



When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, for Better And/Or Worse

Ben Yagoda

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What do you get when you mix nine parts of speech, one great writer, and generous dashes of insight, humor, and irreverence? One phenomenally entertaining language book.

In his waggish yet authoritative book, Ben Yagoda has managed to undo the dark work of legions of English teachers and libraries of dusty grammar texts. Not since *School House Rock* have adjectives, adverbs, articles, conjunctions, interjections, nouns, prepositions, pronouns, and verbs been explored with such infectious exuberance. Read *If You Catch an Adjective, Kill It* and:

Learn how to write better with classic advice from writers such as Mark Twain (“If you catch an adjective, kill it”), Stephen King (“I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs”), and Gertrude Stein (“Nouns . . . are completely not interesting”).

Marvel at how a single word can shift from adverb (“I did okay”), to adjective (“It was an okay movie”), to interjection (“Okay!”), to noun (“I gave my okay”), to verb (“Who okayed this?”), depending on its use.

Avoid the pretentious preposition *at*, a favorite of real estate developers (e.g., “The Shoppes at White Plains”).

Laugh when Yagoda says he “shall call anyone a dork to the end of his days” who insists on maintaining the distinction between *shall* and *will*.

Read, and discover a book whose pop culture references, humorous asides, and bracing doses of discernment and common sense convey Yagoda’s unique sense of the “beauty, the joy, the artistry, and the fun of language.”

When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, for Better And/Or Worse **Details**

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Paul says

As someone who loves languages and everything about them (grammar, etymology, style, syntax, etc.), I absolutely loved this book. It was written with just the right balance of information and humor, and its entertaining style had me reading through it at a pace somewhat faster than what is usual for me for a non-fiction book.

The book addresses each part of speech in a different chapter, picking apart several of the most noticeable examples of modern changes, trends, and evolutions in its category. As he puts it in the title: some are clearly for better, while others are for worse (and, for the most part, I happen to agree with him in his various assessments). Some of these trends have “crept up” on me over the decades, or had already started in my formative years, and were therefore somewhat of a surprise to me when made to stop and take notice of them.

While incredibly enjoyable to me, I can still see how the average reader, uninterested in such finer nuances of the English language, might not find this book as interesting as I have. I would probably direct my recommendation, then, to those readers who appreciate the subject in the first place. I also recommend this book highly to anyone who is a “language professional”: English teachers, writers/journalists, editors, etc.; whether or not you agree with each of his observations, this book is definitely a whole banquet of food for thought.

Carole says

I suppose I may be one of the few people who will consider a book on grammar to also be a book belonging in the humour category, but there you go. Yes, I am a geek. If this is news to anyone, then somebody doesn't know me all that well.

I did actually learn a few things and I enjoyed myself while I did it. I would absolutely recommend reading this book for anyone who either needs a little grammar refresher or is a member of the grammar police.

H says

"The fact is I think I am a verb instead of a personal pronoun. A verb is anything that signifies to be; to do; or to suffer. I signify all three." -Ulysses S. Grant

Recommended for all writers. What I learned:

Keep preposition ratios in sentences to about 1:9 or 1:11.

Cut adjectives, use verbs. Or pair adjectives unexpectedly, don't use dead words.

C.S. Lewis' notes on Kenneth Tynan's paper: "Keep a strict eye on eulogistic & dyslogistic adjectives--They shd *diagnose* (not merely blame) & distinguish (not merely praise)."

Whom = him/her, who = he/she.

Never use an abstract noun for a sentence subject. Your verbs will flag.

"I believe he," not "I believe that he..." In such cases, "that" must be a conjunction.

"To be" presents tautological fallacy. Compare "The man is drunk" to "The man acts drunk." "There is no solution to this problem" to "No one has solved this problem yet."

James says

Yogada's take on the so called "parts-of-speech" had me turning the pages like a good mystery potboiler. His tone swings gleefully from irreverent to respectful, and he is at all times illuminating. He gladly takes on the prescriptivist school of thought (although ever careful to point out the flaws in the descriptivist's camp, as well), and zings with great one-liners as: "[...] the only response to anyone who says, 'I shall go to the store' is 'And I shall call you a dork till the end of your days'" (11). Yogada acknowledges that language is a dynamic rather than a static process, but has no problem looking to the past for examples of what we should consider, if not "proper," then functional English; my favorite example of this enlightened approach is the easy dismissal of the 19th c. schoolmarmish ban of "their" as a singular possessive pronoun for an indefinite subject. He argues, quite convincingly, that everyone understands what the sentence "someone left their book on the table" means, and takes care to point out that "their" has functioned in this capacity for a little over 500 years (it didn't bother the likes of Shakespeare, the writers of the King James Bible, Austen, Wilde, or Stein, among many, so why should it bother us?) A great read, even if you aren't a dork like me.

David says

Ben Yagoda has written a most enjoyable book about the English language, parts of speech, and grammar. Yes, that's right--enjoyable, and quite humorous. For example, he writes:

"... shall call anyone a dork to the end of his days, who insists on maintaining the distinction between *shall* and *will*."

Yagoda devotes a chapter to each part of speech. With the advice in this book, you can learn to write in an unpretentious manner. You can learn to use correct grammar, and learn how to write (and speak) in a more direct manner. Use verbs, not adjectives. Don't get caught up in mistakes with prepositions, and limit their use whenever possible. Loaded with references to pop culture, this book has a modern ring to it, unlike the grammar classics that I remember from years ago.

Brandy says

This is a lot more entertaining than a book on parts of speech ought to be. Yagoda includes enough pop-

culture references (many are from The Simpsons), literary quips, and bad jokes (including the best Tom Swiftee of all time: "I manufacture tabletops for shops,' Tom said counterproductively") to keep the material from being dry and dull. He manages to point out sins of amateur writing (over-reliance on adjectives and adverbs, for starters) that some readers (myself included... gulp) will recognize in themselves, without being a jerk about it. He's friendly and accessible, conversational even. I think I may have had some conversations on these topics, so I'm more "primed" for this than most people I know.

(I'll probably be adding this to the Potential Summer Reading for High Schoolers list I'm compiling.)

Andrea Blythe says

Not many writers can tackle the sometimes tedious subject of the parts of speech. Ben Yagoda's fascination with the English language is clear, and I couldn't help but take part in his excitement, joy, and occasional irritation that is involved in defining and determining proper usage of the parts of speech.

Each chapter takes a stab at the sometimes shady definitions of the parts of speech. Quotes and anecdotes from famous editors, writers, and pop culture icons bring the language to life.

Yagoda comes to the defense of those parts of speech and grammatical uses that having been getting a bad rap over the years, such as adverbs, adjectives, and more. He reveals the source of the almost superstitious hatred against such uses, explains why the hatred is unfounded, and offers examples from famous and well-loved authors who have broken the 'rules' and used this kind of language to powerful effect.

As I read, I found myself paying extra attention the Yagoda's use of words, his own sentences in describing the language illuminating in. As the he predicted I will be forevermore shifting 'only' back and forth. This is an excellent book for any english language aficionado.

Jim says

A very interesting tour on the parts of speech. I dare not say any more for fear of making a mistake.

Brad McKenna says

Another book I read on vacation and have be slack in my reviewing. Again, though, I took notes! Like, a ridiculous amount of notes. Most of them are quotes that connected with the English Major in me.

Adjectives that can be rearranged without changing the meaning have commas, those that can't don't. Ex: wide, rough, freezing river and stately seaside motel. (pp. 20-1)

“Adjectives are tools of lazy writers.” P. 22

NOAs = Needless Obscure Adjectives p.23

“Reviewers of all kinds are probably the most notorious abusers and over-users of adjectives, plugging them into sentences and relieving themselves of the need to think.” p. 29

The most commonly used adverbs don’t end in “ly” and are referred to as “stealth adverbs” pp. 44-5 or “flat adverbs” e.g. it’s fast not fastly. P. 47

Adverbs are used when the writer didn’t use the right verb to convey their meaning. That said, it’s ok to use an adverb when there isn’t a verb. P. 51

Adverbs can modify adjectives, too. P. 52

The over-use of “like” started in the beatnik era. P. 55

Hopefully is etymologically wrong. It’s sadly not sadly. P. 70

The placement of “only” is often wrong. E.g. I only answered one question on the test- only describes answered. I answered only one question on the test- only means I answered one question precisely. P. 70

& is a ligature, or a combination, of the letters “e” and “t”. The symbol dates to the 1st century but the name, ampersand, only to the 19th. P. 108

The ABC song included the symbol as the 27th letter and ended it “and, per se [i.e., by itself], ‘and’.” This eventually became corrupted to ‘ampersand.’” P. 109

“Appellation cacophony” referring to the many ways to spell Rock ‘N Roll. P. 109

The chapter on Interjections begins with Homer’s “D’oh!” Then goes on to mention “mmm” pp. 125-6

In fact, TV has interjections a-plenty...woka woka is mentioned! P. 127
(specific page numbers missing)
p. 148 mentioned

Swahili has 11 genders.

The many ways to create a noun made me realize that most new words that rub me the wrong way are new nouns. Just as he mentioned on page 149 it seems like everyone is creating nouns.
Shawn Fanning’s nickname was a -ster noun creation. It was a comment on his nappy hair...Napster

In 1672, John Dryden’s critique of a Ben Johnson poem gave rise to the myth that you can’t end a sentence with a preposition. The line: “The bodies that these souls were frightened from.” The comment: “The preposition at the end of a sentence; a common fault with him...”

It seems that phrasal nouns (take off) and verbs (sleep with) are the preposition’s majority use. P. 177

The traditional grammar rule that states “they” can’t be used as singular dates back to only the 18th century. Pp. 185-6

“...using [generic masculine pronouns] is a maker of retrograde chauvinism.” P.186

The word “verb” comes from the Latin verbum or “word” p. 212

Snuck started its movement to replace sneaked only in 1897. P. 220

70% of the time we choose a verb, it's an irregular. P. 222 (source: Steven Pinker's Words and Rules)

Firefly says

This book is very entertaining.

Andrea says

"...as far as not getting respect goes, adjectives leave Rodney Dangerfield in the dust. They rank right up there with Osama bin Laden...". [p 15].

Imagine a book filled with English language quirks, stuffy linguists, and enough pop culture references to make a schoolmarm scream. In *When You Catch an Adjective*, Yagoda delivers a funny and well-balanced look at the history and future of our language. I am delighted that he sometimes throws dusty grammar rules upside down, but other times defends grandma's grammatical pet peeves. This book will keep your attention and teach you nifty facts, such as why the "&" is called an "ampersand," as well as the linguistic importance of "getting your freak on."

Samuel Choi says

It is indeed as written on the back cover, “Not since Schoolhouse Rock! have adjectives, adverbs, articles, conjunctions, interjections, nouns, prepositions, pronouns, and verbs been explored with such infectious exuberance.” The book takes the parts of speech and does its dance with them. He goes over each of them and extensively talks about them with the full realization of the philosophical camps and yet dances over and along the fence with gusto and skill. As an aspiring writer, it is a great read and has very useful tips. He certainly blurs the lines when it comes to conventional notions of what category certain words fall under. And when reading this book, there is a dizzying effect between what is said and what is written, for what book can possibly say anything without using words? Yet for all the linguistic and pedantic gymnastics, the book is a fun read even for one who loathes linguistic snobbery. As such, even for a book on grammar, I couldn't help but give it 5 stars. The book is truly a work of art. In some ways it reminds me of the Tao Te Ching in its sagacity, better yet, the Chuang Tze yet it is nicely polished. And you'll learn new words. Keep a dictionary on hand when reading. I found myself laughing out loud at times at the wit and humor displayed through the examples.

Lori says

Ok, I really liked this book and it has lots of insight into the division of words in English. It is well written and interesting. That being said, since it is a discussion on the parts of speech, Dr. Yagoda includes "off color" words in his discussion as pertaining to how they are used in context of written English. I have gone through my copy and edited so that it will be acceptable to read. Here are the pages to avoid: p.4 ignore the example in the middle of the page, middle of p. 61-middle of 62 where he discusses "off color" words are intensifiers, example on p. 115, and two words are mentioned in the list on p. 131. I have to qualify that he is using the off color words as part of the lexicon in the English language and the discussion is very clinical and not profane. I just do not like reading them at all and I think his book would have been better if he had just left them out or just mentioned where they fit into the parts of speech without identifying them specifically.

Brenten Gilbert says

This is definitely one of the nerdiest books I've ever read. Imagine the most thorough grammar teacher trapped within pages of printed text. Devoting one full chapter to each part of speech, Yagoda keeps it interesting by detailing tidbits of insight into our lexicon. I feel like I learned a lot from reading it, but at the same time, I almost feel too terrified to write anymore, because I'm sure I'm not doing it right. I tried to keep a running count of how to incorporate the correct percentages of each speech part necessary to write well and I couldn't quite come up with it. (And, since Yagoda's strong suit is English, there's a chance it wouldn't add up right, anyway).

I'd recommend this book if you really like words and writing, but if not, you're probably fine passing it by. I enjoyed reading it slowly and trying to get a full understanding of all that was shared. I may even look into some of Yagoda's other books. And, before I finish here, I feel compelled to reveal that I came across two typos in the text - one is negotiable, but one is absolutely certain ("Greyound" instead of "Greyhound").

I guess I can keep on writing after all.

Kerri Anne says

Catchy title; (mostly) dull, monotonous writing. I could see Yagoda being a stellar grammarian and/or grammar teacher, but as Matt already noted in his review, this reads a lot like a lecture, and made me remember how psyched I am not to be in college anymore.

[Two stars for English nerdery.]
