage tone without trying to soften language too much. The complaints about euphemisms and genteelisms are telling. Bernstein (1965) writes that "it is the less intelligent and less educated who are most addicted to these linguistic evasions" ('euphemism'), and Partridge (1942) approvingly quotes McKnight: "one of the most distinctive features of sophisticated speech, as distinguished from unsophisticated speech in our time, is the absence of squeamishness and the ready courage to name things directly" ('euphemism'). Accordingly, Evans and Evans (1957) can label "in a family way" "vulgarly genteel" ('euphemism'). You have to feel sorry for the unfortunate students—they are asked to be more sophisticated and refined than their home dialects in their writing, but if their effort shows they are still doing it wrong. Skillful writers will be sophisticated without looking like they are trying to be sophisticated. Whatever is wrong with *in a family way* or *commence* for start has to do with stylistic values prizing sophisticated skill.

The concern for just the right amount of sophistication shades into the concern for honest, direct speech that shows up in entries on gobbledygook and doublespeak. Most usage guides include an article on doublespeak, which one guide defines as "language practices intended to deceive" (Wilson, 1993, 'doublespeak, double talk') like *revenue enhancement* for tax increase or *pacification* for war. This concern may owe something to another feature of 20th-century Good Writing that was heavily influenced by I.A. Richards. Russell (2002) writes

> The communications movement drew its theoretical framework largely from I. A. Richards, who in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936) called for a transformed discipline of rhetoric, which would study all types of discourse as *functions* of linguistic behavior. The revived discipline would discover, as he put it, "how much and in how many ways good communication may differ from bad"—questions that Hitler's propaganda machine had dramatically brought to the nation's attention. (p. 257)

The study of great literature could be employed in this fight against propaganda. As Russell writes,

> General-composition courses focused more on imaginative literature and less on writing about social and political issues. Richards and others expected that literary criticism would be, in Graff's words, "therapy for ideologically based miscommunication and misunderstanding" and produce a generation of students immune to the blandishments of propaganda (133)." (pp. 269-270)

The remarks in usage guides about double-speak, manipulative language, and perhaps even euphemism make more sense in light of this imperative among English departments.

That usage guides would need to envision some kind of Good Writing as the basis of their rules is not the point of this paper; it stands to reason that they would. What deserves notice is that they were apparently unself-conscious about the kind of writing they envisioned and unaware of how much that type of writing was tied up with a specific kind of discourse, a discourse that flattered itself for being superior to others and for being willing to engage in the arduous task of writing with skill and refinement. The history of prescriptive discourse in the 20th century is very much tied up with the history of writing instruction, and they are both tied to the liberal-culture approach's influence in English departments. The values of this liberal-culture approach would easily have bred condescension and superciliousness towards other varieties of writing. Insofar as the liberal-culture approach even acknowledged writing of other registers that depend on Standard English, like journalism and business writing, it did so mostly to disparage them.

Changes in Conceptions of Good Writing and Good English in the Late 20th Century

Perhaps this focus on English-department writing was a happy development in the history of prescriptivism and writing studies—perhaps the precepts taught in service of the refined, artful style are valuable precepts to teach, and perhaps enshrining some of those precepts within specific entries of usage guides has been profitable for anyone looking for usage advice. On the other hand, the naïve reader of a usage guide—and the genre depends on naïve readers—will likely not catch the subtle differences between rules meant to ensure Standard English grammar and rules meant to help one write English-department writing. The naïve reader may decide that clichés like *each and every* or genteelisms like *expecting* for pregnant, or vogue words like *dynamic* or *backlash* are just as incorrect as multiple negation or misspelling *your* instead of *you're*. Such conflation of style with correctness could lead to a feedback loop, insofar as writing instruction still depends on usage guides to provide the basis of correctness in Good Writing: style advice from writing has been picked up by usage guides, repackaged as correctness, and then given back to writing.

But writing studies has already moved beyond a conception of Good Writing that relies principally on literary style. Developments in the 1980s and 1990s have made writing instruction, at least, more confident in teaching people how to write in other registers. The Writing in the Disciplines (WID) movement has performed welcome service identifying the types of writing done in many varieties of English and in legitimizing varieties besides English-department writing. For academic subjects included in WID approaches, elevating visibility has been more important than establishing legitimacy. While there has been some grousing in usage guides about features of social-science writing or the unskillful adoption of scientific terms into general writing, those registers are already seen as legitimate and have not attracted the opprobrium reserved for journalism, business writing, or official writing in usage guides. But when Good Writing is biased toward English-department Writing, writing instructors and students alike may not even be aware of history writing or scientific writing or more fine-grained biology writing. WID has fortunately increased the visibility of these kinds of writing.

For professional writing, like business writing and journalism, WID combined with Writing across the Professions (WAP) has indeed contributed to their legitimacy. Business writing and technical writing programs have increased and improved over the last forty years. Melancon and Henschel (2013) noted a 131% increase in technical and professional communication (TPC) programs just from 2005 to 2011 (p. 45). By all measures, TPC programs have become more robust and sophisticated. Kimball (2017) calls today "the Golden Age of Technical Communication."

What Good Writing is in registers besides English-department writing is a question beyond the scope of this paper, but at the very least Good Writing will be much more sensitive to demands of register and genre. Advice for Good Writing will focus on those features of style that are important for attending to readers of the genre and will be less amenable to the simple choices between variants typical of prescriptive discourse. In a report of a biology course writing assignment, for example, Anne Ellen Geller (2005) notes that students "had considered how they could make their reviews 'interesting' and 'lively,' and they wondered how much 'creativity' they could use" (p.100). In her own reading of their mini-reviews (the writing assignments for the course), she had noted that the mini-reviews she found most satisfying were "engagingly descriptive. They described the symbiosis with detail that helped the reader to picture it. They minimized jargon and did not rely on citations in every single sentence" (p. 99). The solution to writing mini-reviews of scientific research for the literate layperson came mostly in considering the audience and always coming back to the motive for writing (or "what is cool") about the research. Successful writing for this assignment could not be codified as a series of dos and don'ts. Yes, a usage guide could (and some do) warn writers away from jargon, but for a writing assignment that requires distilling jargon, that advice is insufficient. Better advice is to remember "what is cool" about the scientific papers the students read and then to think how to tell someone about that.

The importance of register and genre stands out in Ken Hyland's (2015) analysis of style in scientific writing. His starting point is to make writing good within its register and for its rhetorical aims. Hyland skillfully shows how the functional demands of scientific writing dovetail with the linguistic repertoire that writers have available to them:

> With its complexities and arcane idiosyncrasies, today's scientific English is an unadorned, stripped-down communicative medium that bears little resemblance to the flowery prose of Boyle or Hooke in the 1600s, or even the carefully coy phrasings of Crick and Watson in the 1950s. It has evolved conventions designed to structure arguments and communicate information in tight word limits while being as accessible to the reading and writing capabilities of non-English-speaking researchers as possible. It uses a comparatively predictable set of grammatical and lexis patterns. (p. 64)

Hyland and Feng (2019) analyze a more general register, academic writing, where they devote a chapter to "reader engagement," perhaps the best place to find advice that corresponds to the stylistic advice in usage guides. That is where they dedicate themselves to Good Writing at the level of lexical and grammatical choices. The devices they identify are reader mentions, questions, appeals to shared knowledge, directives, and personal asides (pp. 170-171). None of these devices involve variation so they cannot be reduced to prescriptive advice about which variant should be used. Instead they are tools that writers might more profitably use if they are aware of them. The overarching principle is to engage the reader, whatever the specific genre, and it is completely in line with the "Writing as Rhetorical" principle in the Statement of WAC Principles and Practices: "In order to write effectively, students need to think rhetorically, understanding that all aspects of writing -- from voice, to organization, to stylistic conventions -- are affected by the rhetorical situation" (p. 5)

The importance of clarity, audience, and purpose continue to be features of writing instruction, but the privileging of the belletristic, finely wrought writing is not as strong. As an outsider to WID/WAC, I have to wonder how much of the Good Writing advice that has made its way into usage guides like Strunk and White continues to be taught in disciplines outside the English department. My cursory reading has clearly shown that writing studies scholars are much more interested in other aspects of writing, but I wonder how many handbooks still contain recommendations on style that are largely inherited from the mid 20th century and that do not account for register differences.

Perhaps the developments in writing studies will also help puncture the superciliousness of usage guides. Already Pam Peters has more tempered advice about some of the things that bothered 20th-century prescribers. About euphemisms, Peters (2004) writes that they are "a resource for tactful communication in many situations, and few people want to give unnecessary verbal offense" ('euphemism'). Peters (2004) seems relatively tolerant of a little pretension: "If *transpire* still seems a tad pretentious, it is perfectly idiomatic." (Peters, 2004, 'transpire'). Peters seems more concerned with clear and idiomatic expression. If a threadbare expression is useful, she doesn't hesitate to recommend it, as when she comes up with functional reasons for using *in the case of*, a phrase deprecated in other usage guides:

> The phrase *in the case of* is often censured in style manuals as wordy and overused. In academic prose it's overrepresented, according to the Longman Grammar (1999), but less evident in other kinds of writing. Academics may defend it on the grounds that it serves to signal a change of topic in complex discourse. (Peters, 2004, 'in case, in case of, and in the case of')

Peters's remarks about journalism are neutral, if not approving. For her, journalism is another variety using Standard English, as illustrated in her entry on *aggravation*: "Yet most of the 81 examples in the BNC [British National Corpus] come from academic and journalistic prose, not transcribed speech" (Peters, 2004, 'aggravate, aggravation and aggro'). Here Peters puts journalism on the same level as academic prose, both representing educated, public writing.

I don't expect change in prescriptive discourse to happen fast, however. Several of the examples in Table 2 illustrating a stylistic basis for prescriptive rules come from 21st-century usage guides (Butterfield, 2015; Garner, 2022). Usage guide writers tend to be old and their advice conservative (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020, pp. 76-80). Garner, the leading usage authority of this century, would likely have been taught Good Writing when I was, and he likely imbibed the same lessons about style. Style advice will not likely be excised from usage guides any time soon, and I'm not even sure that it should be excised altogether. But if English-department writing is to remain the primary target of usage advice—though I don't see why it should—usage guides in the future could at least be more forthright in their acknowledgment of this one type of writing as their model. It wouldn't hurt for them to also acknowledge the legitimacy of other registers like journalism and business writing that have their own functional demands. Perhaps such respect for other registers is slowly coming about in today's usage guides.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the paper, I claimed that the history of prescriptivism is a branch of the history of the English language, and that was my reason for focusing on it in this special issue. But the connection is tighter. The focus given to standardization of English after 1500 is not an accident, and the version of HEL taught in the 20th century overwhelmingly focused on Standard English (Milroy, 2002, p. 7). Milroy calls this "legitimate language" and details the ideological work of legitimization that HEL does for Standard English; simply put, legitimate language has a history. Milroy (2002) also

notes the explicit connections to literary language, quoting Sweet, Wyld, and Jespersen who said that literary language should be the basis of the history of English (p. 11). The reliance on literary language as the legitimate language of HEL has a long history. In 1862 George Marsh (1871/1862) wrote a history of English called *The origin and history of the English language and of the early literature it embodies*, and in 1900 Toller wrote that "the language of literature becomes the representative English language" (p. 246). HEL textbooks have predominantly quoted literature as examples of earlier stages of English (Chapman, 2021, pp. 259-261).

Just as the target style for usage guides is 20th-century English-department writing, the target for the English language described in the 20th-century HEL narrative also tended toward English-department English. That is the legitimate language, the language used in university English classes. So all three discourses—writing studies, prescriptivism, and HEL—shared throughout the 20th century a strong tendency toward a common object of study—the kind of English they envisioned as Good Writing or Good English.

And just as the Good Writing that forms the basis of writing studies has been expanding in writing studies, the "English Language" in HEL has been expanding too. And like writing studies, the 1990s also seems like an inflection point for this change. Now most HEL textbooks also include sections on World Englishes, at the very least, and several have included sections on nonstandard English. Moore and Palmer (2019) note that in a survey of HEL instructors, the top two topics of most importance to the instructors were "language change" and "variation and diversity" (p. 11). In a discipline that in principle is no longer invested in describing the history of only Standard English, the table is set for research on many other varieties—not only lesser-studied national varieties, but also regional and social varieties within countries (Wales (2006) and Watts & Trudgill (2002) are a couple of notable examples in this trend). HEL has been moving to fill this gap and become histories of English languages. The entwining of HEL and writing studies, so naturalized as to be practically unnoticed in the 20th century, may have helped HEL to acknowledge the fuller potential of its story as both disciplines have started to recognize there are more Englishes than English-department English.

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Notes

[1] Throughout this paper I will continue to capitalize Good English and Good Writing to refer to idealized, reified entities presumably serving as the basis for prescriptive rules and writing advice respectively.

[2] See Miller (1991) who makes a similar point about the emphasis on student deficiency in writing instruction.

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