

## Dreyer's English: An utterly correct guide to clarity and style (a review)

Original work by Benjamin Dreyer published by Century Books 2019

Reviewed by Barry Tomalin

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Oh no, not another dictionary! Especially, not another English dictionary! But no, this one is different. First, its author is Benjamin Dreyer, Vice President, Executive Managing Editor and Chief Copy Editor of *Random House Publishing* in the USA. Secondly, it is not a dictionary. It is a wise and witty commentary on English usage, covering vocabulary, grammar and punctuation. Its style is personal. It is as if Dreyer is talking directly to the reader and it is frequently very amusing.

It is extremely useful for editors, copywriters, teachers of English and for anyone writing in English, indeed for anyone writing emails, blogs, books articles or exercises for students.

*Dreyer's English* is divided into two parts. Part 1, *The Stuff in the Front*, is devoted to prose writing, rules, punctuation, how to write numbers and advice on grammar and usage. Part 2, *The Stuff in*

*the Back*, deals with easily misspelled words, use of proper nouns, words easily confused and 'trimmables', things that you can delete to make your writing clearer.

Dreyer begins with a challenge. In a chapter entitled *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying up (Your Prose)*, a nod towards Marie Kondo's highly successful book and TV series on *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying*, Dreyer suggests we go for a week without writing these words: *very, rather, really, quite* and *in fact*. 'If you can last a week,' he writes, 'you will be a considerably better writer than when you started'. Simplicity and clarity are Dreyer's watchwords.

Dreyer starts with an examination and 'rules and non-rules' in grammar and sentence structure. Many of us were taught at school never to begin a sentence with *And* or *But*, but many authors use

them as sentence starters to create a stronger effect. Dreyer's advice? If you begin a sentence with *And* or *But*, think first. What are you trying to achieve? If it's simply a pause, don't start a new sentence with them.

What about another rule we were taught at school? Never end a sentence with a preposition. The famous, but apparently never written or said, example is Winston Churchill's, '*Up with this I will never put*', as opposed to '*this is not something I will ever put up with*'. Dreyer's view? Of course, you can end a sentence with a preposition unless you can find a better word to end it with.

Another traditional grammar shibboleth is the 'split infinitive', most famously abused in the TV series *Star Trek* in '*To boldly go where no man has gone before*'. Grammatical traditionalists might argue it should say '*to go boldly...*', but think how much weaker that sounds than, '*to boldly go ...*' which has become a catchphrase.

Discussing punctuation, Dreyer is helpful on the role of full stops in abbreviations. Do we write U.S. or US to mean United States of America? U.N. or UN to abbreviate the United Nations or Ph.D (US) or PhD (UK) to describe an academic Doctorate in Philosophy? Once again, he accepts that British English and American English do things differently in many ways and we just have to accept it.

Another problem is the series comma, often known as the Oxford comma, used to punctuate lists of items. American English tends to insert a comma before the final 'and' as in *apples, pears, pomegranates, and potatoes*. British English tends to leave it out and write simply '*... pomegranates and potatoes*'. By and large, Dreyer would advise using commas unless it is obviously not necessary and gives a number of examples, including the famous book on correct punctuation by Lynne Truss entitled *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* rather than *Eats Shoots and Leaves* (without a comma) to describe a non-carnivorous animal. The title was intentional, by the way, in order to make the point. *Eats, shoots and leaves* suggests someone who has a meal, shoots someone or something and then goes out. *Eats shoots and leaves* suggests an animal who enjoys a diet of shoots of growing plants and leaves off trees and bushes.

Dreyer has valuable advice on the use of colons, semicolons, brackets, quotation marks and when to use dashes and hyphens. He also deals with numbers and insists on the importance of accuracy. He then points out that in his chapter on punctuation, entitled *Sixty-Six Assorted Things to Do and not to Do with Punctuation*, he intentionally left out number 38. Did I notice? I'm not telling, but you can probably guess.

For language teachers Dreyer is particularly interesting on the use of other varieties of English

beyond the US and UK varieties. First, he explores foreign loanwords that have become part of the English language, such as *karaoke*, *mea culpa*, *schadenfreude* and *bête noire* (he is particularly insistent on preserving the diacritical marks on loanwords from foreign languages). He notes that Indian English, spoken by 125 million people on the sub-continent, has several differences from UK and US varieties, many based on traditional culture. The use of, 'May I know your good name?', for example, is based on the Bengali difference between your official name (good name) and a familiar name used perhaps by your family. In the same way, Indian traditional politeness demands calling people *Auntie* or *Uncle* rather than using their names as a form of politeness. It may be considered rude to address older people by their name directly. Since much of India is vegetarian, you may see menus listing meat dishes as 'non-veg'. In other words, vegetarian cooking is the norm. Meat is the exception. One of my favourite Indian English words is *prepone*, the opposite of *postpone*. But it did not originate in India. *Prepone* was first used in the New York Times in 1913 by a certain J. J. D. Trenor.

On the back cover of the UK edition of *Dreyer's English* is a blurb (a sentence publicising the book) which goes like this: 'Written by Benjamin Dreyer, one of Twitter's chief language gurus, your English will never be the same again'. The sentence is

followed by an asterisk, which, when you consult it at the bottom of the cover reads, 'See page 94 for what's wrong with this sentence'. So, what's wrong? Page 94 explains. The problem is the use of a 'dangling participle', that long introduction that precedes the important message that 'your English will never be the same again'. The 'dangler', as Dreyer calls it, takes the essential message out of context and you wonder what it is doing there. Avoid danglers? No. They are often useful as an introduction or contextualisation of the main message of your sentence. However (Dreyer doesn't like this use of *However*, but never mind), if you do use them, make sure they are not confusing. Dreyer quotes Groucho Marx, the famous American comedian who once said, 'One morning I shot an elephant in my pyjamas. How he got into my pyjamas, I'll never know'.

For teachers and advanced students alike, Dreyer's list of words easily misspelt and words frequently confused is very valuable. He lists a hundred and ten commonly misspelt words and there are a hundred and fifty, what Dreyer calls, 'confusables', words frequently confused.

He also adds a list of proper nouns which are commonly misspelt (or misspelled in American English). *Atilla the Hun* should be *Attila the Hun*. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the heroine is *Elizabeth Bennet* (one -t), not *Elizabeth Bennett*, and the author is *Jane Austen*, not *Austin*. Nikita

Khrushchev makes it into the list. Dreyer comments, *'You'd think that people would look up a tricky name like Khrushchev. You'd be wrong'*.

Dreyer's chapter on *Peeves and Crotchets* aroused my curiosity. What are they when they're at home? Well, a *crotchet* is an unfounded belief or notion, and a *crotchety person* is someone who appears always bad-tempered and cross. Don't, says Dreyer, confuse it with *crochet*, a type of knitting technique using a small hook. A *peeve* is another word to describe something that annoys you. Language professionals are often particularly strong on pet peeves and crotchets. Until I read Irina Lebedeva's article about the double modal 'might could' in this issue, I was convinced that using 'might could' together in a sentence was the height of uneducated English usage. Not so,

apparently. And what about the use of the verb *ask* as a noun in *'That's a big ask'*? How would you use *data* in the singular? Is it *a piece of data* or *a datum*? Dreyer's opinion? *'The data supports the consensus that data is popularly used as a singular noun. Move on already'*, he says.

These are just some of the hundreds of examples of usage and misuse that Dreyer discusses. It's a dense book and one to dip into as reference chapter by chapter as well as to read for the sheer pleasure of it. *Dreyer's English* concludes with a recognition that a book is never finished. What you do is stop writing. As he writes at the end, *'There is no last word, only the next word'*.

Definitely a book I will want to keep by my desk and use for constant reference and warning.