

Prescriptivism Assignment

English 125, Rafe Kinsey

Monday, October 28, 2013

Take a look at a specific construction in the English language that has been a source of prescriptive controversy and write about it. You should explain what the construction/rule is; discuss what the prescriptive controversy is; and take and argue in favor of a specific stance about the prescriptive rule, as it applies to serious writing. You should imagine your audience as the well-educated reading public. In particular, you *shouldn't* assume that your audience has any familiarity with either linguistics or discussions about prescriptivism, so you'll have to make sure to explain your example clearly and provide any relevant background about prescriptivism.

You're welcome to choose your own example (check with me first!), or you may choose from one of these topics below¹:

- Sentence fragments
- Dangling modifiers
- Singular *they*
- Split infinitives
- The word *hopefully*
- The word *literally*
- *Who* versus *whom*
- Oxford commas
- *like* versus *as*
- Use of the subjunctive
- *less* versus *fewer*
- The use of double negatives
- The use of contractions
- *farther* versus *further*
- Parallelism in series
- Fused participles
- *since* versus *because*
- Subject-verb agreement (e.g., should *none* be singular)

¹ Note that this just lists topics—you'll have to research to find a specific prescriptive *assertion*. (For example, a specific assertion for the topic "sentence fragments" would be that you shouldn't use sentence fragments in writing.)

- Prepositions at the end of sentences
- How to write the possessive of words like *Charles*
- Passive voice
- Comma splices
- Starting a sentence with *however*
- Conjunctions at the beginning of sentences

First, you should research and read a bit about several different controversies. As homework for class on Wednesday, October 30, you should choose *three* of these topics, and do a little bit of research to find out what the construction is and what the controversy is about each topic.² Then you should write a paragraph about each topic, which we'll discuss in class on Wednesday. For these paragraphs, focus on *clear explanation*, both of the linguistic construction and the controversy. You shouldn't take a stand or make an argument about these constructions in your paragraphs—they are just expository—but you should start thinking about what argument you might make, and how.

Then, you'll choose one of these constructions to write your paper about. By Friday, November 1, at 5pm, you should email me with your selection.

At this point, you'll want to do more research about your specific construction. The Merriam-Webster usage handbook (two copies are on reserve) and other handbooks will probably be good sources, and you might also find useful material online. As you do research, you might find that you have two slightly different tasks: one is to research the *controversy*, and a second is to research the construction itself. It's important to think about the reliability of sources for both research tasks.³

As with all of your writing, it will make sense for you to look at *models* of writing that do similar things. We've already read several articles in class that discuss prescriptive issues, explaining certain constructions and taking a stand on them, as you will have to do. You might observe, for example, how Anne Curzan and Geoffrey Pullum, both trained in linguistics, appeal to historical context and their scientific authority as linguists. Also take a look at some of the articles in the *Merriam-Webster Usage Handbook*, as well as other writing and usage handbooks, such as those you discovered during your library visit.⁴ What constructions do they discuss, and what are their positions? How do they explain the construction? How do they make their arguments?⁵

² Please include a list of any sources you consulted—URLs and/or names of books are fine for now.

³ Some things to think about if you're relying on online sources: Is it the website of a respectable publication? What about a well-regarded blog like *Language Log*, written by academic linguists? Sure; those are probably reliable. Some random person's blog? Well, there you'll have to be careful. Maybe you see someone making a really compelling argument; you should certainly credit them for that, but you don't necessarily want to rely on their authority. (Think about the roles of *ethos* and *logos* here.)

⁴ Another great way of finding sources is to see what's cited in sources you have access to. For example, the *Merriam-Webster Usage Handbook* will reference various experts' books. Look those books up! As always, you can consult a librarian for help and advice!

⁵ An especially important thing to think about is to what extent the author is relying on *ethos* in their argument. Would you, as a student at UM, have as much authority? How could you mitigate this lack of authority?

There are many stances you could argue for. You might decide that this construction should never, ever be allowed. You might decide that there's absolutely nothing wrong with the construction, and people shouldn't worry at all about whether they use it. Or you might take one of the wide range of positions in between.⁶ For example, you might decide that there are two different situations where the construction occurs, and that it's acceptable only in one situation.

How you argue for your point will depend on the conclusion you've made. Is your belief based on a general philosophy about prescriptivism? Or is there something particular about this specific construction? Remember, you're both *arguing* for your position but also *explaining* ideas about linguistics and/or prescriptivism that are new to your audience.

As you write, you'll want to think about the rhetorical approach you're using. What position are you coming from? How do you want to make your argument? Take a look at some of the examples I've listed. Pullum has a pretty combative tone. Curzan and others are more diplomatic. Which approach do you want to take? Think consciously about the effect your tone will have.

A note: You *shouldn't* try to argue a certain position just because you think I might agree with it. I'll be grading you on the quality of your writing and of your argument. Is what you're saying clear? Have you made a strong argument for your case? Have you shown nuance and sophistication in your argument? (For example, have you acknowledged limitations in your discussion?⁷) Is your argument interesting or important?⁸

Self-Reflection: After your essay, write a self-reflective paragraph or two. Describe what sort of a stance you've taken, how you made your argument, what rhetorical approaches you used. I'd also encourage you to write about how you went about this project. What research did you do? Did you outline or freewrite before you started? What conscious or unconscious decisions did you make while writing? How much time did you spend revising?

Sources and Acknowledgments: After your essay, please include a paragraph where you discuss all sources you used, as well as any people you discussed your paper with. (You should certainly be doing both!) As with previous assignments, please provide details. Thus, instead of saying, "I looked at *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*," you should instead say something like, "To learn more about the historical context of the construction, and to see what some other authorities said, I consulted *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*." If you are quoting from, citing, or otherwise borrowing ideas from another source, you should *also* incorporate this into the text. Rather than use formal bibliographical references, you

⁶ Remember, it's important in academic writing to see the world in terms of a full spectrum of greys, not just as black and white, right and wrong. A nuanced view is fine. (But this is not to say that you can't support a view that's more black or white than grey!)

⁷ Think about when this is and isn't effective. Does Pullum acknowledge limitations to his approach? Of course, Pullum is coming from a position of authority, and his article has the air of a polemic. (*A polemic* is "a strong verbal or written attack on someone or something." It comes from the Greek word *polemos*, "war.")

⁸ If you write a paper justifying proper spelling, I'll probably agree with you, but will your paper be interesting? Pretty much everyone agrees that spelling is important. It's certainly *possible* to write an interesting paper making this point, but it's not easy. Conversely, if you try to write a paper making an audacious claim, you're more likely to be saying something interesting, but it will be harder to make a compelling argument. There's no easy route!

should do this as it's done in *Slate* (see Manjoo's article) or the *New Republic* (see McWhorter's article), by simply citing the author and possibly the title and/or source. Then you can provide fuller bibliographic details (e.g., book details or a URL) in the *Sources* section, as necessary.

Please do address the role peer-reviewing played either in the sources section or in your self-reflection. As always, it's up to you to make decisions about your peer's suggestions; you don't have to follow their advice, but you should certainly think about it!⁹

⁹ Sometimes your peer might correctly diagnose a problem—for example, an awkward phrasing—but then prescribe the wrong solution. What they have done is still very useful!

Requirements

Three Informal Paragraphs

Bring these to class on Wednesday, October 30, and *also* email me a copy. Just because they are informal doesn't mean they shouldn't be proofread. Please also have thought a bit about what sorts of arguments you might make about each construction.

Topic Selection

Email me by Friday, November 1, at 5pm.

Polished Rough Draft

Your polished rough draft is due Wednesday, November 6, in class. Please bring *two printed copies* of your draft. Please also *email me* a copy of your draft by class.

Peer Review Comments

Your peer review comments are due emailed to your partner by Friday, November 9, at 5pm. You should cc me on that email.

Final Draft

The final draft is due by Tuesday, November 12, at 5pm. You should both (a) email me a copy in pdf form; and (b) submit a hard copy in my office mailbox.

Instructions for Your Final Draft

Your assignment should be typed, in 12-point font and *single-spaced*. Your main paper should be approximately 1.5-4 pages.¹⁰ After your main paper, you should include the reflective paragraph(s) and an acknowledgments/sources paragraph.

¹⁰ This is approximately the length of many of the model articles we've read. As with most of our assignments, what matters is not the precise length; you should write an amount that appropriately covers the prompt, within these guidelines.