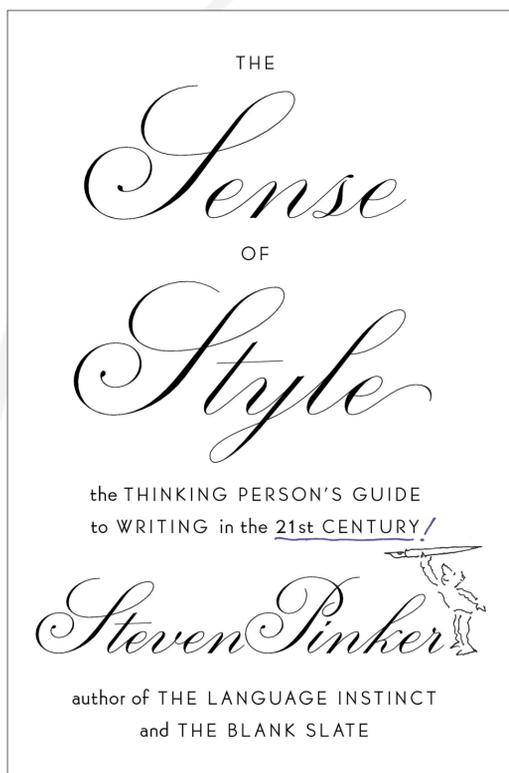


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## Bookshelf: The Sense of Style by Steven Pinker

By [Michelle Nijhuis](#) on November 14, 2014 | [1 Response](#)

A few days ago, I told a writer friend—and fellow grammar geek—that I was reading Steven Pinker's new style guide. She curled her lip. "Oh," she said. "Isn't that the book that advocates a more ... *relaxed* approach to grammar?" Yes, in a way, I admitted. But it's still worth reading.

Many reviews of *The Sense of Style* have focused on its chapter "Telling Right from Wrong," which has scandalized grammar purists everywhere by proposing, among other heresies, that split infinitives and dangling participles are sometimes permissible, and that the phrase "between you and I" is not always a heinous error. Pinker, who chairs the usage panel of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, contends that English grammar

conventions should be based on contemporary usage and the demands of clarity, not on a set of inflexible rules.

Language does evolve, and Pinker and his fellow usage-panel members are right to consider its evolution in their decisions. And good riddance to some old chestnuts: If *decimate* can only mean "to destroy exactly one-tenth of something," as its Latin roots (and many copy editors I have known and loved) suggest, then the meaning of *December*, as Pinker points out, should be restricted to "the tenth month on the calendar." But Pinker's arguments for tolerance are often unconvincing. His contorted defense of "very unique" is as wince-inducing as the phrase itself. As for "Frankenstein" being an acceptable substitute for "Frankenstein's monster," well ... come on, they're different characters. How is clarity served by eliminating the distinction?

If you like grammar—and arguing about grammar—you'll find your own causes for petty outrage in *The Sense of Style*. But don't let pique blind you to the book's invaluable points. Pinker is a charming writer, despite having spent most of his life in the linguistic torture chamber known as academia, and he masterfully dissects the problems with academic prose and the challenges to fixing them. (His chapter "The Curse of Knowledge," which considers why so many experts have trouble expressing themselves outside their fields, is of particular interest to both scientists and science writers.) In a genuine improvement on *Strunk and White*, he also brings cognitive science into his discussion of style, showing how and why certain phrasings and sentence structures are easier for readers to understand. By doing so, he reminds us of grammar's first commandment: Thou shalt make sense. And that, I think we can all agree, is a rule for the ages.

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### Michelle Nijhuis

Michelle Nijhuis' award-winning reporting on science and the environment appears in *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and many other publications. A longtime contributing editor of *High Country News*, ... [MORE »](#)

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### One response to "Bookshelf: The Sense of Style by Steven Pinker"



[Robin Meadows](#) November 14, 2014 at 7:54 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

My older daughter used to be a language "purist" but is a lot more relaxed about usage since learning Latin. Her profs said lots of rules for English came from people trying to adapt rules for/characteristics of Latin to English. To her, the silliest of these is the rule against splitting infinitives, which arose simply because in Latin an infinitive is a single word and so cannot be split.

Also, she's seen how Latin morphed into Italian, and now is open to seeing language changes as useful. Her favorite example of this is using the singular "they" when you want to be gender neutral.

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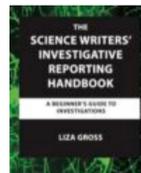


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