



For Who the Bell Tolls: One Man's Quest for Grammatical Perfection

David Marsh

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This is a book that explains the grammar that people really need to know, such as the fact that an apostrophe is the difference between a company that knows its s*** and a company that knows it's s***, or the importance of capital letters to avoid ambiguity in such sentences as "I helped my Uncle Jack off his horse."

David Marsh's lifelong mission has been to create order out of chaos. For four decades, he has worked for newspapers, from the Sun to the Financial Times, from local weeklies that sold a few thousand copies to the Guardian, with its global readership of nine million, turning the sow's ear of rough-and-ready reportage into a passable imitation of a silk purse.

The chaos might be sloppy syntax, a disregard for grammar or a fundamental misunderstanding of what grammar is. It could be an adherence to "rules" that have no real basis and get in the way of fluent, unambiguous communication at the expense of ones that are actually useful. Clear, honest use of English has many enemies: politicians, business and marketing people, local authority and civil service jargonists, rail companies, estate agents, academics ... and some journalists. This is the book to help defeat them.

For Who the Bell Tolls: One Man's Quest for Grammatical Perfection Details

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K.J. Charles says

Excellent stuff. Great jokes, a sensible balance between prescriptive and descriptive approaches, the focus always on meaning and clarity. Loved the chapters on 'political correctness' and jargon: the anger of a decent man coming through. Kindle full of highlights. Strong recommendation for anyone interested in good use of language.

Latkins says

Because I'm rather sad, I love books about grammar, and this one was a gem. It's funny and memorable, and makes grammar really interesting, without being patronising or lecturing. I particularly liked David Marsh's use of pop songs to demonstrate different aspects of grammar, and I liked the fact that he dismisses a lot of the 'old rules' of grammar, such as split infinitives, as out of date. Will my writing be perfect from now on? Probably not, but it'll be better than it was!

Robert says

It started out well: a light-hearted, but relevant account of the commoner mistakes people make and an explanation. As with all allegedly descriptive grammar books, however, the author can't resist making assertions about what is correct and what not.

By page 18, anyone who knew little about grammar would probably be confused. By page 22, I was beginning to froth at the mouth and wonder if I could be "Disgusted (Retd.) of Tunbridge Wells. He doesn't even know that "well", like "poorly" can be an adjective. I made nine pages of scribbled notes, but then realised that I was not addressing the author here, but potential readers, so I won't bore you with them.

I would say the book is well worth a read if your grammar is shaky. The last half dozen chapters are excellent, although I was surprised at most of the entries in his list of commonly confused words. How could anyone get them wrong? Still, if it prevents a few people from using "lay" and "laid" incorrectly, it will be a good thing.

Marie says

Entertaining, witty and interesting. Not what I would expect from a book about grammar...

Jaimella Shaikh says

At last - a book on grammar that revels in the fluid, ever-changing nature of the English language rather than seeking to petrify it with pedantry. Not for Marsh the 'rules that have no real basis and get in the way of fluent, unambiguous communication'. Instead he focuses on the 'ones that are actually useful'.

The entertaining opening chapter uses song titles to illustrate parts of speech. Marsh draws on an eclectic collection of references throughout the book - Yoda, Chomsky, The Sun, Hobbes and (of course) Vampire Weekend. His advice on the Oxford comma differs slightly from Vampire Weekend's: 'it's as unwise to say always use an Oxford comma as it is to say never use one'.

Scattered throughout the book are occasional boxes in the 'irritation factor' and 'frequency of error' of cliches or the misuse of ironic - a sort if top trumps for sloppy writing. These felt a little half-hearted in an otherwise passionate and well-constructed book but in the tweets reproduced at the foot of each page sparkled with Marsh's wit and deep engagement with language.

Jenny says

This is always a risk with "humorous" grammar and style guides - I found the pun-ny bits a bit too punny and the winking-to-the-reader quality a bit too ... wink-y ... to take for very long stretches. I do appreciate a good grammar guide, and I find the mix of jokes and wisdom doled out by the same author in short bites on twitter (@guardianstyle) to be easier to take. This book is a much less short, very much less sweet version of his twitter feed. Good try, though.

thelastword says

One of the better grammar books I've read. I especially enjoyed the tweet footnotes. I didn't give it a full five stars because...

Grammar.
Still hate it.

Sue Robinson says

I liked his use of song lyrics to introduce chapters, but found it a bit slow going in the middle. If you read to the end you can't fail to get the message. Less is beautiful.

Samantha says

I was worried that this book would either be tedious or above my level of understanding. Thankfully, it was neither and I really enjoyed delving into the quirky variations of the English language. It's written with great humour, obvious love for the language and a sensible attitude to our use of English and the ways in which it

has changed and continues to change. A fascinating insight into what can be a very intimidating subject.

Saul says

David Marsh (successfully) attempts to set some rules on what modern 'good writing' involves, swaying away from the concept that formal communication is increasingly more an 'art than a science'. He acknowledges that the English language is a moving target but, though the use of popular culture, he draws the line between what is correct and what is not. Don't be fooled by Marsh's relaxed narrative style, he is a grammatical disciplinarian and he is not afraid of highlighting his pet hates/bugbears. The book is the equivalent a 'memo email' from the boss of an overly relaxed team; it sets the boundaries of what is acceptable, using embarrassing examples of 'bad conduct' to a point of cringing.

I enjoyed the book, both for its content and for what it represents - a gentle reminder that the Facebook generation needs to be told how to write. It contains some very entertaining and insightful considerations, however, as exciting as Marsh makes it sound, it is, after all, about grammar so I would keep the book on your shelf as a 'reference book' rather than bed-time reading material.

Overall a solid 3 stars, £7.99 well spent!

Margaret Barnes says

Brilliant. If only all grammar was taught in this amusing way. I loved it. The footnotes of questions and answers on the Guardian's Twitter feed @guardianstyle are very witty.

On a serious note I learnt that grammar is a changing skill and the very rigid rules I was taught are not written in stone; as long as it makes sense, that's fine.

Jeff says

This is a fun read. Marsh is a descriptive grammarian, meaning he describes how a language is rather than prescribe how it should be. The English language is like a living organism, constantly growing and changing. Marsh writes with so much wit and sarcasm. Particularly interesting are the chapters on business and political jargon and texting / social media lingo.

Lydia says

This is a very helpful, witty book which explains complex aspects of grammar very clearly whilst also allowing you to have a good laugh at it.

As with all books on grammar, I found I had to read it over a long period of time to save myself from too intensive a mental work out! Having said that, when reading it, the book was very easy to follow and understand. It assumes very little prior knowledge which I liked. It helped to refresh my memory of some things I might have forgotten whilst expanding my understanding with further analysis.

I really like this book and the helpful bibliography at the back will serve excellently in deciding what I need

to read next.

I'm currently preparing to study Linguistics at University in September and this has certainly helped to keep my mind on relevant topics during the summer holidays!

As a staunch believer in correct grammar however, the title is still really annoying!

Sarah says

Does one read a grammar book except to see to which views of the author one takes exception? I found this an interesting insight into the life of a sub-editor and liked his style, but was unfortunately obliged to rush through the book due to an imminent library return date. I think it would have been better bit at a time.

Coxychap says

Though replete with awful puns, there's some great information here, interestingly and humorously put. The author explains with clarity some tricky grammatical points, and makes some good cases for retaining some distinctions and losing others. Having said that, isn't it time 'which' and 'that' become interchangeable?
