CHAPTER ONE

Myth 1 You Can't Write That

Or, Only One Kind of Writing Is Correct

1.1 Pick a Century

See if you can tell which century each passage comes from: eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, or twenty-first.

1. Dear student, When you hold this essay in your hands, I know that you will look immediately at the mark I've written at the top of the first page. You will make assumptions about yourself, your work – perhaps even your worth – based on this number.
2. It is certain that if a child is not learning good English he is learning bad English, and probably bad habits of thought; and some of the mischief done may never afterwards be undone.
3. I recognize but one mental acquisition as an essential part of the education of a lady or a gentleman, namely, an accurate and refined use of the mother tongue.
4. Thus two essential qualities of usage, in regard to language, have been settled, that it be both *reputable* and *national*.

If you guessed that the passages appear most to least recent, you were right. First is a twenty-first-century passage, from a 2016 *Guardian* article written by a university lecturer. Second is a 100-year old statement from the 1921 Newbolt Report to the United Kingdom Department of Education. Third is a pledge from Harvard president Charles Eliot documented in 1883, and fourth is an excerpt from George Campbell's 1776 *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*.

Across four centuries, the passages declare there is one kind of *correct English*, which means a *correct* mind, character, and nation. Those who use any other English are careless – even doomed, their mischief never undone.

During these four centuries, writers and writing have changed dramatically, from a few writers with quills, to many writers, with smartphones and spellcheckers. What hasn't changed dramatically is myth 1: Only one kind of English is *correct*.

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And yet there was a time when English existed but these associations did not. Our story begins in the centuries before the opening passages.

1.2 Context for the Myth

1.2.1 Spelling Becomes Uniform and Moral

Fourteenth-century England was a site of sundry spelling. (Try saying that five times fast.) Very few people had written literacy, but for them, English was not uniform. As an English scribe, you might spell the same word multiple ways on the same page.[1] Your spelling might be influenced by other languages, particularly French (the early language of Parliament) and Latin (the early language of bureaucracy). You might specifically choose Latin spellings, to be paid more for longer words.

Correct English spelling didn't exist yet, in other words. It wasn't "anything goes" – scribes were disciplined for wandering attention and haste, for instance. But readers and writers were accustomed to varied English spelling.

Things changed when English started becoming the national language. The Court of Chancery, which at the time was like England's courthouse and treasury in one, started issuing documents in English, and Chancery English became a guide for publishing houses.[2] As Chancery English spelling spread, so, too, did the idea of *Standard English*, which we can call *standardized English* to highlight that it is not an objective standard, but something made through an ongoing process.

Both the *what* and *how* of this process were important: What English was getting standardized, and how it was promoted, mattered. After Chancery clerks began writing in English in the early 15th century, the 1422 resolution of the London Brewers' Association labeled English the language of the king, the ruling class, and the law. It said English was acquired by diligent writing and "setting aside" other languages. Chancery English was not just one version of one language, adopted for specific correspondence, in other words. It was *correct writing*, the writing of careful study and powerful people.

As time passed and more official documents appeared in English, there was less and less official room for anything but *correct writing*. Regional English writers and printers left local varieties behind, lest they be labeled provincial. Scottish writers experienced added pressure after the 1603 Union of the Scottish and English crowns. British colonists began taking *correct writing* across the globe, carrying print materials and proclaiming English the language of *good, civilized* people.

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In turn, texts printed in *correct writing*, and the idea that *correct writing* indicated morality and progress, circulated simultaneously. While a full writing continuum included regional varieties, the part of the writing continuum considered acceptable was shrinking.

1.2.2 *Correct English* Becomes Patriotic

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prominent writers presented *correct English* as a national duty. In 1712, Jonathan Swift published "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue" in the name of "all the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation." In 1755, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* aimed to fix "improprieties and absurdities" in English, including regional variation, which he described as "capricious."

On the other side of the Atlantic, Noah Webster took a similar stance while adding a heavy measure of US patriotism. His *American Spelling Book* in 1790 aimed to end regional US dialects and "purify" English, and his later *American Dictionary of the English Language* was written "for the continued increase of the wealth, the learning, the moral and religious elevation of character, and the glory of my country."

These early, prominent sources helped expand and circulate myth 1. They not only suggested there was one *correct English.* They also proposed that national unity depended on it. Upholding *correct English*, they implied, was part of upholding a refined and moral nation.

1.2.3 Usage Wardens Tell Grown People How to Use English

English usage guides (also called style guides) promoted *correct writing* even more comprehensively than spelling books and dictionaries. Several usage guides emerged in the eighteenth century and became even more popular in the nineteenth century, when a new middle class sought the social advantages of English associated with the upper classes. By then, we know, the message that *correct English* was the language of the ruling class had been around for centuries.

Early usage guides were written by especially devout writing gatekeepers. They tended to be educated, well-established writers themselves – of sermons, of legal texts – who began publishing their own usage preferences for other writers. Prominent examples included Bishop of London Robert Lowth (a man "inclined to melancholy"), British philosopher and dissenting clergyman Joseph Priestley (who allowed, "It is possible I may be thought to have gleaned too much from the Latin idiom"), British educator Ann Fisher (a rare non-Londoner and woman

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in the group), Scottish minister and philosopher George Campbell (who wrote *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* we encountered in the opening), and retired US lawyer Lindley Murray (who promised *Perspicuity in Speaking and Writing*). Usage guides by these authors were among the most widely circulating books of their time, which would be like if a usage guide today competed with *Harry Potter*.

George Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, for instance, was repeatedly printed, sold, and reviewed for broad audiences in periodicals like the *Critical Review* and *Monthly Review*. Campbell had no tolerance for variation and evoked a strict language caste system. "In the lower walks of life," he wrote, people misapplied the language of "superiors." They needed better understanding as soon as possible, so that they could "renounce their own [usage] immediately."

Like Swift, Johnson, and Webster, Campbell approached *correct English* as a nationalist project, but he fixated on *correct writing* in particular. Spoken English could be "negligent" if necessary, he wrote. But *correct writing* would keep English "reputable, present, and national," safeguarded from foreign incursion.

Other usage guides were infused with a similarly moralizing tone. One of Ann Fisher's books was *The Pleasing Instructor, or Entertaining Moralist*. John Ash's eighteenth-century *Grammatical Institutes*, a usage guide reprinted at least fifty times, opens with the platitude "The Knowledge of Letters is one of the greatest Blessings that ever God bestowed upon Man." Lest readers think variation was part of Knowledge of Letters, Ash included an activity entitled "Promiscuous Exercises of False Syntax."

Bishop Lowth, who appears to have been an unwitting gatekeeper,[3] praised writing – which he said was rare – that showed "correctness, propriety, and purity of English style." He also implied that his usage recommendations were not necessarily required for success, since "our best Authors have committed gross mistakes, for want of a due knowledge of English Grammar, or at least a proper attention to the rules of it." We'll see this same paradox in myth 2.

Correct writing regulation was especially championed by Lindley Murray, whose 1795 *English Grammar* defined rules and errors with unprecedented rigidity. Murray is seen as the father of what linguists call *prescriptivism*: prescribing what English *should* be like, rather than what it *is* like (which would be *descriptivism*). Murray's *English Grammar* became the most popular usage guide for decades in Britain and the United States, offering what the contemporary book *The Dictionary Wars* called "a lifeline to success and an improved social status." Today, Murray's legacy lives on in several inflexible rules for *correct writing*.

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1.3 The Myth Emerges

So it was that between 1400 and 1800 the first myth emerged, along with popular reading to proclaim it. Only one kind of writing was *correct writing*. And *correct writing*, despite representing the preferences of only some texts and people, meant goodness, ability, and national progress.

1.4 Consequences of the Myth

1.4.1 We Limit *Correct Writing* (and *Correct Writer*)

With this myth, we limit *correct writing* – and the goodness and ability associated with it – to only a small part of the writing continuum. The rest of the continuum does not indicate goodness or ability; it might even threaten national safety and progress. Table 1.1 emphasizes the limited part of the continuum acknowledged in this myth, taken by many as the continuum itself.

Within this overall consequence, there are several more specific consequences, which appear in Table 1.2.

Table 1.1 "Correct writing" on the writing continuum

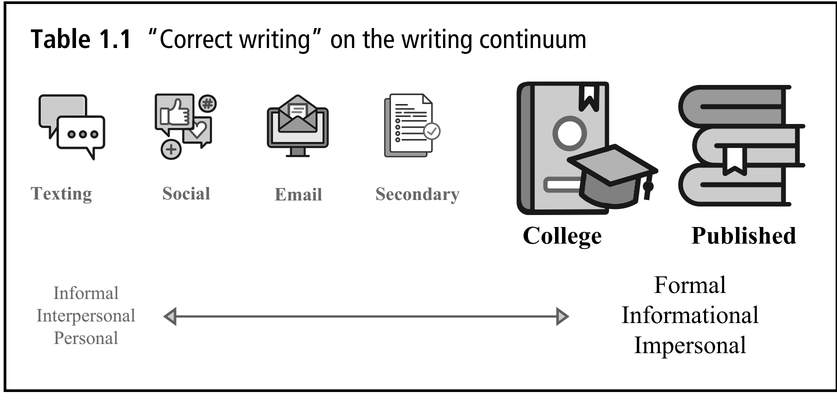

Table 1.2 Consequences of myth 1

Once we believe **only one kind of writing is correct, then…**	… English spelling is a mess that matters
	… English variation is a national threat
	… Usage preferences of a few are usage preferences for all
	… Narrow standards are high standards
	… Formality and informality are enemies
	… We tolerate confusing references to *grammar*
	… We miss opportunities for learning and connecting

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1.4.2 English Spelling Is a Mess that Matters

Since Chancery English spelling was standardized and moralized, we've been stuck with it. This means that spelling expected across much of the writing continuum, and certainly the spelling of *correct writing*, is characterized by lasting oddities.

Some oddities reflect the early influence of other languages. For instance, we write *quick* (versus *cwic*) because Old English *cw* was replaced by the French *qu*. Other oddities come from pronunciation: Pronunciation evolves over time as words are spoken, so a lot of spelling that was intuitive in the past is not intuitive today. If you were describing a *gnarly knight* in 1400, for instance, you'd have pronounced the *g* and *k*.[4] Even more confounding is that English has never had letters for all of its vowel sounds. For example, the letter "a" in *about* sounds different from the "a" in *apple*, but the same letter appears in the English spelling of those words.[5]

Basically, we've inherited spelling that has long been troublesome. Centuries ago, there were already complaints that Chancery English spelling didn't guide pronunciation. In the early twentieth century, English was described as "antiquated, inconsistent and illogical" by spelling reformist R. Zachrisson. By the late twentieth century, English spelling was described by linguist Mario Pei as "an awesome mess."

But here's the rub: since this start of this myth, English spelling has been a mess that matters. It is a mess linked with morality and capability. A 1900 entry in *The School Journal* proclaimed: "If a man is a slipshod speller it is because he is a slipshod thinker … sure to act [on] inadequate moral ideals." A 2015 *Harvard Business Review* linked spelling and credibility, warning: "People jump to all kinds of conclusions about you when they read documents you have written."

1.4.3 English Variation Is a National Threat

In the many early sources that limited *correct writing*, variation within and beyond English posed a national threat. Campbell wrote about *correct writing* as something to be protected from foreign incursion. Johnson characterized English dialect variation as careless. Webster made *correct writing* tantamount to American freedom and national harmony. In these messages, *correct writing* more easily becomes a tool for discriminating against those who don't use or value it. We will see this consequence again in other myths, but we see it begin resolutely with this myth.

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1.4.4 Usage Preferences of a Few Are Usage Preferences for All

Many preferences of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century usage wardens have lasted. This means that the preferences of writers from a narrow population and set of experiences (mostly educated, Christian and religious, economically well-positioned, white men in England and the US) have been the usage preferences represented in *correct writing* for centuries. We will see a prominent illustration in a moment, in the contemporary example of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*.

1.4.5 Narrow Standards Are High Standards

More important than particular rules or standards are what people believe about them. With this myth came the message that *correct writing* standards are not just narrow, or specific, standards; they are high standards. Josephine Baker's *Correct English*, published between 1899 and 1950, was written so adults could keep up "a high standard of expression" after their schooling and thereby avoid "bad English." Similar messages appeared in popular periodicals such as *The Spectator* and *The Rambler* in the UK and *Time* and *Harper's Magazine* in the US.

Likewise, nineteenth-century university leaders promoted *correct writing* as the highest standard for language and moral development. In 1828, University of London professor Thomas Dale said the aim of education was "to inculcate lessons of virtue, through the medium of the masters of our language." Charles Eliot, whom we met at the start of the chapter, linked *correct writing* to "the higher moral interest and greater promise" of English-speaking political and social institutions. At Harvard, Eliot established English entrance exams and courses that valued *correct writing* above other writing or languages. (More generally, Eliot objected to all kinds of diversity, as we will see in myth 3.)

The idea that narrow standards are excellent standards makes it hard to challenge or expand *correct writing*. A century after Eliot, critics denounced Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* for including *ain't,* despite its widespread use and linguistic similarity to *won't*. The outcry highlighted the lasting idea that when English dictionaries and usage guides include diverse usage, they fail to be what applied linguist David Brown describes as "upholders of propriety." This is a good example of how myth 1 fuels language regulation mode: Propriety is associated with only one part of the continuum, and addressing a fuller continuum of English is not allowed.

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For contemporary evidence of this myth, we can look to a particularly famous usage guide, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. *The Elements of Style* sold more than 10 million copies between 1959 and 2009 alone, often as a gift for secondary graduates heading to college. Like earlier usage guides, *The Elements of Style* moralizes *correct writing*, equating written style with human character. *The Elements of Style* also illustrates the passing of language regulation from one generation to another: Strunk was White's college professor, and when White became an author, he expanded and published Strunk's usage rules in a new book.

The fiftieth anniversary celebration of *The Elements of Style* in 2009 included a *New York Times* article by a seasoned reporter, who opens by second-guessing his writing:

> How does a professional writer discuss *The Elements of Style* without nervously looking over his shoulder and seeing Will Strunk and E. B. White (or thousands of readers of their book) second-guessing him? (Is "second-guessing" hyphenated or not? Is posing a question the same as using the passive voice?)

After several paragraphs of similar praise and paranoia, the article cites a University of Edinburgh linguistics professor who shows how *The Elements of Style* severely simplifies English. Strunk, however, had a gatekeeper's rejoinder for critiques such as these, which he passed on to White: "It is worse to be irresolute than to be wrong."

"It is worse to be irresolute than to be wrong" does not seem like great advice in many situations (flying a plane, performing an amputation), but it has particular consequences when it comes to writing. Being *irresolute* about *correct writing* leaves room for questioning and exploring. Being *wrong* means limiting writing despite pervasive language variation. Strunk and White's resolute boundaries around *correct writing* might especially impact those without their confidence – a confidence so complete that the two authors break their own rules in *The Elements of Style* without acknowledgment.

Yet the tone of *The New York Times* article is one of wistful appreciation for just that sort of rigid confidence, which upholds high standards: "Unless someone is willing to entertain notions of superiority," White is quoted as saying, "the English language disintegrates."

The Elements of Style has not been updated to account for new forms of communication, because, explains the publisher, its popularity shows that its advice is timeless. And so the guide continues to circulate widely, emphasizing the *correct writing* error, avoiding change and variation. Language regulation, The *Elements of Style* illustrates, can be at once limiting and well-loved.

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1.4.6 Formality and Informality Are Enemies

Early usage guides separated formal and informal English, depicting *correct writing* as formal and careful and all other writing as informal and careless. Today, students continue to receive this advice from a range of sources.[6] The University of Southern California and the University of Melbourne, for instance, advise avoiding first person pronouns, phrasal verbs, and abbreviations in college writing. While personal correspondence with familiar audiences calls for informal usage, the advice suggests, college writing calls for formal writing no matter the task.

In consequence, informal and formal writing are enemies, not neighbors or friends, their respective writing patterns separate rather than mutually illuminating and sometimes overlapping. The formal end of the continuum is considered *correct*, and it is exclusively prioritized and tested in school despite the fact that most of the continuum is characterized by informal patterns. Even ongoing calls for Plain English don't always call for informality, but rather for less technical jargon.[7]

1.4.7 We Tolerate Confusing References to *Grammar*

Many claims about *incorrect* or *bad grammar* refer to one of two things: conventions or usage preferences. By conventions, I mean norms for spelling, punctuation, what is called "wrong word," and capitalization, rather than what is grammatically possible in English. And usage preferences are just that: preferences for usage, rather than what is grammatically possible in English.

For instance, a recent online list called "15 grammar goofs that make you look silly" emphasizes conventions rather than grammar. No fewer than ten of the fifteen concern words that sound the same but are different – for example, *it's* versus *its, your* versus *you're*, and *their* versus *there.* These homophones are impossible to note in speech, and readers can easily decipher the intended meaning. Often, they are interchangeably used in informal digital writing such as texting. Still, the use of "terrible grammar" to refer to conventions is common. We've seen some examples in this chapter, and we will see many more throughout the book.

1.4.8 We Miss Opportunities for Learning and Connecting

When we only value *correct writing*, we only value part of the continuum. We only reward those writers with exposure and practice with *correct*

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writing. We prioritize and moralize only the language use and culture of a highly limited mold. In the shady reality of this myth, in other words, the son of Bishop Lowth faced a life of presupposed opportunity and moral rectitude, no matter his capability or character.

We support unfair treatment, as a result, and we miss opportunities. We miss different values and ways of relating. We miss connections across a full continuum of writing and writers.

1.5 Closer to the Truth

1.5.1 Standardized Spelling Depends on Memorization and Practice

Correct writing spelling, expected on most of the writing continuum, is an awesome mess. To use this mess, you need practice and memorization. Still, spelling practice is not the same as writing practice: Spelling instruction appears to improve spelling skills but not writing skills. You can be a hardworking, capable writer, but you won't know how to write *gnarly knight* unless you have practiced its peculiar, outdated spelling.

The informal end of the writing continuum has more flexible spelling norms, meaning spelling can change more easily and intuitively. For example, text message spelling often includes *nite* for *night* or *u* for *you*, which approximate English sounds (or phonemes). Indeed, research shows that children who use textisms have enhanced language skills, which researchers attribute to awareness of English sounds and letters.

1.5.2 Grammar Is What Is Possible and Meaningful in a Language

The linguistic definition of *grammar* is what is meaningful and possible in a language – the norms for forming words, phrases, and sentences, regardless of usage preferences or conventions. Sound (or phonological) norms in English, for instance, prevent us from pronouncing the *p* sound in *pneumonia*. Word (or morphological) norms in English allow us to add *-ly* to change adjectives to adverbs (e.g., *quick* to *quickly*), and to use verb contractions like *ain't* or *won't* to express negation. In other words:

- English grammar does not mean "*correct writing* usage preferences" such as "do not use *ain't.*"
- English grammar does not mean "*correct writing* conventions" such as *correct writing* spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.
- English grammar is what is possible and meaningful, across the full writing continuum.

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Table 1.3 English grammar

English grammar	Not English grammar
A writing continuum	* *continuum a*
The continuum	* *continuum the*
Writing is on a continuum	**Continuum on a is writing*
Writing be on a continuum	* *Continuum be a writing*
Idk	* *Kdi*

This definition means, for instance, that the formal phrase *a writing continuum* falls within English grammar, and the informal abbreviation *idk* (for *I don't know*) falls within English grammar.

In Table 1.3, the left-hand column follows what is grammatical (read: possible and meaningful) in English. The nouns follow articles *the* or *a*, and the sentences (including the abbreviation *idk*), use subject-verb-object order. The right-hand column (marked with *) includes ungrammatical (read: not possible) examples. In these examples, we can't decipher meaning.

Usage preferences and conventions are not grammar. When *correct writing* usage preferences or conventions are not followed on the left of the continuum, we might pause because we expect something different. But the full writing continuum is possible and meaningful within English grammar.

1.5.3 Terrible People Can Be *Good* Writers, *Terrible* Writers Can Be Good People

Correct writing is an indication of practice, not goodness. The US terrorist called the Unabomber wrote in *correct writing*. Civil rights activists who couldn't write English fought for equal opportunity and fair treatment for all races. Other examples are everywhere around us, from prominent leaders to unknown children. Producing the narrow version of English that became *correct writing* does not make a person good.

1.5.4 Diverse Usage Is Similar

Writing across the continuum, whether it is considered *correct writing* or not, shares several grammatical patterns like the ones we just saw.

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The famous writer Maya Angelou describes this variation in her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* Angelou offers two example sentences, one she associates with school and one she associates with meeting in the street.

At school, in a given situation, we might respond with “That’s not unusual.” But in the street, meeting the same situation, we easily said, “It be’s like that sometimes.”[8]

Angelou’s two examples follow what is grammatical in English. For one thing, they follow the same subject-verb-object structure we’ve seen already, which has been in English for centuries. Using that structure, the first example uses the present progressive *be* associated with *correct writing* (“That **is** not unusual”), while the second example uses habitual *be* associated with African American or Black English (“It **be’s** like that sometimes”).

Angelou’s examples also illustrate that diverse usage includes many of the same words – particularly pronouns, conjunctions, and prepositions (or *closed lexical categories*). For instance, both Angelou’s examples include the pronoun *that*, a word that has been around for more than 800 years.

In a final example of similarities, writing across the continuum follows parallel morphological processes. Morphological processes dictate what is grammatical (read: possible and meaningful) for forming new words in English. If we’ve grown up writing English, we know the morphological process I mentioned earlier – adding *-ly* to make something an adverb – even if we don’t consciously know we do. Here’s another example. I scuba dive with a company, Little Cayman Divers, that has this phrase on the back of their staff shirts shown in Figure 1.1: *Okayest dive masters in the world.*

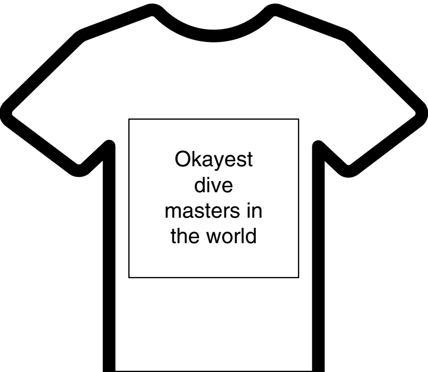

Figure 1.1 *Okayest* follows English morphology

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If you are familiar with written English, you recognize *okayest* because it follows morphological rules that dictate what is grammatically possible and meaningful in English. According to English morphology, we compare adjectives with one or two syllables by adding *-er* (e.g., cool becomes cooler). We add *-est* to make something superlative (cooler now becomes coolest). This is how our knowledge of English morphology, consciously or not, makes *okayest* funny, since *okay* itself means mediocre.

The upshot is that not only is a full continuum of writing important in our lives, but also, the full continuum shares fundamental similarities. Only the myth glasses, as old as this myth, make *okayest* "not real English." It might be on the informal part of the continuum, but *okayest* is grammatically possible and meaningful in English. Meanwhile, Microsoft Word grammar checker, disciple of this myth, is alerting me to change *okayest*.

1.5.5 Diverse Usage Is Correct

While some grammatical structures and words are used across the writing continuum, some language patterns are distinct according to where they are on the continuum. Distinct does not mean *better*. Language regulation mode ignores the continuum, pretending *correct writing* patterns always apply. But language exploration mode looks across the continuum for overlapping and distinct patterns, all of which tell us something about written English.

To illustrate, we'll look at two patterns that differentiate informal and formal writing. One pattern – lots of nouns – appears in what is considered *correct writing*. The other pattern – fewer nouns, more verbs – appears on the rest of the writing continuum.

1.5.5.1 *Correct Writing* Hearts Noun Phrases … *Incorrect Writing* Totally Doesn't

Correct writing uses a lot of nouns. In particular, it uses a lot of noun *phrases*, which include prepositional phrases, adjectives, and other nouns. In other words, on the far right of the continuum, noun phrases tend to take up the stage, leaving less room for verbs, pronouns, adverbs, and adjectives that are not in noun phrases.

By contrast, most of the writing continuum, including informal digital writing, workplace emails, and secondary writing, doesn't use so many noun phrases. Instead, on most of the writing continuum nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns share the stage. We'll look at a set of examples.

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- Example from left of continuum: *Correct writing is totally strange. It hearts nouns.*
  - Here, the nouns and verbs roughly share the stage. The sentence has two clauses, one with a noun (*correct writing*), a verb (*is*), and an adverb and adjective (*totally strange*). The other has a pronoun (*it*), a verb (*hearts*), and a noun (*nouns*).
  - If we are familiar with the words, this proportion makes it easy to tell the main subject, and what is happening, and how.
- Example from right of the continuum: *Relative to informal digital writing, formal academic writing contains a high proportion of dense noun phrases*.
  - Here, we get a single sentence dominated by noun phrases (all but one word of it!). In addition to these noun phrases, we have one verb (*contains*).
  - The noun phrases in this example contain several embedded phrases, including <u>nouns</u> and [prepositional phrases]:

    [Relative to <u>informal digital writing</u>*], [*<u>formal academic writing</u>*] contains [*<u>a high proportion</u>*][of* <u>dense noun phrases</u>*].*

What this means is that *correct writing* often means "includes a lot of noun phrases." In turn, reading *correct writing* – such as academic books or articles – means parsing a lot of dense noun phrases.

What this also means is that what is considered *incorrect writing* often means "includes few noun phrases." Reading informal digital writing, which most people have a lot more practice with, means parsing a closer balance of nouns, verbs, pronouns, and adverbs, which tend to be a bit more obvious about who (or what) is doing what.

These are overall trends. Some workplace emails might use noun phrases, and some academic writing might use simple nouns and many verbs. But these are general trends, when it comes to noun phrases across the continuum. (For my part, I wonder if formal writing really needs to be so noun-dense all the time. But more on that in later myths.)

1.5.6 Linguistic Equality and Social Inequality Are for Real

As we can see in the writing continuum, closer to the truth is that we have a range of writing patterns that are grammatically possible and meaningful in English. Closer to the truth is that all of these patterns are linguistically equal: They are all rule-governed and responsive to different writing situations.

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Even so, we have hundreds of years of the opposite message: that only spelling dating back to the fifteenth century is *correct*; that only usage-guide preferences are *correct*. Also closer to the truth, therefore, is that all language use is not *socially* equal, despite being linguistically equal. Many of us learned only language regulation mode: to judge writers and writing in terms of *correct* and *incorrect* usage. We did not learn language exploration mode: to observe writers and writing in terms of patterns accurate in different situations.

1.5.7 Writing Is on a Continuum of Shared Purposes and Distinct Patterns

Along with some grammatical norms, writing across the continuum shares five purposes that facilitate communication. In other words, there are five things all shared writing does, though how it does them depends on the writing. Here are the five purposes, with example patterns.

(1) Writing has **cohesion**
- To signal new input or ideas, written English includes emojis, new paragraphs, or transitions such as *also* or *however*.

(2) Writing makes **connection**
- To address writers and readers, written English includes specific uses of first- and second-person pronouns, and citations or other references.

(3) Writing shows **focus**
- To emphasize different kinds of topics, written English includes a balance of nouns and verbs, or many noun phrases, and it includes active verbs, or passive verbs.

(4) Writing shows **stance**
- To show doubt, certainty, or a positive or negative attitude, written English includes boosters, hedges, and generalizations.

(5) Writing follows **usage** norms
- To follow norms, written English includes flexible and rigid spelling and punctuation conventions, and informal or formal usage preferences.[9]

Along with the fundamental similarities we discussed earlier, the five shared purposes help us understand and use a range of writing. Meanwhile, the different patterns allow us to use different writing for different ends. These different patterns are correct for different kinds of writing, and they distinguish the two ends of the continuum. On the left side near informal text messages, writing is more informal, personal, and interpersonal; on the right side near formal published books, writing is more formal, impersonal, and informational. For example, even

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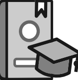
Table 1.4 Writing continuum purposes and patterns



	Texting	Social	Email	Secondary	College	Published

Continuum Purposes	**Continuum Patterns** Informal / Interpersonal / Personal ⟷ Formal / Informational / Impersonal	
Cohesion *Writers move between topics and language users*	• Pragmatic markers (*so, like, yeah*) • Emojis • Punctuation • Pacing, pauses, new posts or messages • Narrative moves such as orientation, complicating action, evaluation	• Transition words (*nonetheless, thus*) • Rhetorical moves such as given-new, introductory, or development moves • New paragraphs • Sections in research articles such as intro, methods, results, discussion
Connection *Writers address readers/writers*	• 2nd person pronouns, direct questions • Text-external 1st person, in relation to experiences and events (*I remember; We going to*) • Reactions, exclamations (*omg*) • References to people, events	• Directives (*Consider this; See table*), rhetorical questions • Text internal 1st person, in relation to text and process (*I will argue; we conducted trials*) • References to sources, citations
Focus *Writers emphasize priorities*	• Nouns, verbs, pronouns, adverbs • Simple sentence subjects emphasize people, experiences • More active verbs	• More noun and prepositional phrases • Dense phrase subjects emphasize ideas, phenomenon, and processes • More passive verbs
Stance *Writers show (un)certainty and attitude*	• More boosters (*totally*), fewer hedges • More generalizations and exaggerations (*everyone, no way*) • Strong evaluative adjectives (*amazing*) and adverbs (*ridiculously*)	• More hedges (*perhaps, suggests*), fewer boosters, few generalizations • Moderate evaluative adjectives, often before nouns (*important contribution*)
Usage *Writers follow grammatical and usage norms*	• Flexible punctuation and usage, conventions able to change	• *Correct writing* punctuation and usage conventions (from 18th c) and spelling (from 16th c)
Norms across the continuum	subject-verb-object construction open lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives) for new words closed lexical categories (e.g., pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions) that rarely change morphological rules of English	

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when informal text messages share information, they have more patterns focused on personal reactions and interpersonal connection with others. And though some academic books share personal anecdotes, overall they have more informational patterns than personal or interpersonal ones. This is why linguists say that "phraseology and epistemology are indissolubly interlinked," which is a formal, informational, impersonal way of saying that different language patterns support different goals and values.

Sometimes, the same feature is used differently, depending on where it is on the writing continuum. First-person pronouns are a good example, as we saw in the introduction. Writing on the left of the continuum tends to use first-person pronouns in text-external ways, emphasizing personal experiences and reactions, while writing on the right side of the continuum tends to use first-person pronouns in text-internal ways, emphasizing the information that the writers are writing about.

To capture purposes and patterns on the writing continuum, I've added rows in Table 1.4. We've already seen some grammatical norms shared across the continuum, and these appear at the bottom of the continuum.

In a full writing continuum, we have shared purposes and patterns, as well as important differences. And yet: From the Court of Chancery to *The Elements of Style*, this myth tells us only one kind of writing is *correct*.

Closer to the truth is that we are all limited by this myth, because we learn less about the full writing continuum. The far right of the continuum is treated as *correct* and wholly separate from other parts of the continuum. Those who do not practice or value that part of the continuum are told they are *bad writers*. They may have been told they are *careless* or *lazy* besides.

At least here, we have dwelled with *correct writing* a different way, as just one part of a full, connected writing continuum. As we address other myths, we'll keep exploring the full continuum, adding examples from written English over time. But we will continue to see *correct writing* refer to the narrow version of written English we get in this myth.

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