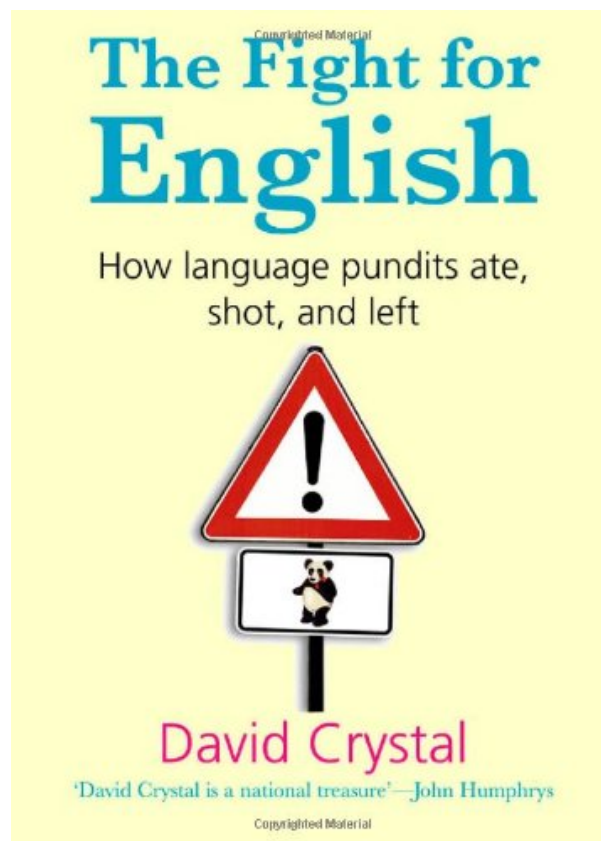


THE FIGHT FOR ENGLISH: HOW LANGUAGE PUNDITS ATE, SHOT, AND LEFT BY DAVID CRYSTAL



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The Fight for English

How language pundits ate, shot, and left



David Crystal

'David Crystal is a national treasure'—John Humphrys

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Review

"Manages to be genial and irascible at the same time...Crystal is fascinating and insightful, often funny."--
Patricia T. O'Conner, *New York Times Book Review*

"This volume is an excellent introductory essay on the development of the English language through the ages and on the rise of the prescriptivist movement, which is still very much alive. For both readers who consider themselves prescriptivists and those who consider themselves permissivists, this book will provide a quick lesson on why neither extreme makes sense, either historically or functionally. Crystal looks ahead to a more balanced view of English as an evolving and rich tool for communication."--*Technical Communication*

"This engaging book encourages one to make appropriateness rather than correctness the cornerstone of usage--and along the way offers fascinating bits of linguistic history. It belongs on the shelf next to [Lynne] Truss's book....Essential. All readers; all levels."--*CHOICE*

About the Author

David Crystal is the foremost writer and lecturer on the English language, with a world-wide reputation and over 100 books to his name. He is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, and has been awarded an OBE for services to the English Language.

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The story of battles--both past and present--surrounding English language usage, *The Fight for English* explores why millions of people feel linguistically inferior. Unhappy with the "zero tolerance" approach to punctuation offered by Lynn Truss's *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*, David Crystal offers a view of the subject that is much more balanced. Instead of answering the claims made by other manuals of English usage, Crystal provides an explanation and analysis of the genre as a whole.

Crystal weaves an intricate and engaging account that traces the history of the English language and its development over time. From Anglo-Saxon to Modern English, Crystal addresses why the same language issues that were bothering people 250 years ago are still bothering people today. This is the story of the fight for English usage--the story of the people who tried to shape the language in their own image, but failed generation after generation. In short, they ate, shot, and left.

The Fight for English brings language to life on the page with a witty and engaging writing style. Broadening the perspective on the English language, this compellingly informative book has something for everyone interested in the topic. Move over Harry Potter. Here comes punctuation.

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Most helpful customer reviews

87 of 89 people found the following review helpful.

The Big Con

By Found Highways

Is your English educated or uneducated? Grammatical or ungrammatical? Urban or provincial? Standard or dialect? U or Non-U? Lered or lewed (to use the words that distinguished the high prestige English dialect from low presitige ones centuries ago)?

All these terms imply something about people's social standing as well as they way they speak. And that's no coincidence. It's part of what David Crystal calls "the Big Con," recalling the movie *The Sting*.

Crystal calls his book a "history of usage," but its focus is the history of prescriptivism in English, written to learn why Lynne Truss's book, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, is so popular.

Crystal may be the most interesting writer on English. (I can't pick between him and the Australian linguist Kate Burridge, author of *Blooming English* and *Weeds in the Garden of Words*.) I was a little concerned *The Fight for English* might be a recapitulation of Crystal's *The Stories of English*, but it's not.

Crystal looks at how English evolved from a group of different but equal dialects to a presitigious dialect trying to keep it's status over other ways of talking that refused to be extinguished. This book isn't meant as sociology, but you do learn about the development of the British class structure.

The most interesting part of the book is Crystal's story of growing up in Wales and Liverpool, learning to speak the right dialects so he didn't get beaten up on the playground or get a ruler on the back of the hand in class, where "educators" instilled in him the Received Pronunciation (what was then "BBC English"). The playground and the ruler both work.

Crystal shows how the institutions that matter to us (like schools, the BBC, and *The Simpsons*) teach us about language.

Crystal calls for a similar kind of language education that Anthony Burgess did in his 1992 book, *A Mouthful of Air* - something between technical linguistics and old-fashioned prescriptivist "grammar." Crystal uses the analogy of a mechanic friend who can fix any car but is a lousy driver. Being a good driver takes more than knowing how an engine works. Grammar isn't everything.

The Fight for English is also funny. Like the university student who thought (for a good reason) that a

preposition had something to do with getting on a horse.

And the humor in Crystal's book brings up another important point, one of the things that make all of his books a pleasure to read. It's easy for a professional linguist to mock "language mavens" like Fowler, Strunk and White, Lynne Truss, and other prescriptivist critics. (And in this book Crystal does show in specific cases why these language guardians don't know as much as they think they do.) But Crystal, unlike many "experts" is very respectful of other people's opinions, even (or especially) when they disagree with him. That's a change from argument in Britain and America lately.

As Crystal says, "Pedants have their place. . . . without them, there would be no way of teaching young people how not to be pedantic."

24 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

The Fight for English as a saga

By David C. Hay

Ok, I have always believed that it is better to speak and write "correctly" than not. As Americans go, I think I do pretty well. But I also am aware of the fact that many other people from various parts of the country speak their own languages "well" and communicate among themselves just fine--even though it may sound awful to me. And yes, I was teased when I was a kid.

The book, *The Fight for English* makes it clear, however, that both sides of that conversation have been far more vicious to each other in England than in America for something like a millennium. And David Crystal's story of how all of those dialects that grew up in the relative isolation of horses and buggies turned into modern English is fascinating. And particularly amusing is the fact that for the last 500 years or so, there was invariably somebody complaining about how the decline in the standards of English was leading the whole society to ruin. (It turns out, by the way, that starting the last sentence with "And" isn't nearly the horrible sin that I was raised to believe.)

David Crystal's view is that throughout its history, the English language has been evolving--first bringing together the very different languages of the Celts, Angles, and the Saxons, and then merging in Norman French and Latin. Shakespeare understood that different dialects added variety to the language and included many in his plays, but he did so without prejudice. People from Yorkshire were not presented as comedic figures, presumed to be ignorant. Their accents were included simply to add variety to the sound of the language in the play. Soon after his time, however, the early "pundits" began to make it clear that there was a particular language for the upper classes, and if you didn't speak that, you were clearly a hick, with all that that implied.

But different accents and dialects have persevered to this day, and the English language has not died. To the contrary, it is flourishing and is working on becoming the first true international language since Latin. None of this means that there should be no standards and it certainly does not mean that children should not learn the grammatical structures of the language. Indeed, in the 1960s, the British system discontinued teaching grammar in the 1960s as a backlash from the ruler on the knuckles approach to teaching English that had prevailed for a hundred years or more, and an entire generation has suffered. The students didn't even learn parts of speech.

That approach clearly was faulty, so the response (in the UK, at least) has been development of the New English National Curriculum. This is a radically different approach that focuses on preparing students to understand the nature and structure of the language, with all the different ways that it can be used. The idea is that they should understand what the old rules are--as well as why they are changing. They should

understand why different cultures use language differently.

Most significantly, they should learn how to use language in a way that is appropriate to each situation.

Don't get the wrong idea. Mr. Crystal has no patience with obfuscation--either intentional by politicians and marketers, or unintentional by people who simply don't understand language. But correctness of grammar has never guaranteed that writing would be clear. Sometimes just the opposite is the case.

Yes, I recommend this book highly.

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

It's where it's at

By J. Cagnol

From neologisms to busting the myth about putting prepositions at the end of a sentence ("This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put," said Churchill), the new Crystal book, "The Fight for English: How the language pundits ate, shot, and left" is a real gem. He takes the reader for a drive through the stiff prescriptive attitudes of English to the cooler, more flexible rules of today. He does this all with taste and respect for both sides of the linguistic courtroom. A must read.

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