



Write It Right: The Celebrated Cynic's Language Peeves Deciphered, Appraised, and Annotated for 21st-Century Readers

Ambrose Bierce, Jan Freeman

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One of America's foremost language experts presents an annotated edition of Ambrose Bierce's classic catalog of correct speech.

Ambrose Bierce is best known for *The Devil's Dictionary*, but the prolific journalist, satirist, and fabulist was also a usage maven. In 1909, he published several hundred of his pet peeves in *Write It Right: A Little Blacklist of Literary Faults*.

Bierce's list includes some distinctions still familiar today--the *which-that* rule, *less* vs. *fewer*, *lie* and *lay*--but it also abounds in now-forgotten shibboleths: *Ovation*, the critics of his time agreed, meant a Roman triumph, not a round of applause. *Reliable* was an ill-formed coinage, not for the discriminating. *Donate* was pretentious, *jeopardize* should be *jeopard*, *demean* meant "comport oneself," not "belittle." And Bierce made up a few peeves of his own for good measure. We should say "a coating of paint," he instructed, not "a coat."

To mark the 100th anniversary of *Write It Right*, language columnist Jan Freeman has investigated where Bierce's rules and taboos originated, how they've fared in the century since the blacklist, and what lies ahead. Will our language quibbles seem as odd in 2109 as Bierce's do today? From the evidence offered here, it looks like a very good bet.

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From Reader Review Write It Right: The Celebrated Cynic's Language Peeves Deciphered, Appraised, and Annotated for 21st-Century Readers for online ebook

Karen says

Charming. This is a fun, little reference book. Ambrose Bierce was such a curmudgeon; it's fun to read his cynical, grumpy opinions on words. The author offers well-documented, useful modern usage notes to either confirm Bierce's opinions or to update them.

I edit a lot of academic articles and dissertations for non-native English speakers that often use unusual word choices. This book has actually been quite helpful for determining word choice in such situations.

What amazed me most about the book is Bierce's belief that he could actually affect how the English language is used. This is both incredibly arrogant and quite admirable.

I highly recommend this book if you like words, like thinking about words, and use words as a vital part of your job.

Cryselle says

This turned out to be an unusual peek into linguistic history and American history; apparently the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries spawned an intense rage for style manuals and advice for speaking and writing. Nit-picking (a phrase that surely Bierce would have denounced for its slanginess and disgusting imagery) over correct English was elevated to a high art form. Strunk and White come from a longer tradition than I ever imagined.

Freeman points out that most of Bierce's detested words and constructions are outdated either by the march of time and technology, have been resolved into standard usage, or simply been forgotten, but as she also points out, "Indignation has charms that reason can't match." That his quibbles are no longer serious linguistic issues for the most part doesn't take away from the amusement of the peek into the curmudgeon's mind.

Freeman's own comments have a joyous acerbity; she both chuckles at Bierce's frothings and matches them, refuting them altogether with wit and citations. Her familiarity with the major style guides of the time and historical language uses let her compare and contrast Bierce's fulminations with other "authorities" and tradition, providing an entertaining look into the evolution of the language.

Due to the format, this isn't a book to be read straight through, but something to be savored in little bites here and there: each entry is a discrete gem. Mine gravitated (now, there's a word Bierce would have hated!) next to the telephone, where rereading will be the perfect consolation for waiting on "hold."

Many thanks to the Walker/Bloomsbury people in whose contest I won this delightful book.

Ian Cockburn says

I have read the original Ambrose Bierce book (courtesy Project Gutenberg) without modern annotations.

I love all books like this, even when (especially when?) they're so personal, contentious and antiquated.

Allen Garvin says

Ambrose Bierce, best known for his cynical Devil's Dictionary, also wrote this little book of language peeves... some of the peeves remain favorites of peeveasts today, like "literally for figuratively", "quite for very", dislike of "unique" being modified in degree... others are boggling to anyone today: "pants" being 'exceedingly vulgar' and to be avoided in favor of "trousers"; "dirt" when used to mean soil (Bierce would have it only mean grime); disapproval of idioms like "seldom ever". Jan Freeman looks at each of Bierce's points, and writes about the historical use, and the history of disapproval, if any exists.

Basically, Bierce is a very grumpy prescriptivist, while Freeman is an open-minded descriptivist. Not a bad book, if you're interested in peeves that seem incomprehensible today. In another century, many of the loudest grammar complaints made by modern peeveists may likewise seem baffling. But if you're looking for a "Devil's Dictionary" sort of book, full of cynical wit, you won't find it here. Bierce comes across as a small-minded pedant most of the time.

Hákon Gunnarsson says

I think William Strunk must have read this book before writing The Elements of Style, because he and Bierce often have a slightly similar humor in their rants about literary faults. And I find their humor amusing.

One example of Bierce's humor goes like this: "Banquet. A good enough word in its place, but its place is the dictioanlly. Say, dinner." The advice, in this and some other entries, has of course more to do personal taste, than some real fault in the language, but the way he states his case is still fun to read.

And some of it is still valuable advice like this one: "Love for Like. "I love to travel." "I love apples." Keep the stronger word for a stronger feeling." I think this really applies today even though the book was written more than a hundred years ago. People are still using the word love for too weak emotions, so when it comes to really say that they love someone the word is a bit diluted from overuse. But some other entries are archaic at best, so it's not all great.

This book is out of copyright, and I got my e-book, or rather e-books, for free from online sites. The first one I got from archive.org and that one is a little bit garbled like can be seen in this quote:

"... than is possible in a book of the character of this. Briefly. . ."

It doesn't make much sense does it? In the copy from gutenberg.net the same quote is like this:

"... than is possible in a book of the character of this. Briefly. . ."

Which does make a bit more sense and would make perfect sense if I had quoted the whole sentence. It almost sounds like bad manners to complain about the quality of free books, but I have to say the copy from archive.org doesn't do much for Bierce's reputation. I use archive.org a lot and rarely come across problems there, but in this book should either be deleted or fixed.

All in all I like this little blacklist of literary faults, even though I'm probably not going to take all its advice too seriously.

Heather says

I won this on First Reads. Yeah for the nerd in me!!!!

November 2009 -

I've read quite a bit of this book, but not all. It's not really something you can sit down and read straight through. I pick it up every day or so and read a few pages. The book is sometimes funny, and always interesting. I'm having a lot of fun seeing how language has changed over the last 100 years.

I can't see that this book has any educational purpose, and you can't really use it for help in your writing or research. It's mostly just for interesting information. It's not something I feel I need for my permanent home library.

Bierce can sometimes be hard to understand and follow. The "deciphering" helps some, but even then there were times when I couldn't figure out why something did or didn't work. Oh well. I'll leave it to others to argue over words.

A great book if you like the language of history.

Ellie says

Disclosure: I love books about the English Language. I devoured prescriptive texts and studied the rules of language as early as I could read. I loved "quote books," orderly reference texts, and books about the rules, or history of the English language even as a teenager. My earliest memories of the internet (I was about 14 or so when it arrived at my house) were searching Alta Vista for lists of grammar rules or quotable quotes about language. I earned a degree in linguistics (where I learned to love language meaning and use and not just the rules). So, yeah, I gave this book 4 stars.

Write it Right is a thoroughly fascinating early embrace of American English as emerging dialect with its own perils, plusses, and peculiarities. It is outdated at times, (which is funny to have to say about a book originally published in 1909) and often in funny ways such as when he declares that mad (for "angry") is declining in usage.

The best entries are those where even a confessed grammar obsessive is humbled by usages she never thought incongruous or ridiculous, (juncture, mutual, survive) and the downright snarky (pants, fail).

Jamie says

This text provides a fascinating look at the roots of language, even more engaging because the reader gets both perspectives - that of the almost priggish guy who wants one and only one usage and insists that simply using a word or phrase frequently does NOT make it okay, alongside that of a student of the actual use of language who is more of a linguist than a grammarian. Freeman's (often very funny) analysis of some of the entries including out-of-date language is particularly helpful and interesting in that it sheds light on modern language and usage, and the notes on the rest of the entries highlight the attitude of Bierce. The latter makes for a cool cross-reference to read his works and dissect their language. The writer and lover of literature in me is inclined to agree with the quotation in Freeman's footnote on page 70 that "'vague and exaggerated expressions' can lead to vague habits of thought and vaguer morals". I think our society would be a lot better off if we would observe many of the distinctions Bierce makes simply because such a practice would force us to think both more and more clearly about what we are actually saying (and thinking a little more would not hurt us). Freeman, on the other hand, seems to say repeatedly that, although a particular phrase might technically be incorrect, it has been used by so many or for so long that it doesn't really matter, and that no one but usage fanatics would notice. In essence, poor grammar is okay, as long as it is widely understood. I appreciate this perspective, and I am actually glad to have it thus presented, even though my inner English major is still cringing. The ambiguity of conclusions particularly interests me, since, frequently, Freeman makes no effort to clear up whether or not Bierce's entry is correct for language today, but only tells the history of the phrase and its modern uses. Clearly, she is not interested in the "textbook" use of anything, but rather in the daily and historical uses, a perspective which could be said to delve more into modern thinking than into modern speaking. It is not a grammar devotional but a language disector, which is awesome in its own right. It is a cool read, for humor on the part of both writers and for edification (in Bierce's sense), and will be fun to use in the future for random referencing. If you love the multi-faceted nature of language and all its uses, you should add this text to your list post-haste. But nitpickers beware, you may have to open your mind a bit.

Won through the Goodreads First Reads Program.

Marie says

Great new ways of looking at words: some of which have mostly dropped out of usage, and many which seem to have become standard. Poor Bierce would be in paroxysms of horror. While it may not be your go-to for modern literary language, you may want to take a look—it'll make you *think* about your words, and not just accept the common parlance.

For example: Demean (v) is related to demeanor and therefore should be neutral, it's used in place of debased.

Also amusing how many problems can be charged to the newspapers.

Jim says

In his typical, straight forward, often caustic manner, Bierce lists writing faults & their corrections. An excellent book for anyone that has to string sentences together, whether they're a 'real' writer or just someone who communicates via email.

Ann says

Thank you very much for the free copy of Ambrose Bierce's Write It Right. Being a high school English teacher who covers American literature, I thought it was fascinating to glean insight about nineteenth century word usage. Bierce's explanation of what was believed to be "acceptable" English is entertaining as well as historical. Jan Freeman's light and witty explanations of his "peeves" offers the reader a look at how the English language is ever-changing and how the misuse of a word can change an entire meaning of a sentence. For example, he believed that the word "action" should not be interchangeable with the word "act." He believed the sentence, "In wrestling, a blow is reprehensible action," should read "In wrestling, a blow is a reprehensible act." Sound nit picky? Jan Freeman gives hundreds of examples of Bierce's "blacklisted" words in a humorous and light explanation that really gives language aficionados a terrific insight into the syntax of the nineteenth century and how some of our words and phrases came into use.

Ahmad Hossam says

Still fun despite its age.

The LibriVox recording is divided among six readers. The variety makes the book interesting; some narrate in an exasperated, cynical tone of the typical language enthusiast, reminiscent of Strunk and White. Others do so in an angry, berating parental voice - almost like George Carlin's language pieces.

Behrooz Parhami says

Writing is often pursued as a vehicle of creative expression for the author, whereas it is more a way of making your thoughts understandable to the reader. We read in the introduction to this gem of a book that good writing is "clear thinking made visible." In this sense, we should prefer words that have precise meanings and avoid words that can have different interpretations. According to Roman rhetorician Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, usually referred to simply as Quintilian, "The writer should so write that his[her] reader not only may, but must, understand."

Like a dictionary or glossary, Bierce's book is organized alphabetically, with almost all entries starting with "x for y," which means that linguistic offenders use x to mean y, followed by a terse justification, and whether the usage is awkward/misguided or a serious linguistic faux pas. This book has been very helpful to me in improving my writing.

I went through the entire book from A to W, but will keep a copy (actually, Gutenberg Project's link to the full text) handy for future perusal, as there is just too much info to remember from a single reading.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12474/...>

I end my review by presenting a few examples that I found most enlightening. I have included very little of the explanatory narratives for the entries.

Allow for Permit

Appropriated for Took

Because for For

Build for Make

Bogus for Counterfeit

Can for May

Commence for Begin

Critically for Seriously

Dirt for Earth, Soil, or Gravel (dirt means filth)

Distinctly for Distinctively

Each other for One another (when there are more than two persons)

Empty for Vacant (empty bottle, but vacant house)

Essential for Necessary

Experience for Suffer, or Undergo

Gratuitous for Unwarranted

Hereafter for Henceforth

I'm afraid for I fear (it will rain)

Insoluble for Unsolvable (problem)

Integrity for Honesty

Involve for Entail

Jeopardize for Imperil

Less for Fewer

Lunch for Luncheon

Minus for Lacking, or Without

Numerous for Many

Over for More than

Partially for Partly

Preventative for Preventive

Quit for Cease, or Stop (smoking)

Real for Really, or Very

Residence for Dwelling, or House

Roomer for Lodger (see Bedder and Mealer, if you can find them!)

Score for Win, Obtain, etc.

Squirt for Spurt

State for Say

Talented for Gifted

The (a little word that is terribly overworked)

Transpire for Occur

Unkempt for Disordered, Untidy, etc.

Verbal for Oral

Witness for See

Adam says

An amusing read catering to the linguistic prescriptivist hiding behind the friendly, beach-fogged descriptivist I pretend to be.

Nicholas Whyte says

<http://nwhyte.livejournal.com/2472874.html>

A style guide for American writers in 1909, some of which must have seemed absurdly pedantic at the time and much of which seems obsolete now (though in a few cases I can regret that the battle has been lost). Here are a few examples of usages to which Bierce objected:

Casualties for Losses in Battle. The essence of casualty is accident, absence of design. Death and wounds in battle are produced otherwise, are expectable and expected, and, by the enemy, intentional.

Conservative for Moderate. "A conservative estimate"; "a conservative forecast"; "a conservative statement," and so on. These and many other abuses of the word are of recent growth in the newspapers and "halls of legislation." Having been found to have several meanings, conservative seems to be thought to mean everything.

Demean for Debase or Degrade. "He demeaned himself by accepting charity." The word relates, not to meanness, but to demeanor, conduct, behavior. One may demean oneself with dignity and credit.

Endorse for Approve. To endorse is to write upon the back of, or to sign the promissory note of another. It is a commercial word, having insufficient dignity for literary use. You may endorse a check, but you approve a policy, or statement.

Expectorate for Spit. The former word is frequently used, even in laws and ordinances, as a euphemism for the latter. It not only means something entirely different, but to one with a Latin ear is far more offensive.

Forebears for Ancestors. The word is sometimes spelled forbears, a worse spelling than the other, but not much. If used at all it should be spelled forebeers, for it means those who have been before. A forebe-er is one who fore-was. Considered in any way, it is a senseless word.

Gubernatorial. Eschew it; it is not English, is needless and bombastic. Leave it to those who call a political office a "chair." "Gubernatorial chair" is good enough for them. So is hanging.

Imaginary Line. The adjective is needless. Geometrically, every line is imaginary; its graphic representation is a mark. True the text-books say, draw a line, but in a mathematical sense the line already exists; the drawing only makes its course visible.

Insignificant for Trivial, or Small. Insignificant means not signifying anything, and should be used only in contrast, expressed or implied, with something that is important for what it implies. The bear's tail may be

insignificant to a naturalist tracing the animal's descent from an earlier species, but to the rest of us, not concerned with the matter, it is merely small.

Last and Past. "Last week." "The past week." Neither is accurate: a week cannot be the last if another is already begun; and all weeks except this one are past. Here two wrongs seem to make a right: we can say the week last past. But will we? I trow not.

Literally for Figuratively. "The stream was literally alive with fish." "His eloquence literally swept the audience from its feet." It is bad enough to exaggerate, but to affirm the truth of the exaggeration is intolerable.

Moneyed for Wealthy. "The moneyed men of New York." One might as sensibly say, "The cattled men of Texas," or, "The lobstered men of the fish market."

Novel for Romance. In a novel there is at least an apparent attention to considerations of probability; it is a narrative of what might occur. Romance flies with a free wing and owns no allegiance to likelihood. Both are fiction, both works of imagination, but should not be confounded. They are as distinct as beast and bird.

Pants for Trousers. Abbreviated from pantaloons, which are no longer worn. Vulgar exceedingly.

Practically for Virtually. This error is very common. "It is practically conceded." "The decision was practically unanimous." "The panther and the cougar are practically the same animal." These and similar misapplications of the word are virtually without excuse.

Proven for Proved. Good Scotch, but bad English.

Responsible. "The bad weather is responsible for much sickness." "His intemperance was responsible for his crime." Responsibility is not an attribute of anything but human beings, and few of these can respond, in damages or otherwise. Responsible is nearly synonymous with accountable and answerable, which, also, are frequently misused.

Spend for Pass. "We shall spend the summer in Europe." Spend denotes a voluntary relinquishment, but time goes from us against our will.

To. As part of an infinitive it should not be separated from the other part by an adverb, as, "to hastily think," for hastily to think, or, to think hastily. Condemnation of the split infinitive is now pretty general, but it is only recently that any one seems to have thought of it. Our forefathers and we elder writers of this generation used it freely and without shame—perhaps because it had not a name, and our crime could not be pointed out without too much explanation.

United States as a Singular Noun. "The United States is for peace." The fact that we are in some ways one nation has nothing to do with it; it is enough to know that the word States is plural—if not, what is State? It would be pretty hard on a foreigner skilled in the English tongue if he could not venture to use our national name without having made a study of the history of our Constitution and political institutions. Grammar has not a speaking acquaintance with politics, and patriotic pride is not schoolmaster to syntax.

Entertaining even where one doesn't agree with him.
