



Reference Books for the Writer and Editor

By John E. McIntyre

For the professional writer and editor, a set basic reference books on the language is as indispensable as the toolbox to the carpenter or the compass to a mariner. Only a fool imagines that the English language can be safely navigated without assistance. What follows is a set of brief comments on some books worth keeping near at hand.

DICTIONARIES

The first is a reliable dictionary. Both the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and Webster's New World College Dictionary are adequate desk dictionaries. The latter has the advantage of being the basis for Associated Press style and therefore consistent with any publication that makes use of the AP Stylebook.

But desk dictionaries are limited. When they are silent on an issue, the latest edition of the American Heritage Dictionary, a handsome and comprehensive volume, is useful to consult. It also gives more advice on usage than other dictionaries commonly do. The Random House Unabridged Dictionary is also useful.

GRAMMAR AND USAGE

THE TOP THREE

For the American writer and editor, the Merriam Webster Dictionary of English Usage is perhaps the single most useful manual of usage. It is comprehensive, evenhanded, sensible. It may tell you more than you care to know about some subjects, but it is relatively free of highly technical language. And it's big.

Bryan A. Garner's Dictionary of Modern American Usage and the paperback abridgement, The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style, use even less technical language. Both are fresh and approachable. Garner's entry on the top superstitions in English usage (that you can't split an infinitive, that you can't put an adverb between and auxiliary and the main verb, that you can't end a sentence with a preposition, and more) is refreshing and to the point.

R.W. Burchfield, author of the New Fowler's Modern English Usage, was formerly editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, and it shows. He has a wealth of example from British and American usage and beyond, and he has a lexicographer's sense of the directions in which words move over time. And he has had the courage to attempt to update the venerated work of H.W. Fowler (about whom he makes some dismissive remarks in his introduction). It is an admirable and intelligent effort in many respects, and the task needed doing. The American

reader may find the automatic precedence given to British usage a little off-putting.

Be cautious. All three of these books give informed advice — but they disagree with one another. You will get the greatest benefit if you consult all three on any given point and exercise your own judgment.

OTHERS WORTH A LOOK

John Bremner's Words on Words: The late John Bremner talked about language with the voice of a prophet; writing with precision was the Lord's work. His verve, his wit and his scorn for the shoddy are on display in his book. It is not as comprehensive as the Big Three above, and there have been enough changes in the language over the past 20 years — new irritating vogue usages, for example — that it is not as fully effective as it once was.

Bill Walsh's Lapsing into a Comma: A Curmudgeon's Guide to the Many Things That Can Go Wrong in Print — and How to Avoid Them: Here is an up-to-date guide for the perplexed. His advice is well worth heeding on the language of the Internet as well as on the traditional pitfalls. His entry on quotes establishes quite clearly how a responsible writer and editor ought to deal with the words within quotation marks, and it would be reckless to disregard him.

H.W. Fowler's Modern English Usage: What other manual of English usage was ever read for amusement? This is the book that Harold Ross and generations of New Yorker writers treated as sacred scripture. Yes, it is determinedly British and decades out of date. Yes, its organization is whimsical, even quirky. Yes, some of Fowler's views are idiosyncratic. Yes, you ought to own and read it.

Allan M. Siegal and William G. Connolly's **New York Times Manual of Style and Usage:** If the AP Stylebook is the rock on which your house style is built, you will have to be cautious with the conventions in this book. But it has entries not duplicated in AP, and its advice on editorial policy is sober and wise. It is an urbane and literate book, exemplifying the standards it upholds.

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