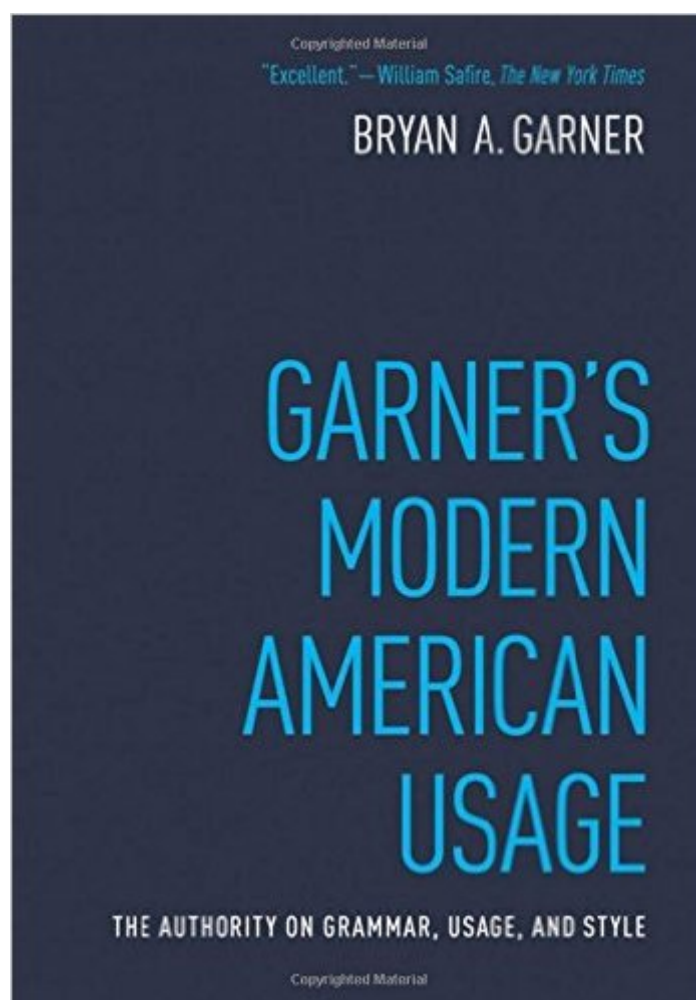


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Garner's Modern American Usage



Synopsis

Since first appearing in 1998, Garner's Modern American Usage has established itself as the preeminent guide to the effective use of the English language. Brimming with witty, erudite essays on troublesome words and phrases, this book authoritatively shows how to avoid the countless pitfalls that await unwary writers and speakers whether the issues relate to grammar, punctuation, word choice, or pronunciation. Now in the third edition, readers will find the "Garner's Language-Change Index," which registers where each disputed usage in modern English falls on a five-stage continuum from nonacceptability (to the language community as a whole) to acceptability, giving the book a consistent standard throughout. Garner's Modern American Usage, 3e is the first usage guide ever to incorporate such a language-change index, and the judgments are based both on Garner's own original research in linguistic corpora and on his analysis of hundreds of earlier studies. Another first in this edition is the panel of critical readers: 120-plus commentators who have helped Garner reassess and update the text, so that every page has been improved.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have no complaints with the content, but if they're going to charge nearly \$25 for the Kindle edition, they could put a little more effort into it. The bulk of the book is all one "chapter", so if you want to look something up under "W", you have to hit "next page" for a half hour. They didn't bother to hyperlink the indexes, but rather just copied them literally from the print editions with the page numbers (which are useless on a Kindle). OUP ought to be ashamed of themselves.

The first part of this review discusses this book in general, and the second part discusses certain changes in the 3rd Edition. So feel free to skip to the second section if you're familiar with prior editions. Garner has done it again with this revised edition of Garner's Modern American Usage. I've used this book for several years and it has been an invaluable resource for me in my writing-intensive occupation. In fact, I doubt seriously that I've written anything substantial in the past several years without turning to this book at least once. Often, I'm pretty confident about proper usage, but turn to this book anyway for entertainment (it rarely disappoints). I usually find myself enthusiastically agreeing with Mr. Garner, and rejoicing that this source is available to settle usage disputes. For those new to this book, most of the entries address proper usage of specific words or short phrases. There are also essay entries that address grammar, style, and other issues. The essays cover a broad range of topics. For example, there is an entry on "punctuation" and another on "jargon." And any usage guide with an essay called "Airlinese" (discussing gems such as "deplane") gets my vote. I only recall disagreeing with Garner on minor points, such as whether to avoid the word "hopefully" altogether. I think it is a useful word and, hopefully, any stigma attached will dissipate with use (see what I did there?). I would simply not do without this book, a style manual (such as the Chicago Manual), and a good dictionary.

ON THIS EDITION: There are five changes I'll note for this edition: (1) ranking of word usage/acceptance (1-5); (2) asterisks next to poor words; (3) new binding; (4) more entries; (5) revisions to prior entries. The most interesting addition is the 1-5 scale for the acceptance of words in usage. Controversial or problematic words are ranked from 1 (unacceptable) to 5 (proper), interestingly combining prescriptive and descriptive concepts. All told, so far I find it an interesting tool, but probably not world-changing. The entries, as they have in the past, describe appropriate usage in a way that is more detailed and nuanced than a scale could hope to be. In some circumstances, I see how this might clarify some issues. The next change that I noticed was the use of a "*" preceding words that shouldn't be used (or non-words). For example, a passage might read "although *irregardless has been used for decades, it should be shunned." (irregardless would also be in italics, like all terms under a given entry heading). I understand the reason for this, but I find it far more annoying than useful. I suppose I'll get used to it eventually, but my eye is trained to associate a footnote with an asterisk (even if I'm not used to seeing it before a word). This isn't a deal-breaker, of course; I just find it distracting. Others may like it. The other notable changes are pretty self-explanatory. Of course the new edition contains more entries (substantially more, in fact), and other entries are revised. I happen to like the new binding and layout. The paper seems a bit thinner, the text smaller, and the book a little taller, which results in a

thinner book with more content than the previous edition. In sum, I recommend this book to anyone who writes, copy-edits, or who is passionate about the English language.

I am now a three-edition aficionado of Bryan A. Garner's *Modern American Usage* (MAU). I purchased the first edition at the South Tower of the World Trade Center in 1998. Then, under more sober circumstances, I purchased the second edition in 2003. Finally, last week, I became the happy owner of the new *Modern American Usage*, Third Edition (MAU 3, for short). The pleasures from MAU 3 are substantial, with only a few minor reservations. First, the major pleasures:

- * As with the first two editions, almost every page of MAU 3 brings me a new wealth of useful reminders and eye-opening information. For example, readers cannot imagine how pleased I was to learn in MAU 3 about "Contronyms" (e.g., the two opposed meanings of "scan"), which must take their place alongside my discovery of "Mondegreens" in MAU 2. One of my favorite mondegreens, encountered firsthand, is "I led the pigeons to the flag," an odd mishearing of "I pledge allegiance to the flag." (I politely told the young "pigeons" reciter about his error, but he said he liked his version better than the traditional one. It is certainly funnier.)
- * By making MAU 3 taller and wider in format than MAUs 1 and 2, the author has been able to retain the previous prefaces and essay ("Making Peace in the Language Wars") while adding a new preface and an essay (funquely titled "The Ongoing Struggles of Garlic-Hangers," inspired for once by the otherwise annoying linguist John McWhorter). More important, this expansive format has allowed Mr. Garner to pack additional nuggets of information into his reference book, especially the section called "Glossary of Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Other Language-Related Terms." This section, in slightly smaller type, is a miracle of informative compression, whether focusing on the "schwa" or the "ergative verb" or "auxesis" or "multiple sentence forms" or "polysyndeton" or almost anything else. It is a treasure trove of the mainstream and the esoteric.
- * The innovative, five-stage Language-Change Index in MAU 3, far from being a gimmick, gives readers a true sense of where certain controversial usages rank along a continuum. With this ranking, readers gain a perspective on verbal change, from the highly rejectable status at Stage 1 (e.g., the double negative "unrelentlessly") to the grudging acceptance at Stage 5 (e.g., "finalize," a jargonic favorite of former President Eisenhower). Among other things, this Index at Stage 5 is Mr. Garner's stout-hearted attempt to end dead-horse beating. (By the way, his "Key to the Language-Change Index" is certain to induce the smiles and laughs of approval in other readers that it did for me. Who says a language authority's continuum has to be dull?)
- * The engaging new essay in MAU 3, "The Ongoing Struggles of Garlic-Hangers," recognizes that defeatist teachers and hypocritical linguists are dragging English usage faster than ever into confusion and decay. No

wonder the conciliatory tone that suffused Mr. Garner's essay in MAU 2, "Making Peace in the Language Wars," has disappeared. After all, only one descriptive linguist (Peter Tiersma) "conditionally" accepted the author's strategy for a truce. So Mr. Garner obviously decided a more confrontational approach was necessary. Much to his credit, though, his essay still maintains a characteristic clarity and civility. Above all, he doesn't flinch from taking on and politely vanquishing linguist John McWhorter, the quintessential representative of the anything-goes crowd. Mr. Garner's new aggressive attitude feels right, yet I still worry. For, at the end of the essay, even as he says he is not "melancholy" over this declining state of affairs, he seems more embattled than he was in 2003. More than ever, we must remember, as Wilson Follett's *Modern American Usage* urges us, "to maintain the continuity of speech that makes the thought of our ancestors easily understood, to conquer Babel every day against the illiterate and the heedless, and to resist the pernicious and lulling dogma that in language -- contrary to what obtains in all other human affairs -- whatever is right and doing nothing is for the best." In short, Mr. Garner's fine book is more than a usage guide, it is the standard bearer of a knightly quest. I guess that might make me one of his Sancho Panzas. That's what he gets for carrying on the Fowler, Bernstein, and Follett tradition. Now for the minor reservations:*

Let's begin with MAU 3's dust cover. There on the left flap, in the first paragraph, the second sentence begins, "Brimming with brief, erudite, and even witty entries on troublesome words and phrases" I saw the "phases" for "phrases," and my heart fell. Because I know MAU 3 itself is fastidiously edited and proofread, but first-time browsers would not. Again one finds that a book shouldn't be judged by its dust cover. Also, remembering Mr. Garner's excellent entry on Sesquipedality, I question whether the use of "corpora" (see left flap, third paragraph, line 10) is a bit high falutin for the fairly simple-and-direct book description.*

Moving inside MAU 3, I find that the author carefully and correctly gives the figurative meaning of "delineate" as "to represent in words; to describe." Then he faults those who wrongly believe that "delineate" also means "differentiate," placing such a misuse at Stage 1 on his Language Change Index and consigning it for the time being to rejection and outer darkness. So far, I agree. But later, in his estimable entry on Standard English, he writes "the delineation between Standard English and dialect has to do with grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation" By using "delineation between" instead of "differentiation between," Mr. Garner has fallen into a dreaded slipshod extension and entered Stage 1's Rejection Land.*

Disappointment also reigned when I noticed, in MAU 3, there are not many illustrative quotations dated after 2003 (the year MAU 2 was published). To me, MAU 3 was an ideal opportunity to present a substantial number of new, post-2003 quotes to complement or replace earlier ones.*

In Mr. Garner's Timeline of Books on Usage, I was surprised to see that

Mark Halpern's *Language and Human Nature*, though quoted in the MAU 3 essay, "The Ongoing Struggles of Garlic-Hangers," was not entered in the Timeline under 2009, the year given for its publication. I assume that threatening deadlines resulted in that omission. I would also like to suggest for inclusion Jenny McMorris's biography of Henry Watson Fowler, *The Warden of English*, published by Oxford University Press in 2001. It's the only full-length biography on Fowler that I know of (not "of which I know"). Among other delightful little details in this book, one reads that "The Times, heading its obituary [of Fowler] 'A Lexicographical Genius,' declared that Henry 'had a crispness, a facility, and an unexpectedness which have not been equalled.'" And, from my "Not Really Garner's Fault Department," I present one last caveat: the taller and wider MAU 3 does not fit into my (formerly) handy-dandy, zippered, green book carrier. *Modern American Usage*, in its third edition, is now approaching perfection. And though it may never get there, authorial attention to such trifling reservations as mine may help move its fourth edition a bit closer. After all, a noble and daring quest such as Mr. Garner's -- to promote ideal clarity, elegance, and effectiveness in communication -- deserves to reach this loftiest of goals.

The book itself is an excellent reference, as many reviews attest. I own an older edition in hardcover and thought that a Kindle edition would be a great convenience but I am very disappointed. The only way to navigate this e-book is to page through it from the letter of the alphabet nearest the entry sought. To find the entry for "Oxymorons," for example, the reader must use the link to the letter P in the table of contents and page backward through the entries under "O." To find "Obscurity" one would start at "O" and page forward. Sometimes a word search is faster, but it is still cumbersome. The frustration increases if the reader wants to follow a reference within one entry to another. The boldface references, alas, are not links. The greatest disadvantage to Kindle books is being forced to purchase blind. It is possible to "look inside" the print editions of most books; there is a real need for an analogous preview of electronic editions.

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