

# THE QUEEN'S ENGLISH SOCIETY POLICY DOCUMENT

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The principal policies and aims of The Queen's English Society are clearly set out as follows in the Society's Constitution:

**The objects of the Society are to educate the public in, and to promote the maintenance, knowledge, understanding, development and appreciation of the English language as used both colloquially and in literature, and to discourage the intrusion of anything detrimental to clarity or euphony.**

Members of the Society are expected to agree with these general aims, but need not agree with all items in this policy document. Many aspects of English cause controversy, as shown by vigorous discussions at many Society meetings. Sometimes there are clear 'rights' and 'wrongs'; e.g., a singular verb with a plural subject is wrong. At other times, the best practice is a matter of taste, logic and style, not of fact or rules, although individuals may have very strong preferences. For example, views on the best pronunciation of 'brass' differ in different parts of the country, although the Society does not presume to stand in judgement of regional accents provided that they be used in a cultured manner; dialects are a different matter and fall outside the purview of "Queen's English" and are further discussed under *Standard English and Dialects* below. And then again, some words have more than one 'correct' spelling, such as connection/connexion. Many special literary effects are achieved by 'breaking the rules': breaking certain of them is not always wrong, but without the general presumption that the rules will be obeyed, such literary devices would lose their effect. The Queen's English Society's Policy Document is therefore not a set of rigid prescriptions

and proscriptions, nor can it be a comprehensive text book; instead it gives our policies on important aspects of English. In many aspects of English, such as spelling, punctuation and syntax, correctness is a great aid to clarity and to effective, unambiguous communication. Striving for correctness, where there are clear 'right' and 'wrong' practices, is therefore often of real practical value. The Queen's English Society is concerned about the practical consequences of the present low standards of English, as well as with 'rights' and 'wrongs'.

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## 2. STANDARDS

The Queens English Society was founded in 1972 by a small group of people who loved the English language and were concerned at the widespread deterioration in standards.<sup>ii</sup> Those standards have continued to fall in many areas, including education, the press, broadcasting and in the speech of many public figures. The Society aims to encourage high standards of written and spoken English; to defend the precision, subtlety and marvellous richness of the language against debasement and against changes which lead to ambiguity, confusion or ugliness.

Possible ways of raising standards include public campaigns by the Society, quoting examples of poor English, showing the harm that can result from poor English, which can lead to ambiguity and misunderstanding, and individual campaigns by members. Campaigning for better education in English language knowledge and usage is an obvious priority. Personal example can also be useful.

We believe that the Government and its local education authorities have a duty to monitor standards of English in schools, and to publish the results, even if they are embarrassing to those authorities. Where possible, comparable data should be collected over many years so that direct comparisons can be made of such things as spelling ability at different ages, reading ability and knowledge of grammatical terms.

Evidence of low or falling standards is easy to find. For example, The Times Educational Supplement, of 29<sup>th</sup> June 1990, reported that: 'Senior educational psychologists from nine education authorities have released confidential data, based on reading tests on more than 300,000 seven-year-olds, which suggest a marked decline in reading standards in primary schools. The psychologists say the data show conclusively that standards have deteriorated over the past four years. The number of children who are extremely poor readers has increased by 50 per cent since 1985, while in some areas the number has doubled, they say.' Evidence of poor English in broadcasting can be heard any day, as with sports commentators frequently using expressions such as 'They played good.' or weather-forecasters telling us that 'It looks like rain'. The then Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, Mr Kinnock, was quoted in The Sunday Telegraph of 8/7/1990, as saying 'The lads done magnificent.' In February 1990, Her Majesty's Inspectors reported that fewer than two primary school pupils in 10 were any good at grammar, spelling and punctuation, that few teachers knew how to teach grammar, and that schools seldom attached sufficient importance to it. In June 1990, Her Majesty's Inspectors reported that polytechnic science students had a poor command of spoken and written English. In December 1989, a senior policeman declared that: 'The standard of literacy of the average Metropolitan Police Officer is appalling.'

Similar sentiments have been expressed about university students of arts, science, engineering and medicine, and about student nurses. Some examples, from students, of low standards in spelling and in understanding the differences between similar words are given

later.

Even in literature, standards are often low. Duff Hart-Davis, in the Sunday Telegraph, on 14/4/1990, wrote that when he received the proofs of a book: 'I was appalled: the text looked as though it had been set by dyslexic Romanians, with no comprehension of English.' In the Sunday Telegraph, of 22/7/1990, Auberon Waugh stated that: 'It is my experience as editor of a small literary magazine that practically nobody in England knows how to punctuate.'

Newspapers, even those of 'quality', contain many errors of syntax, punctuation and spelling.

There are clearly plenty of areas in which Queen's English Society members can campaign, collectively and individually, for higher standards.

The Chairman of the London University Board of Studies in English stated in 1988 that students reading for honours degrees in English often wrote essays full of errors in grammar and spelling. As such degree students will be amongst the elite teachers of English in the future, the prospects for improved teaching standards are poor unless special training is given. Many teachers of English have not even reached GCE Advanced Level in the subject. A modern GCSE or GCE pass is itself no guarantee of good standards. The Daily Telegraph, on 21/12/1989, published extracts from documents of the Northern Examining Association, giving guidance on standards required for the award of particular grades in GCSE English language and literature. The documents included an example of a candidate's work which the board thought was so outstanding that it merited an A grade, 'despite lapses in spelling, structure and punctuation.' As one teacher, who would have awarded it a C grade, commented: 'Almost every paragraph the candidate writes displays evidence of the difficulties he has in expressing himself, yet the examiners commend his fluency, range of sentence construction, maturity and eloquence.'

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### **3. EDUCATION**

#### **(a). Aims**

The Queen's English Society believes that all our country's children, of any racial or social group, should receive a thorough grounding in the knowledge and use of English, including grammar, spelling, punctuation, reading and writing for a variety of purposes, legibility, clear speaking, and an acquaintance with some of the great classics of English literature, from a variety of periods. The levels to be striven for in any area should be clearly defined, and sufficient time allowed in the timetable. The following targets should be attainable by the majority of pupils by the time they leave secondary school:-

1. A reasonably wide general vocabulary, with a knowledge of almost all commonly used words, plus some specialist knowledge of words in subjects studied in detail.
2. An ability to spell common words correctly, to use a dictionary to check spellings and meanings; a knowledge of the different meanings of common sets of similar words, such as there/their, to/two/too, whether/weather.
3. An ability to express themselves in clear, unambiguous sentences, with a minimum of grammatical errors.
4. An appreciation that good punctuation aids readability and comprehension; a knowledge

of the names and functions of simple punctuation marks such as commas, question marks, hyphens, dashes, apostrophes, semicolons and colons, and an ability to use them.

5. An appreciation that language usage, orally or in writing, is an act of communication between people, and that communication is effective only when both the 'sender' and 'receiver' use a common language, with common, widely-accepted standards of structure (grammar, spelling, punctuation), and intelligible pronunciation and legible writing.

### **(b). Testing and Correction**

It helps both teacher and pupil if progress in learning is regularly monitored by testing, which can show whether specific points have been understood. Both understanding and learning need to be tested, perhaps with understanding being tested at intervals during a course, not necessarily by formal written tests, and learning tested at the end of a course or a section of a course. The form and frequency of the tests will differ according to circumstances, such as nature of the course, and the pupils' ages. It would usually be appropriate to test factual knowledge of English and the pupils' ability to use language in a variety of ways.

We believe that teachers should normally point out errors, e.g., in grammar, spelling or pronunciation, but obviously this should be done in a kind, constructive and sympathetic way, to encourage better results in future. Many school leavers seem quite unused to being corrected, which can create problems when employers try training them for adult jobs. Many undergraduates with bad spelling and poor grammar often resent correction, saying that no-one has told them before that these particular things are wrong. It seems difficult to believe them when they say that no-one has ever pointed out such distinctions as their/there, weather/whether, were/where, or affect/effect, which they frequently get wrong. All teachers, whatever their special subject area, should routinely draw attention to such errors. If all teachers made such corrections, it should result in much better standards of English. If only a few teachers do so, they tend to be regarded by the pupils as pedantic rather than helpful. When teachers make those errors themselves — for example in pupils' reports — they, too, should be corrected.

### **(c). Grammar and Sentence Analysis**

'Grammar' has been used in many senses, broad and restricted. It will be used here in the broad sense, as described by Sir Randolph Quirk at the 1989 Annual General Meeting of The Queen's English Society. He said that any language has two parts: first, the lexicon, the words, the vocabulary; second, the grammar, the rules by which the words are arranged and modified to make sense. Grammar therefore includes syntax, inflection and pronunciation.

Everyone needs to use the rules of grammar in writing, reading and speech, if comprehension is to occur. Grammar is in constant use and can not in any way be regarded as old-fashioned, whatever some educationalists may think. As with every other aspect of language, grammar can be taught well or badly, interestingly or dully, in helpful or unhelpful ways. The explicit teaching of grammatical rules, either in context or on their own, can be stimulating and can save an enormous amount of time, effort and frustration compared with expecting pupils to master the rules without ever being told them, as appears to be the policy in many areas of language education. If students are not explicitly told that plural subjects require plural verbs, for example, it may take a very long time for them to realise why some of their sentences sound wrong. It is necessary to teach the names of parts of speech in order

to discuss how sentences work and how they are constructed. With very young pupils, some substitutes may be used, such as 'doing word' for 'verb' and 'naming word' for noun, but terms such as 'verb', 'noun', 'adjective' and 'adverb' are simple and should be mastered in primary school.

Sentence analysis, at suitable levels for the age group concerned, should be taught in all schools, especially secondary schools. Sentence analysis is an excellent way of showing how different types of word are combined to make a unit of sense. It shows grammar (syntax) in action, and makes clear the functions of different parts of speech. Although parsing has been dismissed by some as 'mostly mechanical and uninteresting', sentence analysis can be taught as exciting detective work, as one tries to discover the function of each word in a sentence and the words' relationships to each other. It is a useful and fundamental skill, and should be taught as such. It is particularly valuable for the diagnosis of faults or problems in one's own writing and in that of others. If, like a car, a sentence does not run smoothly, then one can use diagnostic analysis to identify and locate the fault, so that it can be rectified. For example, a sentence might have a singular noun and a plural noun; sentence analysis to identify the subject of the verb helps one to get the verb ending right, and therefore helps to make the meaning of the whole sentence clear.

**It is not just members of our Society who wish to see grammar and sentence analysis taught in schools. Working professionals such as engineers (as stated in evidence to the Kingman Report, 1988), who see the practical problems arising from a lack of such knowledge when reports are written, estimates are made, or contracts are drawn up, have similar views. Strong support was received from over 4,000 members of the public when the Society presented its petition on this subject to the Secretary for Education and Science in 1988.**

#### **(d). Spelling**

Correct spelling is extremely important, as incorrect spelling leads easily to confusions of different words and different meanings. Examples were given above in section 3(b) on Testing and Correction. It is a subject of immediate practical value, not something to be pursued solely for reasons of abstract purity. We feel that the current educational trend not to correct spelling errors, 'so as not to discourage creativity', is wrong. Carried out sympathetically, correcting errors in spelling and grammar can help creativity, as what is created then has a clearer, more precise meaning and more impact.

#### **Examples of useful rules, modified from the Usborne Book of English Spelling:**

*"i" before "e" except after "c" when the sound is "e"; e.g., achieve/receive.*

*Plurals of words ending in "y". If there is a vowel before the "y", just add "s" to form the plural, e.g., monkey/monkeys. If there is a consonant before the "y", change the "y" to "i" and add "es"; e.g., fly/flies.*

*Adding suffixes beginning with a vowel to one syllable words. You double the final consonant when there is only one vowel before it, as in hot/hotter, rob/robber. If a one syllable word has two vowels or ends in two consonants you just add the suffix, as in feel/feeling, wreck/wreckage, cool/cooled.*

*Every English verb which ends in "r" preceded by one vowel, and with a stress on the last syllable, forms a noun with 'ence', as in occur/occurrence, confer/conference.*

Those people who do not regularly see the spelling standards of today's school children and higher education students may not realise just how low standards are. Evidence submitted to the Kingman Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language contained the following percentages of science undergraduates getting these words wrong: occurred, 67%; miniature, 55%; independent, 43%; separate, 36%; environment, 15%.

### **(e) Reading**

The Society accepts that experts differ as to which method of teaching reading is best, and that one particular method may not be best for all pupils. We favour methods which start from first principles, as these seem most logical, and for which there is support by the most evidence of their effectiveness. This means starting with teaching individual letters and their sounds, then groups and combinations of letters. The method known as 'synthetic phonics' therefore seems preferable compared with whole-word or word-shape methods, such as 'look-say'. The adoption of 'look-say' methods was accompanied by a large fall in reading standards. The 'real books' or 'emergent reading' method seems even worse, in our opinion, as it does not involve any systematic teaching of reading. Guessing words from pictures and context is not reading words.

### **(f) Scansion**

We believe that pupils should be taught, at an appropriate age, about the role of rhythm in poetry, with examples of common metres, as an aid to appreciating the aesthetic quality of language. A basic knowledge of scansion helps one to read poetry aloud and to appreciate the skills of great poets. It is an effective aid to pupils in improving their own poetry, which they should be encouraged to write. So many would-be pupil-poets try hard to be creative, yet produce clumsy-sounding verse as they have not been taught to trace the trouble by scanning their own lines as an aid to better creativity.

### **(g) Teaching the Teachers**

The Kingman Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language (1988) stated that: 'According to the most up-to-date statistics available, 28% of the total number of teachers of English in secondary schools have no discernible qualification beyond GCE O-level English, and they carry out 15% of the total amount of English taught in secondary schools.' The Kingman Committee recommended that all intending secondary teachers of subjects other than English should satisfactorily complete a course on knowledge about language — the Queen's English Society strongly supports that, and demands that all specialist teachers of English be well qualified in that subject in future. We welcome the Kingman Committee's recommendation that English generally and knowledge about language in particular be included in the list of national priority areas under the Local Education Authority Training Grants Scheme with effect from the earliest possible date.

The training of teachers of English, whether for primary or secondary schools, or further or higher education, is obviously of crucial importance for the standards and knowledge of English in the future. An A-level or higher qualification in English is highly desirable for all teachers of English, especially in secondary schools. Of all the areas of concern to our Society, the training of teachers, the specification of the relevant school and examination syllabuses, and the standards required in the examinations, are the most crucial. The

attitudes to English inculcated into future teachers and, through them, passed to the pupils, are also extremely important.

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#### **4. STANDARD ENGLISH AND DIALECTS**

A dialect is a variety of a language characteristic of a district or class, differing from other varieties in either or both syntax and or inflection, or both; it may also have differences in accent, but those are not enough on their own to make a dialect.

Local dialects are an important part of the English language, adding richness, variety and local colour. They often help to give a region a sense of identity, acting as a recognition signal for their users even when no longer in their home area. Local dialects, used locally, or to give character to a person in a play, for example, are wholly acceptable. There can be no objection to the use or teaching of English dialects in the appropriate region. Indeed, all children should be made aware of the existence of different forms of English. All children should also be taught to use spoken and written Standard English, so that there is one form of the language which can be used and understood by all, in Britain and internationally. If all this country's inhabitants could use Standard English, in speech and writing, each of them would have the ability to communicate easily with any of the others, from any region, class or group.

The reason for choosing Standard English as the universal type is that it is already the most widely used and understood form of English, in books, newspapers and most spoken usages. Having a standard, generally understood form of our language is also essential for overseas users and learners of English. With English as the major international language of science, medicine, commerce, the arts and air-traffic control, for example, the value of everyone being able to use and understand one standard form of the language is obvious. In a school with a great diversity of dialects, it would be impracticable for each child to be taught in his or her own dialect, so teaching Standard English is the simple solution.

The Queen's English Society believes that local dialects are fine for local use, but that Standard English is preferable for general use as it is more easily and widely understood. The Society respects traditional regional dialects, but deplores slovenly forms of English such as 'They never saw nobody', which can easily lead to confusions of meaning.

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#### **5. 'RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION' AND ACCENTS**

An accent is a characteristic mode of pronunciation typical of people of a particular group, such as people in a region, race or social group. The same arguments used above for Standard English and local dialects apply equally to 'Received Pronunciation' and regional accents. Some regional accents are often very difficult for outsiders to understand, although adding interesting variety to the language. For local purposes, such accents are fine, but for general communication, where many people may not easily follow a particular regional accent, one universally understood form of pronunciation is to be preferred. 'Received

Pronunciation' is the most suitable because it is the most widely understood British form, nationally and internationally, and should therefore be taught in all schools, with local accents also used locally where appropriate.

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## 6. DICTIONARIES: PRESCRIPTIVE OR DESCRIPTIVE?

Dictionaries are very important as information sources on word meanings, origins and spellings. Well-known dictionaries, whether large or small, are often regarded as the main sources of authority on various aspects of the English language, and are often used to settle arguments about word meanings. Lexicographers therefore play a very important part in conferring acceptability on particular meanings of words by determining which of a number of possible meanings are listed for a particular word in dictionaries. Some lexicographers see their role as prescribing which meanings are preferable for particular words; others see their role as describing many possible standard and 'non-standard' usages for a particular word, often with little guidance as to which meanings are most appropriate.

The consequences of these different approaches are important for the clarity of the language, as can be demonstrated by a simple example. The usual meaning of 'infer' is to deduce, to conclude from evidence, with humans making the inference. The usual meaning of 'imply' is to suggest, to hint, to express indirectly, with inanimate things, such as a report or an experimental result, able to imply, but not to infer. A purely descriptive dictionary might list 'to imply' as one meaning for 'to infer', hence continuing and upholding the confusion between the two terms. One dictionary gives 'imply' as one meaning for 'infer', then adds: 'a use often condemned, but generally accepted for over four centuries'. Another dictionary does not list 'infer' under 'imply' and puts: 'Usage: It is a common mistake to confuse *imply* (to hint, or state something indirectly) with *infer* (to deduce, or draw a conclusion from what is stated). The speaker or writer implies. The listener or reader infers.' Another dictionary gives using 'imply' for 'infer' as non-standard.

The more 'dictionary approved' different meanings a word has, the greater the scope for misunderstandings of meaning there is between writer and reader, or speaker and listener, as the context does not always make the particular intended meaning clear. In examples such as 'infer' and 'imply', the prescriptive approach is much more helpful to users of the dictionary (by making useful distinctions between the meanings) than the descriptive approach.

## 7. PLAIN ENGLISH OR RICH ENGLISH?

For some purposes, clear, simple English is ideal, for example in forms or instruction leaflets.

While plain English is clearly important in many contexts, the Queen's English Society wishes to encourage rich and imaginative English where appropriate, as in poetry, drama, fiction and some non-fiction. Schools should teach pupils to suit their style of writing to the context.

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## 8. THE MEDIA

The public media have certain obligations of social responsibility and education, in addition to commercial considerations. This particularly applies to programmes with many young listeners or viewers, who often readily adopt the speech patterns of media 'personalities', such as pop singers and footballers, however bad the English of such role-models may be while, at the same time, managing to hold aloof from any influences by educated or literate sources. Indeed, things have come to such a pass that, to be considered 'cool' by their peers, youngsters today make a point of not sounding 'posh'. There are many excellent programmes, but there are also many cases where the standard of English, especially spoken English, is abysmal. There are very many errors of grammar, word-use and pronunciation, which are easily copied, especially by the young. Where possible, producers should endeavour, as one of many aims, to improve their audiences' vocabulary and acquaintance with standard grammar and pronunciation, especially in programmes for children.

The Society believes that broadcasting authorities should place much more emphasis on good standard English, and that they should not employ or use presenters, commentators or readers whose English is slovenly and a bad example to others. The adoption of pseudo-American accents and American slang by many British broadcasters is unnecessary and a poor example.

British regional dialects and accents are acceptable, as outlined in Sections 4 and 5 above, with general comprehensibility being important.

In comics, magazines and books for children, it should not be assumed that bad English is more popular or more acceptable to readers than good English. Many children's books and comics, such as *The Eagle*, have combined very high standards of English with popularity and commercial success.

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## **9. PARTICULAR POINTS OF USAGE**

There are far too many disputed points of usage to deal with them here: H. W. Fowler's 'A Dictionary of Modern English Usage', revised edition, is a sound general guide on many points. Just a few of those most commonly encountered will be considered.

**Split infinitives.** These often sound and look clumsy, separating two elements of a verb which naturally go together. In general, it is best to avoid split infinitives, unless a circumlocution required to avoid them is even clumsier. It is necessary that there be a general presumption that infinitives will not be split in order that a deliberate splitting of infinitives have any dramatic or comic effect at all.

**Ending sentences with a preposition.** This is not always wrong and there are examples of great writers doing it occasionally. Prepositions are normally followed by the noun or pronoun they govern, in a natural word order. There are occasions, however, especially in rapid speech, where putting the pronoun last is the simplest solution to finding the most convenient word order. Clumsy circumlocutions are undesirable. In some cases, the 'preposition' is actually part of a phrasal verb, not an ordinary preposition, and it follows the verb naturally, even at the end of a sentence; e.g., "Please tidy up."

**Beginning sentences with conjunctions.** A major function of conjunctions is to join separate sentences containing related or contrasting ideas. The natural place for a conjunction is within sentences, not at their beginning. Starting a sentence with a conjunction is a device often employed in advertising or journalism to make short, snappy sentences. It can be a

stylistic cliché if over-used and should not be used frequently. Although usable for special effects, it is effective only if there is a general presumption that sentences will not begin with conjunctions.

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## 10. CONCLUSION

The Queen's English Society's policies are designed to implement our objects, as set out in the Introduction. Our Society finds that standards of English are often lamentably low among school-leavers, even in those bright enough to go to university. Our findings have been borne out by recent statements from the CBI, from the heads of major firms such as Tesco and Marks & Spencer, and from Lord Quirk in the House of Lords.

In these principles, we have made suggestions for improving educational standards in English, through explicit teaching and examining important elements of our language, and by regular constructive correction of errors. The training of teachers of English needs to be improved, and teachers of all subjects should be more than just competent in English; they should correct errors in English as well as in their own subjects.

We acknowledge the importance of local dialects and accents in giving a sense of local identity, and do not advocate that everyone should use "received pronunciation" for ordinary speech. For national purposes, and maximum clarity, "received pronunciation" is the most widely understood and internationally appreciated, so should be taught in all schools.

We think that dictionaries should give guidance on best usage, and not give legitimacy to errors just because they are common. We prefer the prescriptive approach to the descriptive approach, as we do not want the language to lose its fine or major distinctions.

We favour appropriate styles for particular purposes, including both plain and rich English.

We believe that the media have obligations of social responsibility regarding English. They often expose their audiences to very bad English, especially ungrammatical, slovenly spoken English, which is all too readily copied by the young and the not so young.

A few points of usage are here discussed, but a policy document is not the place for a long treatment of the many features of English which often cause trouble.

This document sums up the major policies of the Queen's English Society, but is not exhaustive.

[i] See also ["ABOUT THE QES" return to standards topic](#)