



Yes, I Could Care Less: How to Be a Language Snob Without Being a Jerk

Bill Walsh

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A usage guide for writers and all lovers of language from Bill Walsh, language maven, copy editor at *The Washington Post*, and author of *Lapsing into a Comma*.

Calling all language sticklers—and those who love to argue with them! Usage maven Bill Walsh expounds (rather than expands) on his pet peeves in the long-awaited follow-up (note the hyphens, please) to *The Elephants of Style* and *Lapsing Into a Comma*.

Could you care less? Does bad grammar “literally” make your head explode? Test your need for this book with these sentences:

"Katrina misplaced many residents of New Orleans from their homes."

"Mark had a full schedule of meetings. His first of the day was a small businessman, followed by a high schoolteacher."

"Betty was 100% percent wrong."

Pat yourself on the back if you found issues in every one of these sentences, but remember: There is a world out there beyond the stylebooks, beyond Strunk and White, beyond Lynne Truss and Failblogs. Part usage manual, part confessional and part manifesto, *Yes, I Could Care Less* bounces from sadomasochism to weather geekery, *Top Chef* to Monty Python. It is a lively and often personal look at one man's continuing journey through the obstacle course that some refer to, far too simply, as “grammar.”

Yes, I Could Care Less: How to Be a Language Snob Without Being a Jerk Details

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Anna says

Yes, I could care less. Or I could even care more.

I like words and etymology; it's always interesting where - and how - the words came to a language.

And I like the correct punctuation and spelling (which would be much less painful if you were not expected to also punctuate everything correctly in three languages. Yes, I get irritated of linguistic stupidities in 3 languages).

This book is good on getting back some sense in where, when and how use punctuation like -, --, ,, ;, "".

And it also gives some sense in when to hyphenate the words (like when used in a way that the word will not be hyphenated in the dictionaries). Gay marriage protestor or a gay-marriage protestor? Commonly-misspelled words? (No for that).

And the words get funkier than that...

I admit I read some parts in the beginning very loosely, as not everything after the could-care-or-couldn't-care-less snobbery grabbed my full interest. But when I got to incorrectly hyphenated gems like cheeses teak, whatever a cooter mint is, mans-laughter, I got hooked fast. What's wrong with me? Up 2.30 AM on a Saturday night and laughing at cheeses teaks and mans-laughter...

Then there are various how to spell this or that when it's spelled commonly in so many ways and there doesn't seem to be much sense or string in them. House buyer, house buyer? First time house buyer, first-time house buyer? Wait, why is it bookshop or drug store but a coffee shop? And why is a coffee shop a diner type Americana cafeteria instead of The proper type coffee shop (see Amsterdam)?

Some of the spelling atrocities I disagree with the author (but I admit, a rather entertaining way to linger and travel around spelling and punctuation without being a total snob). He insists - and this was published in 2013, not in 1994 - that it's still web site and e-mail instead of website or email. E-mail because it's d-day - so hey, why not look at these atrocities like d-day instead? To me they are just a m-monstrosity c-caused b-by s-someone w-who s-stutters a lot (I tried to spell those last two words together but I can't commit to that crime). Just like teetotaler - no tea there, just a repeated t to make the word a lot m-meaningful. So if we use d-day as an example, then it should be e-email. Ha! I mean, h-ha!

I had not realized so many words have different spellings in the dictionary - as there are several from Oxford to Webster to American Heritage. Cab drive, cab driver, seat belt, seatbelt... Wouldn't it be nice if the ways to spell conjoined and combined words in English had a more systematic way. Like if it's a bookshop, it should also be a coffeeshop. In most other languages (that I know at least, so make it six) it's clear how you spell a composed word. So is it a restaurant car or a restaurantcar in that train? There's no doubt how to spell the same vagone ristorante or ravintolavaunu for the same car. So there's some space for the language to clarify, develop, evolve etc itself. 3,5 stars would be more or less how much I do care about this book. ;)

Besides of journalists, writers, and editors, I'd recommend the book to anyone who commits any linguistic atrocities such as "I didn't used to", "love that outfit", "fave", "twerk", "tuto", "tute", and especially that Yelp and Foodspotting reviewer who described the pancakes she ate at IHOP with the word "dervish". To her, I'd also recommend using a regular dictionary.

Leslie says

This book is ideal for language geeks, a group in which I proudly claim membership.

There are certain sections that I marked specifically because of their hilarious relevance. One is on business-speak, which drives me insane, and other "professional" jargon. The last sentence of this section reads, "I'm not even sure the business types know what they actually mean when the talk about utilizing paradigm-shifting technologies to task personnel to grow the company."

Another chapter is "Tiny Acts of Elegance", which features as a first subsection, "Editing like a Ninja". It is something I think about every day at work, as I edit sentences to have them make sense. This is sometimes harder than you'd think, but this chapter helped me to simply restructure sentences so that they make some sense.

My other favorite chapter, "The S Files" (about "S" being the hardest-working letter in the alphabet), begins with references to a local-to-me newspaper, the *Frederick News-Post*, where the author's brother is an editor. It seems that someone wrote to complain about a local brewery's use of "offensive" names for its beers (that would be Flying Dog, whose "Doggy Style" and "Raging Bitch" was apparently too much for someone). Someone commented, "Gee, can't you just ask for Millers?" And someone replied, "I don't like Millers, but sometimes get Bids, Coor, Michelobs, Heinekens, Sam Adam, Foster, Buschs, Pabsts, Killian, Rolling Rocks, Natty Bos, Yuengings, and Molsons."

As through most of this book, I laughed myself silly over this. So, if you don't find this passage funny, this book probably isn't for you. But I would like to thank Bill Walsh for this book, and will be seeking out his previous books, *Lapsing into a Comma* and *The Elephants of Style*. Yes, these are actual titles.

Brian Cleveland says

The start of the book is a little different from Bill's past books and deals more with the philosophy of editing and dealing with all the gray areas and ambiguity of language and grammar rules, which provides a nice insight into the brain of a true editing expert. And it gets at the idea in the title, which more people should probably abide by. The rest of the book is similar to his past ones, talking about certain problematic words or phrases, with a good dose of humor paired with the education.

Carl says

mostly clear & judicious, but come on: "waterbed" is one word.

Anna Engel says

Meh. Got bored. Couldn't care less.

(sorry)

Brad Grabow says

Meh. The author makes good points and raises several uncommon language errors of which I was unaware (and perhaps guilty), but his attempts at humor (and incessant parenthetical interruptions) were far from effortless (even to the point of distraction, I might say). (But I digress.) (Again) The book could easily be distilled to half its length, as well, as Walsh frequently strives to overcome every known or conceivable counter-argument, no matter how banal or unworthy of refutation.

The title caught my attention--and got me nodding in enthusiastic agreement--but the book as a whole collapses under the weight of its own overworked arguments. Too bad, because notwithstanding my dissatisfaction with this read, I agree with 90% of the points it raises.

Melissa says

I enjoyed Walsh's columns and tweets so I decided to try the book. It certainly contains some solid information on language and is often humorous but I didn't love the flow and it didn't absorb me enough for an additional star.

Lee Anne says

"To make a concerted effort is to make an effort in *concert* with others. It's not hard to understand why people hear the way 'a concerted effort' is used and assume it means to try really, really hard, but there are plenty of other words for that."

There. Maybe you just learned that, too.

I met the late Bill Walsh at a signing when this book came out, and although he didn't share my white-hot rage at "third wheel" supplanting "fifth wheel" in the common usage, he did politely (if bemusedly) listen to me go off about it. This book is a mildly snarky look at the way words are, should be, and ought not to be. It was a quick, fun read, and I learned a few things. Hyphens! Who knew?

Kelsey says

[I'm concerned that if this author reads this he will find something wrong with my writing but maybe he would be kind enough to not say too much about it. Here's to hoping that he is too busy to read book reviews.]

This book was hilarious. It got off to a scary start. Some of the topics at the beginning I found myself disagreeing with but I stuck it out. It was worth it. This author has A+ sarcasm and I learned things from this book too! I find myself suddenly into words and language and grammar (and generally sounding smarter) so this book fit into that perfectly. I'm well aware that most of what I learned won't stick in my brain but I also am certain that a lot of it will. I think that it was a fantastic idea to read this right before going back to school

but it was also just funny. Did I mention that already? I thought that a book like this would be plain old boring but it wasn't. The examples were memorable and I laughed out loud at his comments. I found the tweets at the top of the page (from the author's twitter) to be just as entertaining as the content of the novel.

I would recommend this book to language snobs and language jerks and those of us who just like words and language but lack the jerk side of it. English majors, this one is for you too! I think that anyone interested in language could get something out of this book. Check it out and let me know what you think.

Could you care less? Personally, I couldn't.

Find more reviews like this one at <http://one-chapter-ahead.blogspot.com>

Megan Stolz says

I had a hard time getting into this one. In my work, I come across a lot of grammar snobs, although I'm more of a descriptivist myself, so I was looking forward to maybe some validation in this book, or at the very least, some amusement. But despite the subtitle, there's a definite snobby undertone, at least in the first few chapters, which is as far as I got. The history behind how certain grammatical pet peeves came to be is mildly interesting, but it basically comes across as an explanation for why it's okay to be snobby about specific pet peeves because they're wrong after all (and here's the historical proof). I think this one will have to remain unfinished.

Carol Turner says

Language snobs unite.

BookBec says

The best chapters are those in which Walsh riffs on a single subject and digs into its nuances. Not so fun are the chapters full of short paragraphs on individual words (unless you have 30-second intervals in which to read).

The book also suffers from off-topic mid-chapter sidebars about misremembered movie quotes, names of government offices, and Walsh's disagreements with dictionaries. The Twitter quotes in the right-hand-page headers are distracting too. Let's just stick to one subject at a time, shall we?

And why do we need to hear so much about Walsh's fondness for porn?

However, I laughed a lot, and Walsh prompted me to think about my reasoning as I agreed or disagreed with his pronouncements. But if this book were less of a mishmash of editorial mini-essays with style-guide-like word lists, it would be a better reading experience.

Washington Post says

Reading Yes, I Could Care Less is like bellying up to your favorite neighborhood bar while a cranky yet lovable uncle holds forth on the perils of comma splices and misplaced hyphens. Walsh is combative and funny, and he doesn't suffer fools gladly ("Humans are often idiots," he explains helpfully at one point). Read the rest: <http://wapo.st/11GsWRC>

Karen Lorberau says

I was interested in the subject matter and thought this would be a fun read but he takes SO LONG to get to any point and is not that funny and I guess I figured out I don't care as much about so-called "correct" usage as I thought. And I'll bet there are bunches of what he might call errors in these sentences. But I think I got my point across.

Barbara says

I thoroughly enjoyed the variety of word- and usage-related discussions! (Are those hyphens correct?!?) When he was tackling a big topic (like the topic of the title), it may have gone too long, but the rest were to-the-point. (Love those hyphens!) His humor throughout had me laughing out loud. For example: "WIS., WISC.: Wis is the standard abbreviation for Wisconsin. Wisc. is an abbreviation for ... wiscellaneous I guess." My kind of humor; I loved it. (Is the semi-colon correct?!?)
