Have you ever sat for half an hour in front of your computer trying to compose just the right message for an e-mail? How many times do you read the same passage to make sure your message comes across stern, yet non-confrontational? Perhaps you've received a message from someone in which you thought their tone was a little uncalled for, or received an e-mail that was so grammatically off the map that you started to think less of the person who sent it? I speak of e-mail only because it is used so commonly today, but people have had communication anxiety since the dawn of the printed word. If you've experienced any of these situations, you appreciate grammar for its ability to guide our words to convey the intended meaning. Grammar is the skeleton upon which we dress our message. Without it, expressing ourselves the way we intend proves difficult if not impossible. Still, proponents of correct grammar usage, like author Lynne Truss, often get a bad rap for being nagging elitists and are referred to as pedants by those who deem grammar nothing more than a stylistic choice. Yet if English is to be used as a global language, as author Bill Bryson says it already is, then prescribed grammar is necessary because it provides a critical starting point for anyone learning English as a second language.

In his book *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*, Bill Bryson stakes a claim for English as being "the most global of languages" (12). As he points out, English is praised for its simplicity while simultaneously feared for its complexity (11-20). This may seem
contradictory, and indeed it is. There is a gauntlet of rules, punctuation, and illogical phonetics, but compared with other languages, it strikes a balance between being too simple to communicate certain ideas, and being overly complicated with unique words or characters (117-120). Observations about the complications of the English language demonstrate the complexity that remains as a result of its evolution through time. In other words, when it comes to English grammar, there's still a lot up for debate. So who is debating? What are the arguments? Why does this debate matter? When it comes to good grammar, Bryson's research can be summarized as this: There are certain rules in place to maintain clarity, but after that, it's really just a matter of taste (134-146). Basically, there are prescriptivists on one side who argue clarity is key and rules should be followed, and there are descriptivists on the other side who say that users of the language should choose its path.

Prescriptivism is the practice of prescribing grammar rules: continuously maintaining the framework of our language and passing it on to others. Prescribed grammar is what we learned in elementary school. Most dreaded it - I loved it. Learning grammar was like learning the rules to a game and then getting to play it. There was a right and wrong way to set up a sentence and if I placed words or punctuation in different places, I could change the meaning of the sentence entirely! The more rules I knew, the better I'd be at the game. But, accidentally misplace a modifier, and there goes a mark on the quiz. In her book *Eats Shoots and Leaves*, Lynne Truss shares this enthusiasm and supplies many examples. Here's one:

A woman, without her man, is nothing.

A woman: without her, man is nothing. (15-16)

These two short sentences demonstrate how grammar (in this specific case, punctuation) holds the power to drastically alter what is said. Although these sentences harbour the same words in the same order, the punctuation used makes them completely opposite statements. Prescriptivists believe, as I've said, that there is a right and wrong way to present your language. These rules
must be followed in order to convey a message clearly without misinterpretation. In regard to
the aforementioned summary of Bill Bryson's research, prescriptivists insist that clarity is key.

The other side of the grammar debate is descriptivism. Descriptivists are more likely to
argue that grammar is a matter of taste. They describe how language is actually used, rather than
how it should be used. Descriptivism comes in handy when technology advances and we need
new words to describe them. Where would we be if we did not have a word for disk drive,
television or internet? Descriptivism is a commentary on how people are using and evolving the
language in real time, and it is absolutely necessary. A language, through time, cannot be
expected to remain static. However, in order for English to remain as Bill Bryson says, "the
most global of languages" (12), prescriptivist rules need to stay firmly intact, so that English
remains accessible to everyone who wants to use it.

Technology like e-mail and text messaging has made communication faster and easier;
there is no doubt. However, due to their fast and easy nature, such media can make writers feel
rushed, causing them to skip crucial steps in the writing process that are there for good reason. A
capital gets missed here, a period dropped there, and little by little the message loses clarity. Yet
there is an ever-so-polite battle raging between the pedants and the non-pedants over whether
clarity is really the issue at hand. Stephen Fry, a self-proclaimed non-pedant, beautifully asserts
in a podcast of his, that everyone in a check-out line understands what is meant by "5 items or
less" even though the grammatically correct way to state it would be “5 items or fewer,” so
pedants should let the issue slide. His rant is so well crafted, in fact, including plays on words
and intentional incorrectness, that one could counter his argument, charging he knew the rules
quite well before he broke them. For those who are new to the language and may not yet know
all the rules, mistakes they see in newspapers or signs (or podcast rants) can be interpreted as
correct and serve as tricky obstacles to overcome when learning a new language.

Commercials, billboard slogans, and various other means of advertisement are created by
marketers, not English professors. Secondary to the lessons learned in an English class, this landscape of questionable grammar usage is what those new to the language are immersed in if they are learning the language in an English-speaking society. Lawrence Casler demonstrates some of these rule-bending usages in his article "The 1983 Corporate Bad Grammar Awards." One example he abhors is an ad for Kraft Dinner in which a child is scripted to claim, "It's more cheesier" (45). When asked why they intentionally wrote a grammatical error into their ad, they responded, "Advertisements [...] must attract attention, and mistakes attract attention" (45). Fair enough. Those well versed in grammar would probably raise an eyebrow at the redundant phrase "more cheesier." However, someone just learning the language may not. Therein lies the danger. While some can turn a blind eye to bad grammar in everyday life, there are others who do not have the skills to recognize mistakes when they see them, potentially taking these mistakes to be correct. Further, it could be said that those learning English as a second language do not have the skills needed to "code-switch" between good grammar and bad.

Kristen Hawley Turner's article "Flipping the Switch: Code-Switching from Text Speak to Standard English" describes code-switching as what people do to alter their language according to the situation. For instance, the way one speaks to a friend on the walk home from school is not the way one would speak during a job interview. Stephen Fry, who mentions how one might "dress up" their language in his aforementioned podcast, seems to be aware of code-switching as well. Code-switching is what lets native English speakers ignore signs in grocery stores that say "5 items or less" or ads claiming something is "more cheesier." Native speakers see these grammatically questionable usages and they may (if they are pedants) or may not cringe because they know it's incorrect, but undoubtedly they get the meaning. Where the problem lies is with those new to English or with those not so strong with their grammar skills. These people may take misprints and grammatical errors as fact because they do not yet possess the skills necessary to defend themselves from these incorrect usages; they are not well versed enough with the
language to code-switch.

Some readers may challenge my view that prescriptivism is necessary at all. After all, many of our rules for English grammar came from arbitrary beginnings or languages other than English. Bryson discusses this topic at length in his chapter "Good English and Bad" (134-146). Indeed, my own argument, that we should follow a set of rules when constructing a thought because it maintains clarity, seems to ignore the fact that many of our accepted rules, spellings and phonetics are illogical and do not follow expected patterns or even make sense on a basic level. English teachers Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia Dunn sum up this argument clearly in their article "Analyzing Grammar Rants: An Alternative to Traditional Grammar Instruction" when they say, "Standard English does not really make any more sense than nonstandardized dialects of English - in some cases, Standard English is simply a set of sanctioned language idiosyncrasies" (74). On the one hand, I agree with those like Lindblom and Dunn who make the point that many of our rules are arbitrary. But on the other hand, I still insist that arbitrary or not, the rules should be followed in order for English users to remain on the same page, so to speak. Further, it can even be argued that in rare situations, good grammar is a matter of life and death. In his article "Reading for Readiness: The Case for Fleet Literacy," Anthony Mortimer presses the importance of improved literacy in the U.S. Navy by describing an event he witnessed. Mortimer was on board a ship where a naval technician caused a fire while repairing equipment because he could not interpret the written instructions (32). This is an extreme example, of course, but without a good base in grammar, literacy suffers. When literacy suffers, any number of things can go wrong.

My point here—that grammar prescriptivists should be valued rather than brushed off as nagging elitists—should interest those who have been irked by grammar flubs infiltrating their inbox, or misuses of apostrophes in store window advertisements. Beyond this limited audience, however, my point should speak to anyone who cares about the larger issue of being able to
communicate ideas properly with everyone who uses English around the world, without confusion or misinterpretation. Grammar is the frame upon which we build the language. Just as buildings cannot be constructed properly without certain structures and tools, ideas cannot be communicated effectively without first understanding certain rules and regulations of the language. Ultimately, communication itself is on the line, and prescriptivists are simply putting an oar in to maintain it at an agreed-upon standard so that our language is accessible to all who'll use it. Prescriptivists defend our ability to communicate our ideas accurately. Bill Bryson tells us the world is trending toward using English as its second language (170-195). If it is to be the "Mother Tongue" as he puts it, we need to maintain it at an agreed-upon state. For instance, math is a universal language; its rules are the same wherever it is taught so that anyone can learn it and communicate ideas through it. Any language that does not prescribe proper rules for itself cannot be properly learned, and while naysayers of pedantry call it elitist, isn't a language that is clear for native speakers but not clear for those just learning it, also elitist?
Works Cited


