

## WHAT IS GOOD ENGLISH?

**Dr. Bipin Bihari Dash**

Assistant Professor in English  
Odisha University of Technology and Research

### Abstract

What is good English? Is grammatically correct English good English? Or, do plain words make good English? It seems there is no concrete or easy answer to this question. 'Good' is a value term. It suggests approval. Can we certainly say which is good and which is bad? It all depends on what one likes or doesn't like. Still, it is possible to describe what good English is all about. At least, we can point out some of its qualities. This paper attempts to discuss the features of good English.

**Keywords:** Good English, Plain English, Latin and French Phrases, clichés or hackneyed phrases

### INTRODUCTION

English has now been established as a language of global communication and a language of opportunities. A fairly high degree of proficiency in English and excellent communication skills enhance students' employability. In view of the increasing importance of English for career purposes, universities and institutes are beginning to offer courses in communication skills as part of their general English courses. The use of correct English aims to develop students' ability to use English accurately, appropriately and fluently in face-to-face, telephone and written communication in academic, social and professional situations (*A Course in Communication English*, 1)

### ANALYSIS

The term "Good English" stands for the use of English language in such a way that a reader can easily interpret the meaning. There must be right use of vocabulary and grammar. Good English, to begin with, has rather short sentences, simple words with one or two syllables, direct straightforward meaning and an easy flow. Above all, it is readable. In other words, it must be clear and interesting. These are not absolute features of good English. For the time being, though, let's accept them as such. First, what is correct English? Is it obeying the rules of grammar? Or is it the correct choice of words? The ghost of 'correctness' has frightened us for a long time. Grammarians like Nesfield have laid down elaborate rules of usage. These are artificial rules. They are borrowed from Latin and Greek. One such rule, for example, says, 'Don't use a preposition at the end of a sentence.' Thus, the following sentence, to these grammarians, is 'incorrect'.

"This is the house I once lived in".

They would, therefore like us to write, "This is the house in which I once lived."

This sentence is no doubt correct. But in everyday life situation, one would prefer the first sentence. Every native speaker uses preposition at the end of a sentence. Even popular writers do. So, here is a piece of warning that makes fun of itself:

"A preposition is a word you must never end a sentence with."

Some of the other sentences found to be 'ungrammatical' were:

It's me. (Instead of 'it is I.)

I am mistaken,

In Latin such a structure means "I am misunderstood' rather than I am wrong.

I want to actually learn English. (It splits the infinitive.)

All this is allegedly not 'correct' English. These so-called "corrupt", "incorrect" and 'vulgar' forms have been used by Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible. By correct English, we mean the educated usage. (Even the dialect forms are correct in the context of the variety.) In what is called the structural approach, grammatical structures of present-day English came to be emphasized. It was thought that knowing a language meant knowing grammatically correct sentences. This, by no means, is good English. Good English is much more than that. Grammatical accuracy is no doubt important. But in real life, we do not always produce neat, sanitized sentences. They must relate to one another, suitably Joined by connectives such as, and, or, so, however, on the other hand, and so on. The text is a whole, not just a collection of sentences. It must have a life of its own with movement and style.

So 'competence' in a purely grammatical sense is not enough. One must know how to express time, not just tense. How to express meaning is the real purpose of learning a language. This ability (not in the narrow sense of 'skill') is called "communicative competence. It does not eliminate grammar. In fact, it allows slips and mistakes, hesitations and false starts. Therefore, let us not make too much of 'correctness'. It is certainly important. But this alone does not constitute good English. It is the use of English, rather than usage that matters. What is written should be clear enough to be understood. And that must be interesting as well. That brings us to the idea of 'plain English' or 'clear English'.

### **Plain English**

The word 'plain' means simple in form and style. It also means direct, straightforward and clear. By contrast, it has a negative meaning too, that something is ordinary and not at all beautiful. However, we take the word in its positive sense. It has the connotations of honesty. We use the word in a broad sense. We will certainly take ideas from the Plain English Campaign which started in England in 1979. It has its roots in the 1920s when C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards devised Basic English with a core vocabulary of 850 words. The virtues of

simplicity and clarity have been stressed by many. We will briefly discuss, with examples, some of the guidelines of plain English.

### Write shorter sentences

A long sentence with too many clauses makes it difficult to read and understand. It can confuse the reader.

*Take the following sentence*

It is the earnest desire and expectation of the government that members of the general public will understand and appreciate the current oil pool deficit and other related fiscal difficulties which necessitated the hike in petrol price and that they will extend their unflinching support and fullest co-operation to it.

The sentence is of course long and unmanageable. There are so many unnecessary words made worse by repetitions. We can rephrase the statement in the following way:

The Government expects the people to understand the current economic difficulty and support the petrol price increase.

The average sentence length should be 15 to 20 words. It is not a hard rule. Some-times, a sentence may have more words, say up to 30 words.

### Use simple words

Words used in common everyday life situations are always preferable to big words few understand. Sir Ernest Gowers, the author of *The Complete Plain Words* has this to say, "Be short, be simple, be human."

The advice applies to both the sentence and the word. The verb start has other synonyms - begin, commence, initiate, institute and originate. Except for begin no other word is simple enough to be easily understood. So one should use start as well as begin.

Officials, lawyers and academics use high-sounding big words. Such a language is called 'gobbledygook' words like *whereas, hereinafter, therein, notwithstanding* should be avoided.

The following list gives examples of long words and their shorter equivalents. Remember that the latter is better, at least in most situations.

Official terms	Plain Alternatives	Official terms	Plain Alternatives
Accordingly	So	Attain	reach
Accustomed to	Used to	Calculate	Work out
Additional	More, extra	Category	group

Aggregate	total	Cease	Stop, end
Alleviate	Reduce, lessen	Commence	begin
Anticipating	awaiting	Communicate	write
Apprise	inform	Component	part
as a consequence of	because	Concerning	about
Assist	help	Consequently	so
Deem	consider	Notwithstanding	Even if, still, but
Defer	Put off	Peruse	Read, study
Desist	stop	Principal	Chief, main
Disburse	pay	Prior to	before
Discrepancy	difference	Proximity	nearness
Due to the fact that	because	Purchase	buy
Emanate from	Come from	Reduction	Cut
Expedite	Speed up	Regarding	about
Facilitate	help	Remuneration	pay
Forward (verb)	send	Reside	live
Henceforth	From now on	Residence	home
Heretofore	Until now	Stipulate	state
Impart	give	Terminate	end
Implement (verb)	Carry out, do	Utilise	use
Indigenous	native	Verify	check
In lieu of	Instead of	Via	By way of something
In regard to	about	Villa	Large house
Institute (verb)	start	Virtual	nearly
Interim	meantime	Welfare	Happiness, comfort
In event of	If, when	Whilst	while
Nonetheless	However, yet	Zest	excited

Some people tend to use Latin or French phrases instead of the English equivalents. Except when absolutely necessary, the former should be avoided. Here is a list of such phrases.

Latin or French Phrases	Phrases in English	Latin or French Phrases	Phrases in English
cf (confer)	Compare	modus operandi	method
Cirea	about	per annum	per year, a year
e.g. (exempli gratia)	for example	per capita	per head
en bloc	together	per diem	per day, daily
en route	on the way	sic	thus
etc. (et cetera)	and so on	sine die	Indefinitely
ibid	in the same place	Vis-a-Vis	regarding, about
i.e (id est)	that is	Viz	namely
inter alia	among other things	Vs (versus)	against

- **Use the active voice as far as possible.**

There are certain verbs which demand passive voice, particularly when the doer of the action is not known or is irrelevant. The sentence "The earthquake killed a lot of people in Syria and Turkey." is possible. But the use of passive voice sounds more appropriate. In most cases, however, the active verb is more effective as in "I/we suggest..." instead of "The Suggestion is made that..." and "we recommend..." instead of "It is recommended that...".

Where possible, make a person the subject of your sentence. Take the following sentence.

The prevalence of malaria among the Adivasis in Koraput of Odisha is causing concern to doctors. It is a typical sentence in an official report. It is cold and impersonal. We can change it in the following way: Doctors are concerned about the prevalence of malaria among the Adivasis in Koraput of Odisha. It would be still better if the victims of the disease are made the subject. The Adivasis in Koraput of Odisha are contracting malaria and doctors are concerned.

- **Put your idea in the positive rather than in the negative**

Readers first think about the positive alternative when faced with the negative.

Do not go into the sea unless you know swimming. (Negative)

The sentence is less pleasant and less polite than the following:

Go into the sea only if you know swimming. (Positive)

Similarly, between the following sentences the second one is better.

Vote for not more than one candidate. (Negative)

Vote for one candidate only. (Positive)

- **Avoid biased language**

Language sometimes shows up one's bias against certain castes, religion, colour, age, sex and so on. In the USA the words Negro and nigger are offensive while African-American is neutral. Blind, or even visually handicapped are offensive. You should avoid sexist language and use sex-neutral alternatives.

According to B. B. Dash "Language shows bias against sex. Some prefer the term gender which is a social idea while sex is a biological fact. Ours is a male dominated world. Language is felt to be contaminated by an attitude which stresses that man is superior to woman. We have a large number of words with man, chairman, spokesman, mankind, manpower, man-made, and so on. So to some people expressions like humanity, human beings, humans, mankind, and the man in the street are sexist, and are replaced by ordinary human beings" (*Professional English*).

- **Avoid repetitions.**

Some people repeat words and phrases to express the same idea. They do so for emphasis. Expressions like 'I saw with my own eyes', 'I heard with my own ears,' 'to foresee in advance' and 'Will you repeat that again?' are some such examples. Some would argue that 'a pool of water' and 'to light a fire' fall into the same group. Perhaps it would be better to take them as fixed expressions. But 'we returned back home' is simply unacceptable.

- **Avoid archaic usage.**

Words and phrases which were in use in the past, and are no longer used are called archaic. "I am in receipt of your letter of 25th instant, is archaic. Avoid 'receipt and 'instant'. It should read 'I've got your letter of 25 (April)'. Words like **erstwhile**, **perchance**, **methinks** should be avoided. Instead, *former*, *perhaps* and *I think*, should be used.

- **Avoid colloquialism and slang words in formal writings**

They have chosen a **rotten** novel for the Booker Prize. (Very poor quality)

I am **fed** up with life. (Unhappy, bored or tired)

Pakistan was **out to** grab Indian Territory. (Intended to)

**Avoid pedantic or high-sounding phrases.**

Phrases	Preferred forms	Phrases	Preferred forms
nuptial ceremony	wedding	feathered race	birds
Pyrotechnic display	fireworks	fragrant weed	tobacco

- **Avoid clichés or hackneyed phrases like**

The cup that cheers, last but not least, the fair sex, slowly but surely, pales into insignificance, air-dashed to Delhi, damage-control exercise, put on the backburner, its importance cannot be overestimated.

- **Avoid empty words like 'it'**

It is evident that----- (evidently, clearly)

It is interesting to note that --- (note that)

It has been noted by the Finance Minister--- (the Finance Minister has noted that)

Below are some examples of English usage with the recommended alternatives in brackets we are unable to effect a change in the society so easily. --- (We cannot change the society...)

We regret most sincerely ---- (We are very sorry)

In accordance with the decision of the government (As decided by the government) notwithstanding illiteracy--(Despite illiteracy...)

It is desired that we receive ----- (We want to receive/Please send...)

May we suggest that you. ----- (Please ...)

At this point in time ----- (Now)

Enclosed please find ----- (Here is or I attach/enclose)

Your letter of even date---- (Say what date)

Our Mr Das (in letters) ---- -- -- (Mr Das, who looks after stores and purchase in our office)

The reason why--- (Because)

The zoo is closed sine die ----- (The zoo is closed indefinitely.)

These are some useful tips. But they will be of little use unless you actually use them in writing. It is through practice that you will be able to write reasonably well-clearly, correctly and forcefully. A word of caution is 'important' here. The expressions which we have not favoured here are not always inappropriate. In formal contexts, some of them, if not all, may be the recommended forms.

Good English is an informal term for English regarded as all or any of the following: well-spoken, well-written, well-constructed, fluent, effective, a mark of good breeding and social

standing, a mark of good education. The term appears from time to time in the title of usage guides, in the sense of good usage: for example,

English has become one of the dominant languages of our modern world. Learning any language can seem like a tedious task, especially as a beginner. However, as you slowly get used to the unavoidable and seemingly unusual subtleties of a language, learning it becomes exponentially satisfying.

Teacher effectiveness is a cliché term in general education domain and there are many useful publications such as magazines, journals, books, papers and internet websites which you can easily reach with a little effort. It is always the main focus of teacher training programs which aim to train teachers pedagogically and create more superior and efficient teachers in the classrooms. Since most of the educators and scholars agree with the idea that teachers are inseparable parts of education and they have highly significant roles in the quality of teaching and raising successful learners, it would be better to talk much about the attributes of effective language teacher in terms of popular perspectives in order to increase language learners' academic achievements both inside and outside of the class. Then, it would be helpful for the improvement of language teaching and learning process in some degree by lessening the problems deriving from the teachers' side. Use correct English is vital.

## CONCLUSION

Learning to speak and write good English is a very essential task. English is, after all, one of the complex languages to learn because there are so many oddities in the language. You can learn a grammar rule and then discover that it has lots of exceptions. Spelling rules are like this too. For example there is the basic rule that all learners are taught. Organization, structure, and grammar are all important components of the written. Vocabulary is also an important component. Our speech generally includes a lot of repetition. Our writing, however, should rely on vocabulary to get our point across, rather than repetition. As writers, we also use structure and punctuation for emphasis, and to keep our writing and thoughts orderly. If you write the way you speak, the results tend to be disorganized and confusing. English is an unphonetic language. When we write, we can't complement our words with facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice as we do when expressing ourselves verbally. That is why we must make those words express our thoughts clearly. We need to expand on our points until they are clear, easy to understand, and the subject is thoroughly explained. When speaking directly to people, we are constantly adjusting our manner, tone, and vocabulary to the nonverbal feedback we receive, even when we don't realize we're doing so. When we write, we have to imagine the readers' feedback and adjust our style accordingly. We need to make sure our writing is clear, concise, and gets our points across in a way that is easy to digest. When you write the way you speak, on the other hand, tends to involve rambling that quickly loses your reader's attention. Correct English is very significant.

## REFERENCES

- Chand, J.K. and B.C.Das. *Millennium Guide to Writing and Speaking English*. Cuttack: Friends Publisher, 2004.
- Cutts, Martin. *The Plain English Guide*. London: OUP, 1995
- Das, Bikram K. *An Introduction to Professional English and Soft Skills*. Delhi: CUP, 2012.
- Dash, Bipin Bihari. *Professional English*. New Delhi: JTS Publications, 2021.
- Dutt, P. Kiramani, etal. *A Course in Communication Skills*. Delhi: CUP, 2004.
- Gowers, Sir Ernest. *The Complete Plain Words*. London: Penguin Books, 1962.
- Howard, Godfrey. *A Guide to Good English*. London: Pelham Books, 1985.
- Johnson, Edward D. *The Handbook of Good English*. London: Oxford, 1991.
- Nesfield, J.C. *A Manual of English Grammar and Composition*. London: Read Books, 1898.
- Ramamurthi, Lalitha. *A History of English Language and Elements of Phonetics*. Chennai: Macmillan, 1998.