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MICHAEL SWAN

Practical English Usage

Fully Revised **International** Edition

- complete topic-by-topic **grammar**
- guide to over 250 **vocabulary** problems

OXFORD

PRACTICAL ENGLISH USAGE

Michael Swan

PRACTICAL
ENGLISH
USAGE

Fourth Edition

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Dedication

To John Eckersley, who first encouraged my interest in this kind of thing.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all the people who have helped me with the preparation of this fourth edition. I owe a particular debt to Professor Bas Aarts of University College, London, and Dr Catherine Walter, of Linacre College, Oxford, who both read all of the material in draft, and whose detailed comments and suggestions have substantially improved the book. I am equally indebted to Professor Loretta Gray of Central Washington University, who also read the whole text, and whose comprehensive advice on questions of American usage has provided valuable support for this aspect of the revision. Many teachers in different countries were good enough to respond to a request for suggestions for possible additions and improvements: my thanks to the individuals and organisations concerned. My thanks also to members of the staff of the London School of English, who kindly participated in a very constructive workshop designed to explore ways of using the book. Several specialists have generously shared their knowledge of specific areas of language and usage, and numerous teachers, students and colleagues have taken the trouble to make comments and suggestions regarding particular entries. Their input, too, has benefited the book considerably. I must also reacknowledge my debt to the many consultants and correspondents whose help and advice with the preparation of earlier editions continue as an important contribution to the fourth.

Any pedagogic grammarian owes an enormous debt to the academic linguists on whose research he or she is parasitic. There is not enough space to mention all the scholars of the last hundred years or so on whose work I have drawn directly or indirectly, even if I had a complete record of my borrowings. But I must at least pay homage to two monumental reference works of the present generation: the *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (Longman, 1985), and the *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, by Huddleston, Pullum and others (Cambridge University Press, 2002). Their authoritative accounts of the facts of English structure and usage constitute an essential source of information for anyone writing pedagogic grammar materials today.

Finally, it is with particular pleasure that I express my gratitude, once again, to the editorial, design and production team at Oxford University Press, whose professional expertise is matched only by their concern to make an author's task as trouble-free as possible.

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Practical English Usage

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Introduction

What is Practical English Usage?

Practical English Usage is a combined usage guide and learner's grammar. It is intended mainly for advanced students and teachers of English as a foreign or second language; it may also be useful to teacher trainers and materials writers. It is not addressed to native speakers of English, who need a rather different kind of reference book.

A usage guide

Usage guides deal with problem points: words and structures that people have difficulty with, or disagree about. English, like all languages, is full of problems for the foreign learner. Some of these points are easy to explain – for instance, the formation of questions, the difference between *since* and *for*, or the meaning of *after all*. Other problems are more tricky, and cause difficulty even for advanced students and teachers. How exactly is the present perfect used? When do we use past tenses to be polite? What are the differences between *at*, *on* and *in* with expressions of place? We can say *a chair leg* – why not ~~*a cat leg*~~? When can we use the expression *do so*? When is *the* used with superlatives? Is *unless* the same as *if not*? What are the differences between *come* and *go*, between *each* and *every*, between *big*, *large* and *great*, or between *fairly*, *quite*, *rather* and *pretty*? Is it correct to say *There's three more bottles in the fridge*? How do you actually say $3 \times 4 = 12$? And so on, and so on.

Practical English Usage is a guide to problems of this kind. It deals with over 1,000 points which regularly cause difficulty to foreign students of English. It will be useful, for example, to a learner who is not sure how to use a particular structure, or who has made a mistake and wants to find out why it is wrong. It will also be helpful to a teacher who is looking for a clear explanation of a difficult language point. There is very full coverage of grammar, as well as explanations of a large number of common vocabulary problems. There are also some entries designed to clarify more general questions (e.g. formality, slang, the nature of standard English and dialects) which students and teachers may find themselves concerned with.

Problems are mostly explained in short separate entries. This makes it possible to give a clear complete treatment of each point, and enables the user to concentrate just on the question that he or she needs information about. In longer entries, basic information is generally given first, followed by more detailed explanations and discussion of more advanced points.

A complete student's grammar

The grammatical entries in *Practical English Usage* are grouped into 28 Sections, each dealing with a major grammatical topic (e.g. present tenses, passives, nouns and noun phrases, prepositions, relative clauses). So the book can be used not only as a guide to particular usage problems, but also as a systematic reference grammar. For users who like to work in this way, each Section begins with one or two pages giving a general introduction to the grammatical topic, together with a list of common mistakes that are dealt with in the entries that follow.

Vocabulary

The grammar Sections include a good deal of information about the structures used with particular words. In addition, the last three Sections of the book deal specifically with vocabulary questions, and include an A-Z guide to over 250 common word problems of various kinds.

Approach and style

I have tried to make the presentation as practical as possible. Each entry contains an explanation of a problem, examples of correct usage, and (when this is useful) examples of typical mistakes. In some cases, an explanation may be somewhat different from that found in many learners' grammars; this is because the rules traditionally given for certain points (e.g. conditionals or indirect speech) are not always accurate or helpful. Explanations are, as far as possible, in simple everyday language. Where it has been necessary to use grammatical terminology, I have generally preferred to use traditional terms that are simple and easy to understand, except where this would be seriously misleading. Some of these terms (e.g. future tense) would be regarded as unsatisfactory by academic grammarians, but I am not writing for specialists. There is a glossary of the terminology used in the book on pages xx-xxix.

The kind of English described

The explanations deal mainly with standard everyday southern British English, but contrasts between British and American English are given detailed attention. There are also brief notes on several other varieties (e.g. Australian and Indian English). Information about stylistic differences (e.g. between formal and informal usage, or spoken and written language) is provided where this is appropriate.

Correctness and rules

If people say that a form is not 'correct', they can mean several different things. They may for instance be referring to a sentence like *I have seen her yesterday*, which normally only occurs in the English of foreigners. They may be thinking of a usage like *less people* (instead of *fewer people*), which is common in standard English but regarded as wrong by some people. Or they may be talking about forms like *ain't* or 'double negatives', which are used in speech by many British and American people, but which do not occur in the standard dialects and are not usually written. This book is mainly concerned with the first kind of 'correctness': the differences between British or American English and 'foreign' English. However, there is also information about cases of divided usage in standard English, and about a few important dialect forms.

The rules given in this book are **descriptive**: they explain what actually happens in standard spoken and written English. Some usage guides give **prescriptive** rules – rules devised by people who feel that the language should be tidied up or protected against corruption. Such rules do not always correspond to actual usage (the rule about not using *less* with plurals is an example). In *Practical English Usage*, I avoid giving rules which do not describe the language as it is actually used, though I mention their existence where this is useful.

What this book does not do

Practical English Usage is not a complete guide to the English language. As the title suggests, its purpose is practical: to give learners and their teachers the most important information they need in order to deal with common language problems. Within this framework, the explanations are as complete and accurate as I can make them. However, it is not always helpful or possible in a book of this kind to deal with all the details of a complex structural point; so readers may well find occasional exceptions to some of the grammatical rules given here. Equally, the book does not aim to replace a dictionary. While it gives information about common problems with the use of a number of words, it does not attempt to describe other meanings or uses of the words beside those points that are selected for attention. Nor does it attempt to cover all the vocabulary problems that learners may meet: for this, another complete book would be needed.

Changes in the fourth edition

After consultation with users, the alphabetical organisation which was used in previous editions has been replaced by a thematic arrangement (see above), so as to make it easier to search for information. A number of amendments have also been made to particular entries to reflect recent changes in the language – for instance, the reduced frequency of some modal verbs, the disappearance of *shall*, or cases where British English is adopting American usage.

How much do mistakes matter?

It depends on how much people need, or want, a high level of correctness when speaking or writing another language. For many learners this is important – for instance for work, examinations, or their own personal goals – and *Practical English Usage* will help them to approach standard British/American native-speaker usage. However, it is important for such learners not to become obsessed with correctness, or to worry every time they make a mistake. It is quite unnecessary to speak or write a language like a native speaker in order to communicate effectively, and very few adults in fact achieve a perfect command of another language. For some learners, on the other hand, accuracy is relatively unimportant: people can use English successfully for international communication even when their grammar differs considerably from native-speaker models. However, too many such differences can make a speaker or writer difficult to understand, so it is good even for these learners to aim at a reasonable level of correctness.

Note also that ‘mistake’ is a relative term. The mistakes listed in this book are wrong if produced by someone aiming to write standard British or American English. They would not necessarily be incorrect in some other varieties of the language.

How to find things: the Index

The best way to find information about a particular point is to look in the Index at the end of the book. Most points are indexed under several different names, so it is not difficult to locate the entry you need. For instance, if you want to know about using *to* instead of a whole infinitive, in structures like *I hope to*, *I'd like to*, you can find the number of the entry where this is explained by looking in the Index under ‘to’, ‘infinitives’, ‘ellipses’ or ‘leaving out words’. (On the other hand, it would obviously not be helpful to look under ‘hope’ or ‘want’: the rule is a general one about infinitive structures, not about these two verbs in particular.)

Using the Index

to (infinitive marker) 89.6; used instead of whole infinitive 280.1; weak and strong pronunciation 315.3

infinitives SECTIONS 8–10; introduction 88; progressive, perfect, passive and negative infinitives 89; split infinitive 89.7; perfect infinitives (e.g. *to have left*) 90; without *to* 91; *to* instead of whole infinitive 280.1; as subject, object or complement 92; infinitive or *-ing* form 95; infinitive or *-ing* form with different uses 105; after verbs 97; after verb + object 98; after *hear, see, etc* + object 110; after adjectives 101; after *easy, difficult, impossible, etc* 101.4; after superlatives (e.g. *the youngest person to*) 101.3; after nouns and pronouns 102; after

280 ellipsis: infinitives

1 **to** used instead of whole infinitive: *We hope to.*

We can use *to* instead of the whole infinitive of a repeated verb (and following words), if the meaning is clear.

'Are you and Gillian getting married?' 'We hope to.'

'Let's go for a walk.' 'I don't want to.'

I don't dance much now, but I used to a lot.

Sorry I shouted at you. I didn't mean to.

'Somebody ought to clean up the bathroom.' 'I'll ask Jack to.'

Be and *have* (used for possession) are not usually dropped.

There are more flowers than there used to be. (NOT *... than there used to.*)

She hasn't been promoted yet, but she ought to be. (NOT *... but she ought to*.)

You've got more freckles than you used to have (NOT *You've got more freckles than you used to.*)

ellipsis (leaving out words) 275–280; after adjectives 278.1; after *and, but and or* 276; after *as* and *than* 275.7; after auxiliary verbs 279; after conjunctions 275.11; after determiners 278.2; after *if* 244.6; after question words 275.8; at the beginning of a sentence 277; before question tags 306.8; in advertisements, instructions, etc 291; in emails, etc 290.2; in headlines 292.1; in infinitives (e.g. *I don't want to*) 280.1; in noun phrases 278; in replies 275.1; leaving out articles 142; leaving out *if* 244.4; leaving out prepositions 214; leaving out prepositions before *that* 210.1; leaving out *that* 265; object relative pronoun 234.4; subject relative pronoun 237.19; ellipsis causing comprehension problems 285.6–7

leave preposition 213; + object + infinitive 98; and *forget* 470; with preparatory *it* (e.g. *I'll leave it to you to decide*) 269.4; with two objects 8.1

leave off ...*ing* 100.1

leaving out words see **ellipsis**

left (= remaining) 509

leisurely adjective and adverb 194.1

How to find things: the Contents overview

Larger grammatical topics (e.g. 'simple present', 'articles', 'reflexive pronouns') can also be found quite easily by looking through the Contents Overview on pages x-xvi.

4 Talking about the Future

INTRODUCTION

- 35 *going to* 36 present progressive for future
- 37 simple present for future 38 *will*
- 39 *will, going to* and present progressive: advanced points
- 40 future perfect 41 future progressive
- 42 *be to* + infinitive: *I am to ... , you are to ... , etc* 43 future in the past

12 Determiners: *a/an* and *the*; *my, your, etc*; *this, that, etc*

INTRODUCTION

- 133 articles: introduction 134 articles: basic information (A)
- 135 articles: basic information (B) 136 more about *the* 137 more about *a/an*
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- 141 *the*: difficult cases 142 special rules and exceptions
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- 174 personal pronouns: advanced points 175 singular *they*
- 176 possessive pronouns: *mine, yours, etc* 177 *a friend of mine, etc*
- 178 reflexive pronouns: *myself, etc*
- 179 reciprocal pronouns: *each other* and *one another*
- 180 *somebody, someone, anybody, anyone, etc*
- 181 *one, you* and *they*: used for people in general
- 182 *one* (substitute word): *a big one*

However, many smaller topics will not show up in the Contents Overview, because they do not have their own separate entries. So for instance to find what structures can be used with *expect* or *hope*, or what is the correct plural form of *phenomenon*, it is best to go to the Index.

Contents overview

This overview gives a general picture of the topics covered in the book; it is not a complete guide to the contents. References are to entry numbers. To find information about a particular point, consult the Index at the back of the book.

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1 Verbs

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1 irregular verbs 2 active verb tenses 3 progressive structures
4 non-progressive verbs 5 progressive with *always*, etc
6 perfect structures 7 subjects, objects and complements
8 verbs with two objects 9 verbs with both active and passive meanings
10 verb + object + complement: *You make me nervous*.
11 linking verbs: *be, seem, look*, etc 12 two-part verbs: phrasal verbs
13 two-part verbs: prepositional verbs 14 verbs of movement: *she ran in*, etc
15 verb + verb: auxiliary verbs 16 verb + verb: other structures

2 *Be, have and do*

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17 *be*: general 18 *be*: progressive forms 19 *be* with auxiliary *do* 20 *there is*
21 *have*: introduction 22 *have*: auxiliary verb 23 *have*: actions
24 *have (got)*: possession, relationships and other states 25 *be* and *have*
26 *do*: introduction 27 *do*: auxiliary verb 28 *do*: substitute verb (*I may do*.)
29 *do so/it/that*

3 Present Tenses

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32 present progressive 33 stories, commentaries and instructions
34 present tenses: advanced points

4 Talking about the Future

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42 *be to + infinitive: I am to ... , you are to ... , etc* 43 future in the past

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- 50 present perfect progressive
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- 75 *have (got) to* and *must* 76 weaker obligation: *should* and *ought to*
- 77 weaker obligation: *had better* 78 expectations: *supposed to*
- 79 willingness: *will, can*
- 80 instructions and requests: *will, would, can, could, might, shall*
- 81 permission: *can, could, may, might, be allowed to* 82 ability: *can* and *could*
- 83 ability: advanced points 84 *can* and *could* with *see, hear*, etc
- 85 *be able to* 86 typical behaviour: *can, could, may, might, will, would*
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- 91 infinitives without *to*: *I saw you come in.*
- 92 infinitive as subject or complement 93 *-ing* forms: introduction
- 94 *-ing* form as subject, object or complement
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12 Determiners: *a/an* and *the*; *my, your, etc*; *this, that, etc*

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