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LAJM Bibliography: Dictionaries on Usage and Style

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Bernstein, Theodore M. **The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage**. New York: Atheneum, 1965.

Proclaiming himself as a “self-appointed oracle,” Bernstein believes that we should make some struggles for our language so that we may write carefully and correctly. Known as the past authority of the written word for the **New York Times**, he concludes that language has changed but only slightly, arguing that the problem to write clearly is the failure to understand the difference between speaking and writing. The **Careful Writer**, then, makes the distinction between spoken and written word choices. However, in his **Dos, Dont’s and Maybes of English Usage** (1977), he is more open to language change and sees a place for informal expressions in written prose. Although his texts are a must for the careful writer, his judgements should be closely scrutinized.

Bryant, Margaret, M., Ed. **Current American Usage**. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1962.

More scholarly than others, this text is largely based on the findings of the National Council of Teachers of English’s Committee on Current English Usage, begun in 1951 to study controversial points in usage for both teachers and the general public. Avoiding the dictionary labels of “standard” and “nonstandard,” Bryant describes how Americans at all levels of education actually do speak and write but with clear distinctions among the cultivated, less cultivated, and uneducated users of language. Her advice for language etiquette, however, is that it’s best to follow the style of the admired user of language. A worthwhile text for English and Language Arts teachers interested in NCTE’s position on usage during the 50’s.

Copperud, Roy H. **American Usage: The Consensus**. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970.

For the writer who wishes to save money and time consulting several texts on usage and style, here is a text that combines disputed points of correct usage from: **The Careful Writer, Current American Usage, A Dictionary of Usage and Style, A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage, The ABC of Style, Modern American Usage**, and **A Dictionary of Modern English Usage**. Copperud, however, leaves it up to readers to make their own judgements as to the appropriate or inappropriate choice of usage.

Copperud, Roy H. **A Dictionary of Usage and Style**. New York: Hawthorne, 1964.

As a journalist and editor, Copperud states that his views tend to be the middle of the road: “Usage is a matter of taste...one sophisticated enough to consult [a usage text] should be ready to reject it if he is not convinced of it’s validity.” Stressing that writing has become simpler and more informal, he offers the reader information on which to base an intelligent decision. Appealing to both the writer and editor, he argues that a new usage is a matter of opinion; and cautions that “if a sentence doesn’t sound right it isn’t any good, whether the infinitive is split, rewoven, braided, or sawed in half.” This text has since been revised.

Evans, Bergen and Cornelia. **A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage**. New York: Random House, 1957.

In their preface the authors argue that since language changes that “no one can say how a word ought to be used,” that the best one can do is show how it is being used—this is the purpose of grammatical study. Although they have a preference for literary form over the technical one found in journals, they attempt to show what is accepted as good English. Finding that there is more than one accepted way of using a standard written or spoken English, they make distinctions between informal and formal usage. Because they reserve judgement about the use of words in various dialects, their text is considered to contain liberal views on usage. In spite of the label, this text is held in high regard by both traditionalists and liberationists.

Follett, Wilson W. **Modern American Usage**. Ed. and completed by Jacques Barzun. New York: Hill and Wang, 1966.

This text is probably the one most used by educators, writers, and editors; it is to Americans what Fowler's text on modern English usage is to the British—conservative and pedantic. Realizing that there were a number of differences between modern American and English usage, Follett intended his text to be solely for the American writer and reader. Although it is rich in present day word usage, the explanations are long and sometimes complex, leaving one with the impression that it is a proclamation for an "American Academy on Correct Usage."

Fowler, Henry W. **A Dictionary of Modern English Usage**. 1926; 2nd Ed. Rev. by Sir Ernest Gowers. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965.

Fowler's first text on usage was called **The King's English**, a description that justly applies here; his works have influenced both American and British authors of dictionaries on usage. While most authors respect Fowler's views on language usage, they are critical of his writing style, finding him difficult to read. Although Gower's revision includes Americanisms (Fowler had a strong dislike of Americanisms.), the revised text maintains the flavor of the original—traditional and judgemental, mostly written for the British.

Morris, William and Mary. **Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage**. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

As the editor of the **American Heritage Dictionary**, Morris had a usage panel of one hundred experts; for Harper's Dictionary he has a panel of 136 experts (editors, educators, writers, journalists, linguists). Unlike AHD, though, Harper's includes comments by various members. The panel members mostly respond to controversial issues of usage, and a percentage is given for the preferred usage. For example, **76%** of the panelists disapprove of the word **enthuse**. What does this mean for teachers of language or for practicing writers? Is it acceptable to use the word **enthuse 24%** of the time?

Nicholson, Margret. **A Dictionary of American-English Usage: Based on Fowler's Modern English Usage**. New York: Signet, 1957.

Perhaps **reprint** is a better word than **based** on Fowler's text; many of Nicholson's explanations are taken word for word from Fowler's text. Although she includes American variations for word usage, her text is a condensed version of Fowler's.

Phythian, B.A., Ed. **A Concise Dictionary of Correct English**. Totowa, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979.

This text is based solely on other British dictionaries of usage: **The Concise Oxford Dictionary**, **The Complete Plain Words**, **Modern English Usage**, and **Usage and Abusage**.