

Prescriptive and descriptive grammar

Prescriptive approach:

- a set of rules for the 'proper' use of language, attitudes toward language based on what is said to be 'correct'

Prescriptive grammar explains or prescribes rules on how a language should be used and what should be avoided so that the language standard can be achieved.

(in other words, these rules tell people how they are supposed to use the language)

This approach was taken by some grammarians, mainly in the 18th-century England, who set out rules for the correct or proper use of English. They claimed that the structure of English sentences should be like the structure of Latin.

As defined by Ilse Depraetere and Chad Langford "A prescriptive grammar is one that gives hard and fast rules about what is right (or grammatical) and what is wrong (or ungrammatical), often with advice about what not to say but with little explanation" (2012)

Descriptive grammar:

- a set of rules about language based on how it is actually used

The goal of the descriptive approach is a description and knowledge of rules (principles) of how the language is actually spoken.

"A descriptive grammar is a study of a language, its structure, and its rules as they are used in daily life by its speakers from all walks of life, including standard and nonstandard varieties" (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990).

Examples of descriptive and prescriptive grammar:

- *To boldly go where no one has gone before.* *To go boldly where no one has gone before.*
- *Who did you go with?* *With whom did you go?*
- *Me and my family would go there.* *My family and I would go there.*
- *And you shouldn't do it.* *You shouldn't do it.*
- *He reads good.* *He reads well.*
- *10 items or less.* *10 items or fewer.*

An example of descriptive and prescriptive grammar rule:

- This is the house **which** he lives **in**.
- This is the house **in which** he lives.

According to **descriptive rules**, both forms are correct, as follows:

Informal: This is the house which he lives in.

Formal: This is the house in which he lives.

Prescriptive Grammar Advantages & Disadvantages:

- **(+)** Teaching prescriptive grammar creates formal writers and resources.
- **(+)** Teaching prescriptive grammar is beneficial for both non-native teachers and learners, as it has definite rules of language that help reduce confusion.
- **(-)** Prescriptive grammar might keep non-native speakers wondering and confused when they talk with a native speaker, as they might realize that some natives do not write or speak obeying these rules.

Descriptive Grammar Advantages & Disadvantages:

- **(+)** The descriptive grammar approach improves non-native speakers' pronunciation and helps them sound like native speakers.
- **(+)** The descriptive grammar approach helps language learners understand the applied usage of language and communicate better with native speakers.
- **(-)** The descriptive grammar approach is sometimes not used in formal settings, such as exams and speech.

10 'grammar rules' it's OK to break (sometimes)

Steven Pinker, The Guardian

- **and, because, but, or, so, also**

it is ungrammatical to begin a sentence with a conjunction

- **dangling modifiers**

"Turning the corner, the view was quite different."

"Turning the corner, I saw that the view was quite different."

The rule decrees that the implied subject of the modifier (the one doing the checking, turning, and so on) must be identical to the overt subject of the main clause (it, the view, and so on)

- **like, as, such as**

"Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should."

"Winston tastes good, as a cigarette should."

"Like" is a preposition, said the accusers, and may take only a noun phrase object, as in "crazy like a fox" or "like a bat out of hell". It is not a conjunction and so may not be followed by a clause.

- **preposition at the end of a sentence**

"It's you she's thinking of"

"It's you of whom she's thinking."

- **predicative nominative**

"Hi, honey, it's I"

(a pronoun serving as the complement of "be" must be in nominative case (I, he, she, we, they) rather than accusative case (me, him, her, us, them))

"It is he" and "It is him" is one of formal versus informal style.

- **split infinitives**

"Are you sure you want to permanently live here?"

The very terms "split infinitive" and "split verb" are based on a thick-witted analogy to Latin, in which it is impossible to split a verb because it consists of a single word,

- **that and which**

The Cambridge restaurant, which (that?) had failed to clean its grease trap, was infested with roaches.

Every Cambridge restaurant *which failed to clean its grease trap* was infested with roaches",

- **who and whom**

Who kissed the bride?,, Whom did Henry kiss?

- **very unique**

referring to degrees of uniqueness is meaningless: something is unique or not

Nor can one sensibly modify "absolute", "certain", "complete", "equal", "eternal", "perfect" or "the same". One may not write, for instance, that one statement is "more certain" than another.

- **countable nouns, mass nouns and "ten items or less"**

One can talk about "many pebbles" but not "much pebbles", "much gravel" but not "many gravel". One can only have "fewer pebbles", not "less pebbles". The sign over supermarket express checkout lanes: "*Ten Items or Less*".

Sources:

Fromkin, V., R. Rodman, N. Hyams (2011) *An Introduction to Language* Wadsworth Cengage Learning

Yule, G. (2006) *The Study of Language* Cambridge University Press

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<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/15/steven-pinker-10-grammar-rules-break>