The New Fowler's


If, like me, you are an editor who in your first editing job was taught to from Fowler and if, like me, you grew up (professionally speaking) relying on Fowler to tell you what was right and wrong with respect to English usage, you were probably apprehensive when you learned a couple of years ago that Fowler was being revised. Would the new be as useful as the old? Would it go the way of other style guides, along the road to permissiveness? Would it still have a sense of humor, a wink in the eye?

The results are in: The new book, Fowler, is just as useful as the old (Fowler-1 and Fowler-2), it is more permissive, and, sad to say, it is boring—little sense of humor, no wink.

R W. Burchfield, the editor of Fowler-3, came to the task of revising Fowler with worthy credentials, most important among them having been chief editor of the Oxford English dictionaries from 1971 to 1984 and editor-in-chief of the 4-volume supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) from 1972 to 1986. Surely such an authority would do credit to a revision of a book so important to professional word people? Indeed he has. To compare old and new, I selected a handful of the usage problems that plague (or at least annoy) manuscript editors and their clients and traced the treatment of them in Fowler-1, -2, and -3 (F-1, F-2, and F-3) and in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage (MWDEU), a book that I have come to consider the best, easiest-to-read, and most-comprehensive all-purpose American usage guide.

Between, Among

F-1: Does not treat the subject.
F-2: Notes the "superstition" that "between" may be used only of the relationship between two things and that "among" is required if there are more than two and quotes the OED. "In all senses 'between' has been, from its earliest appearance, extended to more than two... It is still the only word available to express the relation of a thing to many surrounding things severally and individually[,] 'among' express[ing] a relation to them collectively and vaguely."
F-3: Agrees with F-2, repeats most of the OED quotation, and gives many examples of varied current uses of "between".

MWDEU: Agrees with F-2, repeats the OED quotation, gives a detailed history of the controversy, presents numerous examples of usage, and, on the grounds that native speakers of English will rarely make a mistake in the choice of one word or the other, suggests that writers depend on their instincts in choosing.

Compare To, With

F-1: States succinctly that "compare" in the sense "suggest or state a similarity" is regularly followed by "to", not "with", and in the sense "examine or set forth the details of a supposed similarity or estimate its degree" is regularly followed by "with", not "to", and adds that sometimes either sense is applicable.
F-2: As in F-1.
F-3: Repeats and explains the first part of the F-1 advice but then sets forth obscurely how in other cases "to" and "with" are both correct.

MWDEU: On the basis of the Merriam-Webster files and in particular some 3 dozen citations, states that "compare" used as an active verb in F-1's first sense is usually followed by "to", and as an active verb in F-1's second sense is followed by "to", but not as regularly. For the use of the past participle (as in "Compared with [or to] him, I am a..."), notes that "to" and "with" are both applicable and approvingly quotes James J. Kilpatrick: "I will never in my life comprehend the distinction between compared to and compared with."

Different From, Than, To

F-1: States that of the 3 choices, "from" is fine (and usual) and nothing is wrong with "to", objections to which are "mere pedantries"; does not mention "than".
F-2: As in F-1, but states that "than" is "sometimes preferred by good writers to the cumbersome 'different from that which'."
F-3: States that all 3 are OK and that "than" is widespread in the United States but not part of "regular language" in Britain. (But acknowledges a "contrary view" that "different to" and "different than" can be "especially valuable").

MWDEU: In 1 1/2 big pages, shows that "from" is most common and standard in Britain and the United States, "than" is standard in both but more frequent in the United States, and "to" is standard in Britain but rare in the United States; gives history of all 3 with examples and history of the controversy itself. Summary: All 3 have been in standard use since the 16th and 17th centuries and continue so.

Due To, Owing To

F-1: Claims that "due to" is often used by the illiterate as though it had passed, like "owing to", " into a mere compound proposition". "Due . . . must like ordinary participles & adjectives be attached to a noun."
F-2: Uses evidence that arose after F-1 to show that the offending use of "due to" is very common and to justify a claim that to resist it is to fight a losing battle.
F-3: Adds that by the 21st century the battle will be not only lost, but forgotten.

MWDEU: Presents the history of the controversy in detail and concludes, "due to" is as impeccable grammatically as 'owing to'. . . . There never has been a grammatical ground for objection . . . There is no solid reason to avoid using 'due to'."

Respectively, Respectively

F-1: In 1 1/2 pages, explains 6 categories of use: The words "give information needed by sensible readers", "give information that may be needed by fools", "say again what is said elsewhere", "say nothing intelligible", "are used wrongly for some other word", and "give a positively wrong sense". Notes that "delight in these words is a wide-spread but depraved taste."
F-2: Much the same as F-1, but with several different examples and minor editing.

F-3: In one paragraph says when "respectively" is "correctly used" and gives some examples, and in one paragraph quotes F-1's general comments and says that they might no longer be relevant: "I have found no evidence of such usages of 'respectively' in the 1990s."

MWDEU: Briefly tells how to use and how not to use the words and gives a few examples, mainly of incorrect use.

Serial Comma

F-1: Advocates consistent use of serial comma to avoid ambiguity (but also advocates, in most cases, use of a comma after the last item in a series of 3 or more).

F-2: States that it is "more usual" not to use the serial comma and that whereas the other commas in a series take the place of "and", the serial comma is unnecessary because "and" is already present. However, recommends using serial comma to avoid ambiguity.

F-3: Refers to serial comma as "Oxford comma" and advocates its consistent use, but acknowledges that many publishers "unwisely" use it only when it is needed to avoid ambiguity.

MWDEU: Dismisses the subject: "In spite of all the discussion, practice boils down to the writer's personal preference, or sometimes a house or organizational style. Additional comment is not needed."

Since, Because

F-1, F-2, F-3: Do not treat the subject.

MWDEU: Traces the use of "since" to mean "because" back at least to Shakespeare, notes that it is commonly so used (and commonly criticized for such use), and cautions against such use when the temporal and causal senses would both have meaning in the context.

Split Infinitives

F-1: In one of its best-known passages, divides "the English-speaking world . . . into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know & condemn; (4) those who know & approve; & (5) those who know & distinguish" and begins a 3-page discussion with "1. Those who neither know nor care are the vast majority, & are a happy folk, to be envied by most of the minority classes". Concludes the discussion by stating that split infinitives are not in themselves desirable but are sometimes better than the results of attempts to rewrite so as to avoid them.

F-2: As in F-1.

F-3: Begins with a simple definition (which, strangely, F-1 and F-2 lack) and then proceeds to set out the history of the split infinitive in the English language beginning in the 13th century and to describe the present state of its use and attitudes toward it. Concludes by suggesting that splitting an infinitive with a simple adverb is harmless but advising that split infinitives be avoided unless it is inconvenient to avoid them.

MWDEU: Recapitulates the definition (with the added twist that, strictly speaking, English has no split infinitive—for instance, in "to move", "move" itself is the infinitive and cannot readily be split) and the history of the usage and the controversy about it. Points out the ambivalence of many of the commentators, who seem to say that there is nothing wrong with split infinitives, but that we should avoid them if we can, but that we are safe in using them if we think we must. Concludes by noting that split infinitives, perhaps ironically, seem to be used much more in the speech of the better educated than in that of the less educated.

Which, That

F-1: Opens one of its longest articles with "What grammarians say should be has perhaps less influence on what shall be than even the more modest of them realize; usage evolves itself little disturbed by their likes & dislikes." Later suggests that "if writers would agree to regard that as the defining relative pronoun, & which as the non-defining, there would be much gain in lucidity & in ease. Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers."

F-2: Generally as in F-1 but reduced.

F-3: In a much-reduced discussion, notes that "that" and "which" are used interchangeably in some constructions and gives no advice on choosing one or the other for use in restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses.

MWDEU: Traces "that" and "which" back to Middle English, explains the controversy, shows that even the usage writers who insist on a distinction use "which" to introduce restrictive clauses, and concludes with "at the end of the 20th century, the usage of 'which' and 'that'—at least in prose—has pretty much settled down. You can use either 'which' or 'that' to introduce a restrictive clause—the grounds for your choice should be stylistic—and 'which' to introduce a nonrestrictive clause."

While, Although

F-1: Includes the meaning "although" among the various meanings of "while" and does not condemn it.

F-2: In a slightly shorter essay, refers to "although" as a "proper" meaning of "while".

F-3: States that "while" has been used predominantly in a temporal sense since Old English times and to mean "although" at least since the 16th century. The various usages of "while" "pose no threat to one another and are all part of the normal apparatus of the language."

MWDEU: States that senses of "while" unrelated to time are established and standard. They are also extremely common." Adds that ambiguity in such uses should of course be repaired but is "not an inherent problem.

What conclusion can be drawn from all that? If it makes you feel good to have a new Fowler that is as comprehensive and as literate as the old, Fowler-3 will make you feel good. (Fowler-2 was actually a rather modest revision of Fowler-1.) Burchfield is apparently much better versed in linguistics than was Henry Fowler, so his advice is better grounded, less idiosyncratic, and more per-
missive, Fowler-3 has gotten rid of the sometimes-baffling article titles of Fowler-1 and retained and added to the already-large number of short, didactic entries about specific points of usage; in these 2 senses as well, it is not only an updating of, but an improvement on, the original. As has been pointed out by others, Burchfield seems to find matters of so-called political correctness much less important than North Americans commonly do—but no one is perfect. He certainly knows what he is talking about when it comes to matters of everyday and literary usage and usually states his opinions clearly. It would be unfair to expect more of him, even if he is tampering with the work of the sainted Fowler.

But next to Fowler-1, Fowler-3 is boring and dry. And—too bad—that twinkle is gone.

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SOLUTION CORNER

Lead-Author Responsibility

Question
As editor of a scientific journal, you publish abstracts of papers to be presented at the annual meeting of the sponsoring society. Before publication of an abstract, you receive a letter from an individual who claims exclusion from authorship on a submitted abstract and requests that the abstract (if accepted by the program committee) not be published. You learn from the claimant that the disagreement is related to a disputed order of authorship, which has led the lead author to leave off the name of the claimant from the submission. Does the program committee or journal editor have an obligation to withhold publication of the abstract pending resolution of the authorship question? Should the lead author be contacted for clarification? If the lead author confirms the above scenario, is there an ethical responsibility for the lead author to include the claimant as an author? (Summarized from CBE Views 1997;20(3):106)

Solutions
From the standpoint of a publisher who represents ownership of several biomedical research journals, I believe that in a case of authorship dispute, the program committee or journal editor has the obligation to withhold publication of an accepted abstract pending resolution of the authorship question. The first step in resolution of the dispute would be to query the lead or corresponding author regarding the authorship and to ask for clarification. Pending adequate clarification, all authors should be requested to sign a statement that they agree to the authorship and title as it stands. Should the authorship remain unresolved in this situation, the institution where the work was performed should be contacted to investigate the matter to satisfactory resolution. Should this fail, it is then the institution's responsibility to contact the government's Office of Research Integrity to investigate the matter.

It is the responsibility of the program committee or editor to refuse publication of the abstract until the authorship issue is resolved. If the excluded author were to be found unjustly omitted from the abstract, it is, of course, the ethical responsibility and obligation of the senior author to include the author on the abstract.

In the case of a full article, such problems might be avoided by the practice of requiring all authors to sign an agreement indicating their participation (and the extent of their participation) in the preparation of an article, however unpleasant and unwieldy this process might be. All authors should be made aware of a work in progress, and no "author" who did not participate in its preparation should be included as an author. If all authors were involved in preparation of a given article, it should not be difficult to collect their signatures indicating that 1) they agree with the content and authorship of the article; 2) the article is not under consideration for publication elsewhere; 3) the article or information has not been published previously and that the information contained therein is original; 4) and they assign copyright to the copyright holder of the journal (except in the case of government employees).

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