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The Styles of Prescriptivism and Descriptivism in Editing

There are many different writing styles to choose from when starting a writing project.

Some of these styles are prescriptive, descriptive, high or grand, middle, plain or low, primer,

telegraphic, passive, active, verb, noun, affected, complex, and literary. All writing styles follow

basic grammar rules and will require editing once the project's first draft is finished. Later in this

paper, I will use prescriptive and descriptive styles in addition to the research I gathered on these

styles to analyze two editing books. These two writing styles, prescriptivism and descriptivism,

are very closely tied to grammar, so it will be necessary to give some history of grammar.

Whether or not English grammar should be taught in United States public schools has

been debated starting in the early 1900s. Grammar has traditionally been taught in a

prescriptivist style using grammar rules that must be followed. In the 1900s, several studies, such

as the 1963 study by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, were done on

what the effects on students and student writing are. Kolln et al quote the conclusion of this

study: "'the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some

instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of

writing'" (Kolln 5). After this study, many others with similar conclusions followed and as a result teaching grammar was debated for several years before schools slowly stopped teaching it. Recently, there has been a push to revive grammar in schools, and debates over how it should be taught.

There are two ways of teaching grammar that stick out after all of my research: the prescriptive and descriptive approaches. A prescriptive approach is rule based and is often found in grammar textbooks. This type of approach is not just rule based, it prescribes rules that must be followed. Many like, Tabbert, have come to the conclusion that "…they [the lists of rules] are exhortations sometimes collectively referred to as 'prescriptive grammar.' But in fact they are overwhelmingly PROscriptive, that is, warnings setting forth [of] what NOT to do" (4). A descriptive approach allows for language to evolve over time as new words are coined and other words change meaning. Some people accuse descriptivists "… of being 'permissivists,' of preaching a philosophy of 'anything goes,' of believing that there are no standards" (Tabbert 3). Although a descriptive approach is less concerned with rules and more concerned with context, this is not the case. Neither prescriptivism nor descriptivism is wrong or bad, they both have their uses in different situations. Prescriptivism and descriptivism used together in a single document or communication usually yields more favorable results than either could produce alone.

Prescriptivism and descriptivism are not only applied in grammar, but can also be applied to larger structures. Depending on the way a sentence is written, it could be more descriptive or more prescriptive. The same can be said for the style of paragraphs, papers, chapters, and even books. Books such as in Saller's *The Subversive Copy Editor (Or, How to Negotiate Good Relationships with your Writers, your Colleagues, and yourself)* and Rude's *Technical Editing* can be defined in terms of prescriptivism and descriptivism. I will be looking at the stylistic

choices in Saller's *The Subversive Copy Editor* and Rude's *Technical Editing* to determine which one is more effective. Specifically, I will be comparing the language used in each book's section on work relationships in editing. Both books have elements of both approaches to language, but Saller's *Subversive Copy Editor* follows a more descriptive approach to language while Rude's *Technical Editing* follows a more prescriptive approach.

In chapter two, Saller has identified "six habits to cultivate" that is similar to a list in "strategies for working with writers" called "managing efficiently" of chapter 15 in Rude's book. I will go over each list point by point and determine which is descriptive and which is prescriptive while comparing the effectiveness of each. It is worth noting that each of these books is aimed at different audiences and what will be most effective for each audience "…depends on the type of information… and the style of writing…" (Kokil et al 4). I will start with Saller's list, then move to Rude's list, and finally compare the similar points.

Saller's six habits are ask first, and ask nicely; don't sneak (much); eliminate surprises; check in; keep it professional; and say "yes". Ask first, and ask nicely is a habit that helps editors avoid confusion and mistakes. If an editor is confused on a potential error, they should ask the writer or writers about it. They should also be sure to ask nicely so they do not offend the writer(s) or put the writer(s) on the defensive. An example of this strategy is emailing the writer a question like, "I noticed you have some sentence inversions in a couple sections your book. Is this by accident or on purpose? I'd like to speak with you about it when you have the chance." Don't sneak (much) is a habit of editing documents in track changes mode and only turning it off to fix small errors. If there is a repeated small error, the editor should make a comment saying that the specific error was corrected with track changes turned off in other words, corrected

silently. For example, "the paragraphs should be indented with the ruler of the word processor instead of using the tab key. Corrected silently hereafter."

Eliminate surprises is a habit of letting the writer know what the editor's expectations are, of who is responsible for what, and of when soft and hard deadlines are expected to be met. An example of this is sending a quick email to the writer after sending their manuscript back in the mail to let them know when it should arrive and when you will need to hear their thoughts on the edits that were made by. Check in is a way of keeping in touch with the writer via email or other traceable communication method to make sure everything is on track, to remind the writer of approaching deadlines, and to ask for feedback on edits. For example, "I'm wondering if you got the manuscript yesterday in the mail. Could you let me know if you have it?" Keep it professional is a habit of using "Dear Mr/Ms Lastname" in emails until the client says it's okay to call them by their first name. This habit also is to make sure that when editing needs to get done, it does without upsetting anyone. A writer and an editor's relationship may evolve into friendship, but they have to stay professional when they are doing their job. Say "yes" is a habit of listening to the writer and being willing to let them keep their writing as it was before the editor made changes, especially if the writer has explained their reason for wanting it in that particular way. For example, a writer could explain sentence inversions as being part of a character's dialect and that it is important to keep the sentence inversions even though they are grammatically incorrect.

Rude's strategies for working with writers and managing efficiently includes participate early, clarify your expectations, work with the writer throughout development, don't surprise, and be prompt. Participate early is a strategy to avoid conflict and confusion between editor and writer. If the editor is involved in the planning stage of the writing, they can collaborate with the

writer on what the project's overall goals are. In this way, editors and writers will not argue about how many images and how to format images: right, left, or center justified. Clarify your expectations is a strategy that will help keep the project on time and keep everyone on the same page. These expectations include sending the writer general guidelines and/or the organization's style guide, clarifying assumptions about readers and purpose, illustrations, length, expectations of content, and the schedule. For example, Rude's book has an assumption and expectation that technical editors will use the book to aid them in the editing process and her content matches that expectation and assumption.

Work with the writer throughout development is a strategy that allows changes to the schedule to be made as they come up rather than at the end of the original timeline. This way the writer and editors do not cost their company/companies money by having an unexpected last-minute delay. Don't surprise is a strategy that communicates the editor's plans for editing and if the editor plans to change the editing plan, they will have to explain to the writer why before doing more editing that was originally planned. This strategy also allows the editor to let the writer know if there were extensive edits made. Be prompt is a strategy that will help to help the writer know when to expect work back from the editor.

The similar points are don't surprise and eliminate surprises; and check in, work with the writer throughout development, and clarify expectations. The way each list explains it's points is different in terms of wording. Don't surprise is phrased using sentences and phrases like "Share your plans for editing with the writer" (Rude 344) while eliminate surprises uses sentences like "You might send him the manuscript just as he's leaving for two weeks of incommunicado research for a cover story on gorilla tracking in Centeral African Republic" (Saller 17). The first of these two sentences is telling the reader what the rule is that must be followed and can

therefore be called a prescriptive sentence. Saller's sentence is more informal, casual, and similar to the way the same message would be phrased in a conversation so this sentence can be termed a descriptivist sentence.

Work with the writer throughout development uses phrases like "If plans need to be adjusted for any reason, it's better to do so midway than to wait until the end" (Rude 342) and clarify expectations uses phrases like "Guidelines should be available to writers before they write that cover usage, punctuation, and spelling conventions (e.g., spelling of technical terms), documentation style, and format (e.g., headings, margins, spacing)" (Rude 341-42). Rude continues, here, to use prescriptivist sentences by way of telling the reader what to send the writer before they write and what that should include. Finally, check in uses phrases like "Just because someone at CyberWidgets International signed for it, doesn't mean languishing in a corner of the mailroom" to let the reader know why they should check in with their writer (Saller 18). This is one of Saller's more humorous descriptivist sentences as it, and others, combine wit and humor with an informal, colloquial tone.

It would seem as though Saller's book is written in a descriptive style while Rude's book is written in a prescriptive style from only these few sentences. These sentences are able to represent the style I found each book had when reading these books over the summer. However, this categorization of one being prescriptive and the other being descriptive might affect how creditable each book seems in academia. David Green did a study on how the style of an academic excerpt on learning and teaching and had participants underline aspects of the text according to five categories. These were words, phrases, or sentences that "(A) seemed to be specialist terms that need greater explanation (i.e. problematic meaning). (B) seemed to be incomprehensible jargon or meaningless buzz-words (i.e. problematic word-form). (C) were felt

to be too academic. (D) were felt not to be academic enough. (E) were felt to be irritating" (Green 5). Analysis using Green's categories can help determine whether my initial result of Saller's sentence style being descriptive and Rude's sentence style being prescriptive is correct.

For my second analysis of Rude's and Saller's books, I will focus on the categories D, and E as well as assuming these books are being read by a general audience of scholars in various academic fields. Rude's first sentence, "Share your plans for editing with the writer", some readers may consider it to fall under both categories D and E (Rude 344). These readers may categorize this sentence as E because the sentence sounds very dry and authoritative. The second sentence from Rude, "If plans need to be adjusted for any reason, it's better to do so midway than to wait until the end" (Rude 342), could be categorized by readers as category E because it is also dry and authoritative. Rude's last sentence, "Guidelines should be available to writers before they write that cover usage, punctuation, and spelling conventions (e.g., spelling of technical terms), documentation style, and format (e.g., headings, margins, spacing)", could be categorized by readers as belonging to E (Rude 341-42). This categorization is due to the use of parenthesis can feel disruptive if a reader wants to know what guidelines to send to the writer but do not need at the moment to know examples of what the guidelines should include. This sentence also seems to be like something stereotypical grammar and editing books, which many readers will be irritated with. From this second analysis, it appears that my initial results were correct about Rude's sentence style being prescriptive.

Saller's first quote, "You might send him the manuscript just as he's leaving for two weeks of incommunicado research for a cover story on gorilla tracking in Centeral African Republic", could be viewed by readers as falling under category D (Saller 17). This is because of the informal style and colloquial tone of the sentence and it does not contain words or phrases a

reader would expect in an editing or grammar book. The second quote from Saller, "Just because someone at CyberWidgets International signed for it, doesn't mean languishing in a corner of the mailroom", some readers may also determine to be category D (Saller 18). These readers may decide this sentence under category D because of similar reasons to the first quote. This final part of the second analysis confirms my initial results about Saller's sentence style being descriptive.

Although this hypothetical general audience of scholars may have found some of the style choices to be irritating or not academic enough, they would be very likely to understand the meaning each author had in mind when writing these sentences. In the end, as Kelley quotes, "'… *it matters only whether a large majority of the reading audience accurately perceives what the author had in mind.*'--George Gopen and Judith Swan *The Science of Scientific Writing*" (2, original emphasis). In the end, neither Saller's descriptive style nor Rude's prescriptive style is hindering their audience's ability to understand what is written in their books.

One of the reasons this hypothetical audience would have an easy understanding of the author's message is because they follow some helpful tips. In Kelley's "Sentence Structure of Technical Writing", there are several tips for improving writing. These tips include advice on clarity, brevity, simplicity, and word choice. Both Saller and Rude follow most of these tips. They both avoid jargon to improve the clarity of their books, put the most important thing first to improve brevity, and use great word choice and use details wisely to communicate their ideas, as seen in the above sentences. However, Rude unlike Saller, uses words efficiently in less is more fashion than to improve brevity, as evident in all three quotes from her book.

Additionally, some readers may find this ease of understanding comes from the use of everyday language rather than academic terms. Most people will understand this type of language and agree "that '[s]traightforward language is preferred to the obscure or complex'"

(Green 6). The more colloquial tone Saller uses also adds to the ease of understanding her book while the efficient less-is-more style Rude uses adds to the ease of understanding her book. On the whole, as readers will understand both books, which they choose to use on their own comes down to two factors: what they are trying to edit and which style they prefer descriptive or prescriptive. Technical editors, for work purposes, will be likely to choose Rude's book as it is called *Technical Editing* and is specifically written for them. At any other time, all readers will be more likely to choose Saller's book because it is more colloquial and humorous.

Both of these books work well as technical documents, though for slightly different fields. Rude's book is more applicable, as already stated, to technical writing and editing. Saller's book is more suited to general writing and editing. Each book has a mix of prescriptive and descriptive methods but leans more heavily on one than the other. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, combining prescriptive and descriptive styles often yields better results than either style could produce on their own.

An example of Saller using prescriptivism within her descriptive prose is in the names of her six habits: ask first, and ask nicely; don't sneak (much); eliminate surprises; check in; keep it professional; and say "yes" (16-22). These are prescriptive because each habit is telling the reader that they must do something, such as check in with the writer. This mix of prescriptivism and descriptivism helps readers to understand what the author means. When Saller is more prescriptive, she is noting that while the reader is having fun reading her text, they need to pay attention to the particular prescriptive statement. Saller is pointing out that the reader needs to follow the "rule" she is telling them about and will explain why with descriptivist statements after finishing the prescriptive statement.

The prescriptivist Rude is slightly descriptivist when explaining her point participate early "the idea that editors are only fixers of errors at the end of development invites conflict" (341). This is a slightly descriptive sentence because it uses "fixers of errors" instead of "editors are those who fix errors" or something similar. In Rude's case, her being descriptivist for a moment allows readers to more easily accept the prescriptive statements Rude makes. Rude is, at those moments, allowing the reader to be on the same level as her and to help them understand why her "rules" are so important while adding a small amount of dry humor to her book.

Saller's mainly descriptive style and Rude's mainly prescriptive style are aimed at different audiences that react well to the style each author has chosen. All writers, and especially technical writers, need to be aware of what style they choose for their audience as well as what their tone is: formal or colloquial. These choices will have different effects on readers and the writers are responsible for making their meaning clear through their choice of word, style and tone. All of the writing styles have their merits, depending on what audience is being written for. Although it may seem like descriptive and prescriptive styles are difficult to use together, Rude and Saller have proved it can be done.

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