



Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English

Patricia T. O'Conner
Riverhead Books, 1996
227 pages
\$11

By Deirdre Goebel Edgar

In this amusingly named book, whose title argues that Ophelia of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" perhaps should have uttered something other than "Woe is me," Patricia T. O'Conner addresses the finer points of our complex language in a friendly and conversational writing style.

Here you will find answers to questions of usage, word choice and punctuation in chapters with names such as Yours Truly, Comma Sutra, and They Beg to Disagree, and section headings including The Which Trials, Where There's a Will There's a Would, and Keeping Up with the Joneses.

Examples are used in sentences related to popular culture: The Ricardos and the Mertzes had dinner with the Simpsons and the Flanderses. And, Liz gained 20 pounds for "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

In addition to giving examples of proper usage, O'Conner gives the reasons behind them – a handy feature for slots to be able to answer a copy editor's question with something other than "because that sounds right."

Her descriptions sometimes were better than those in my local stylebook, such as that regarding the use of "none." The Los Angeles Times stylebook's entry reads: It can take plural verbs when it modifies a plural noun: None of the seats were in their right places. This in no way prohibits its use as a singular: None of the seats was in its right place. So this tells me I'm allowed to use either or a plural or singular verb. But O'Conner tells me why I might want to: If it

suggests "none of them," it's plural: None of the fans are fighting. If it means "none of it," it's singular: None of the bout was seen in Pittsburgh.

As I browsed through the book at work, I found myself reading aloud passages to our copy desk chief, with both of us exclaiming a comprehending "Ohhhh!"

O'Conner, a former editor at The New York Times Book Review, advocates some usage that differs from AP style, for instance, opining that plurals of abbreviations or numbers all should take an apostrophe: CPA's have been advising M.D.'s since the 1980's.

The book also has some very basic information, which most copy editors will already know, such as the differences between its and it's and among their, they're and there. And it contains some frustratingly obvious advice, such as this in a section on plurals of words such as potato: If you're unsure about the plural of an o word, look it up in the dictionary.

Included are several lists: common contractions, clichés to avoid and 13 tips for writing more clearly.

[Deirdre Goebel Edgar](#) is an assistant copy chief on the Los Angeles Times' metro desk.