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Garner's Modern American Usage

"Excellent." —William Safire, *The New York Times*

BRYAN A. GARNER

GARNER'S MODERN AMERICAN USAGE

THE AUTHORITY ON GRAMMAR, USAGE, AND STYLE

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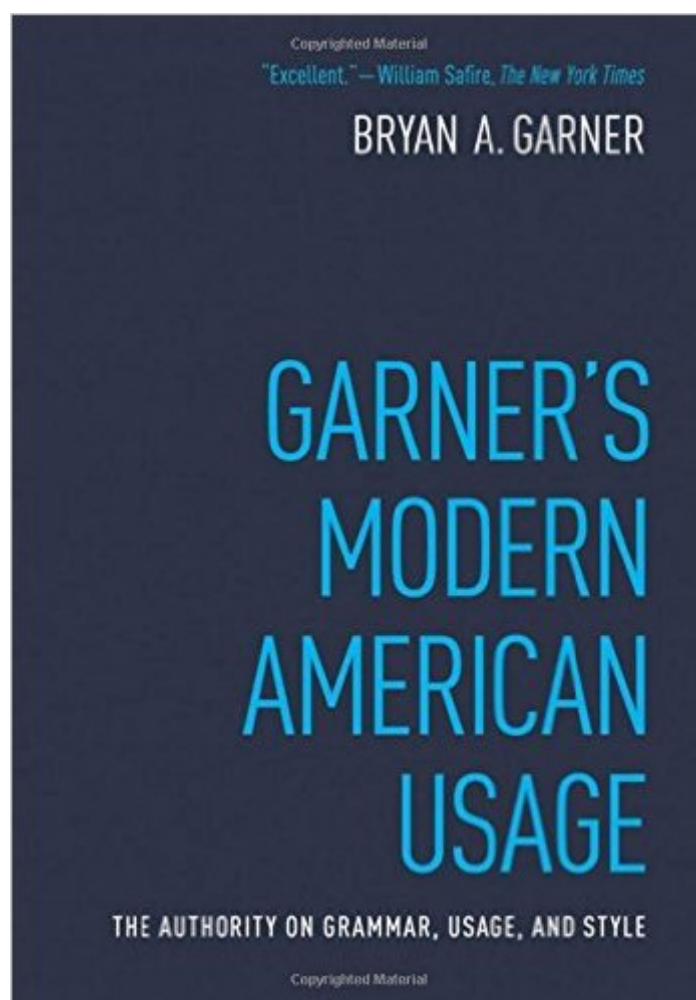
Synopsis

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.

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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 WorldTrade 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 AmericanUsage, Third Edition (MAU 3, for short).The pleasures from MAU 3 are substantial, with only a few minorreservations.First, the major pleasures:* As with the first two editions, almost every page of MAU 3 brings mea new wealth of useful reminders and eye-opening information. Forexample, readers cannot imagine how pleased I was to learn in MAU 3 about"Contronyms" (e.g., the two opposed meanings of "scan"), which musttake their place alongside my discovery of "Mondegreens" in MAU 2. Oneof my favorite mondegreens, encountered firsthand, is "I led thepigeons to the flag," an odd mishearing of "I pledge allegiance to theflag." (I politely told the young "pigeons" reciter about his error,but he said he liked his version better than the traditional one. It iscertainly funnier.)* By making MAU 3 taller and wider in format than MAUs 1 and 2, the authorhas been able to retain the previous prefaces and essay ("Making Peacein the Language Wars") while adding a new preface and an essay (funkilytitled "The Ongoing Struggles of Garlic-Hangers," inspired for once bythe otherwise annoying linguist John McWhorter). More important, thisexpansive format has allowed Mr. Garner to pack addditional nuggets ofinformation into his reference book, especially the section called"Glossary of Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Other Language-RelatedTerms." This section, in slightly smaller type, is a miracle ofinformative compression, whether focusing on the "schwa" or the "ergativeverb" or "auxesis" or "multiple sentence forms" or "polysyndeton" or almostanything else. It is a treasure trove of the mainstream and theesoteric.* The innovative, five-stage Language-Change Index in MAU 3, far frombeing a gimmick, gives readers a true sense of where certaincontroversial usages rank along a continuum. With this ranking, readersgain a perspective on verbal change, from the highly rejectable statusat Stage 1 (e.g., the double negative "unrelentlessly") to the grudgingacceptance at Stage 5 (e.g., "finalize," a jargonic favorite of formerPresident Eisenhower). Among other things, this Index at Stage 5 isMr. Garner's stouthearted attempt to end dead-horse beating. (By the way, his"Key to the Language-Change Index" is certain to induce the smiles andlaughs of approval in other readers that it did for me. Who says alanguage authority's continuum has to be dull?)* The engaging new essay in MAU 3, "The Ongoing Struggles ofGarlic-Hangers," recognizes that defeatist teachers and hypocriticallinguists are dragging English usage faster than ever into confusionand decay. No

wonder the conciliatory tone that suffused Mr. Garner's essay inMAU 2, "Making Peace in the Language Wars," has disappeared. After all,only one descriptive linguist (Peter Tiersma) "conditionally" acceptedthe author's strategy for a truce. So Mr. Garner obviously decided a moreconfrontational approach was necesssary. Much to his credit, though,his essay still maintains a characteristic clarity and civility. Aboveall, he doesn't flinch from taking on and politely vanquishing linguist JohnMcWhorter, the quintessential representative of the anything-goescrowd. 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 ourancestors easily understood, to conquer Babel every day against theilliterate and the heedless, and to resist the pernicious and lullingdogma that in language -- contrary to what obtains in all other humanaffairs -- whatever is 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 standardbearer of a knightly quest. I guess that might make me one of hisSancho Panzas.That's what he gets for carrying on the Fowler, Bernstein, and Folletttradition.Now for the minor reservations:* Let's begin with MAU 3's dust cover. There on the left flap, in thefirst paragraph, the second sentence begins, "Brimming with brief,erudite, and even witty entries on troublesome words and phases ...." Isaw the "phases" for "phrases," and my heart fell. Because I know MAU 3itself is fastidiously edited and proofread, but first-time browserswould not. Again one finds that a book shouldn't be judged by its dustcover. Also, remembering Mr. Garner's excellent entry on Sesquipedality, Iquestion whether the use of "corpora" (see left flap, third paragraph,line 10) is a bit highfalutin for the fairly simple-and-direct bookdescription.* Moving inside MAU 3, I find that the author carefully and correctly gives thefigurative meaning of "delineate" as "to represent in words; todescribe." Then he faults those who wrongly believe that "delineate" alsomeans "differentiate," placing such a misuse at Stage 1 on hisLanguage Change Index and consigning it for the time being torejection and outer darkness. So far, I agree. But later, in hisestimable entry on Standard English, he writes "the delineation betweenStandard English and dialect has to do with grammar, vocabulary,spelling, and punctuation ...." By using "delineation between" insteadof "differentiation between," Mr. Garner has fallen into a dreaded slipshodextension and entered Stage 1's Rejection Land.* Disappointment also reigned when I noticed, in MAU 3, there are not manyillustrative quotations dated after 2003 (the year MAU 2 waspublished). To me, MAU 3 was an ideal opportunity to present asubstantial number of new, post-2003 quotes to complement or replaceearlier ones.* In Mr. Garner's Timeline of Books on Usage, I was surprised to see that

MarkHalpern's Language and Human Nature, though quoted in the MAU 3 essay, "TheOngoing Struggles of Garlic-Hangers," was not entered in the Timelineunder 2009, the year given for its publication. I assume thatthreatening deadlines resulted in that omission. I would also like tosuggest for inclusion Jenny McMorris's biography of Henry WatsonFowler, The Warden of English, published by Oxford University Press in2001. 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] 'ALexicographical Genius,' declared that Henry 'had a crispness, afacility, and unexpectedness which have not been equalled.' "* And, from my "Not Really Garner's Fault Department," I present one lastcavil: 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.

Garner's Modern American Usage McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions: The Most Up-to-Date Reference for the Nonstandard Usage, Popular Jargon, and Vulgarisms of Contempos (McGraw-Hill ESL References) A Small C Compiler: Language, Usage, Theory, and Design Word Smart for the GRE: A Guide to Perfect Usage McGraw-Hill Handbook of English Grammar and Usage, 2nd Edition Coding With Modifiers: A Guide to Correct CPT & HCPCS Modifier Usage Rigging Your Cinema Camera: A practical guide to product, cost, fabrication, assembly, and usage Business Grammar, Style & Usage: The Most Used Desk

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