Garner’s Modern American Usage

In his preface to the third edition, Bryan Garner writes, “The mark of a genuine scholar is never to leave an answerable question unanswered” (p. xi). After living with this book for several months, I can honestly say that Garner is a genuine scholar. His erudition and love of language shine through on every page and in most entries.

For previous readers of Garner, his new Language-Change Index is an exciting addition. Changes to usage are categorized by one of five stages: (1) rejected, (2) widely shunned, (3) widespread but still avoided in careful usage, (4) ubiquitous but opposed by linguistic stalwarts, and (5) universally accepted. So you can look up your pet peeves and see where they stand. For example, I’m glad that email (not e-mail) is in Stage 4.

Previous readers will also be interested in the doubling of new entries, the identification of poor usage by asterisks, and the expanded glossary of language terms. But new readers will be captivated by the many topics Garner addresses. For example, in his entry on initialese (the overuse of abbreviations), he directly criticizes technical writers for allowing the proliferation of abbreviated terms, requiring the reader constantly to refer to their original uses to grasp meaning.

Garner’s sense of humor is always near the surface of his writing. As a native Texan, he is sensitive to the pronunciation of the letter w, which in Texas comes out as “Dubya” and is now the nickname of the 43rd U.S. president.

Some of his entries are right on the mark. Take sexism, for instance. As an adjunct professor, I’m well aware that contemporary students have little understanding of the underlying problems of language change and no clue of the politics that engendered them.

But some things puzzle me. Garner has separate entries for disabled and handicapped and makes no mention that the former is the preferred term by the disabled and their supporters. I’m also bothered by his approval of illegal alien, which Garner calls the “usual and preferred term in American English.” Preferred term by whom? FOX News and members of the Tea Party? It is an offensive term to immigrants and only serves to make people angry.

Despite these criticisms, Garner’s book is by far the best on contemporary usage. For language lovers or for those attempting to find out how words are being used today, Garner’s Modern American Usage is an indispensable tool.

Charles R. Crawley
Charles R. Crawley is the lead technical writer for Rockwell Collins in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He is the public relations chair of the Eastern Iowa Chapter of STC and the treasurer for the Technical Editing SIG.

The Twitter Job Search Guide: Find a Job and Advance Your Career in Just 15 Minutes a Day

The Twitter Job Search Guide is for anyone, regardless of their Twitter experience, who wants to build a professional brand, expand their professional network, or search for a job. The authors have written an excellent book offering advice from their career, personal branding, and social media expertise. You will learn and explore

- How to build a personal brand and strategy in 15 minutes a day
- Stories from Twitter users who build online visibility
- How to communicate on Twitter to build new relationships (“tweeps”)
• Wisdom from experts in social media and personal branding

This book is broken into seven sections, with 32 chapters and an appendix, which provides tips from career experts and information from successful Twitter job seekers. The chapters, most of which are three to six pages long, are full of practical information and easy to read quickly. You can navigate to topics of personal interest depending upon your Twitter experience, job search mode, and time available.

The most relevant chapters for technical communicators include “Your Brand and Twitter,” “Job Search Advice from the Trenches,” and “Maximize Twitter in Just 15 Minutes a Day.”

You’ll learn how your personal brand and social media fit together and how you can use this to strengthen connections with employers. Coauthor Deb Dib’s Brand to Land Plan outlines four brand essentials to help you get hired faster: personal brand, career brand, brand statement, and branded value proposition.

Ten rules for searching in a new economy include how to articulate your assets into a compelling brand by writing concise marketing materials such as your Twitter bio. You’re also encouraged to build relationships with specific companies by targeting them before they publish job openings. The chapter on maximizing Twitter helps you organize your 15 minutes a day productively on Twitter (after you create your account and learn the basics). Coauthor Chandlee Bryan’s handy checklist provides detailed recommendations to grow your network and manage your strategy in four weeks.

Twitter can be overwhelming with all its features, but this book is organized clearly into simple steps to provide goals to help you achieve success. Overall, Whitcomb, Bryan, and Dib present excellent strategies for inspiring you to create a professional brand on Twitter (even if you haven’t created a Twitter page yet) and have written a recommended resource for those in the job search process.

Angel Belford
Angel Belford is a senior technical writer/editor with a BA and MA in scientific and technical communication.

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Digital Barbarism: A Writer’s Manifesto


Writing in the Wall Street Journal in 2005, Mark Helprin argued, “If you must go to war, do not do so hesitantly, with half a heart.” He takes his own advice in his aptly named manifesto, Digital Barbarism, in which he declares war on teachers, librarians, college professors, computer programmers, environmentalists, and NASCAR fans, among others. Helprin defends a copyright system he sees as under assault from a variety of cultural and technological forces. His central thesis: “The rights of authorship, the most effective guarantor of which is copyright, protect fact from casual manipulation; slow the rush to judgment; fix responsibility; encourage conscience in assertion and deliberation; and protect the authority of the individual voice, without which we are little more than nicely yoked oxen” (p. 66).

Where Lawrence Lessig and other critics of current copyright law see copyright as stifling creativity, Helprin says copyright promotes creativity by forcing artists to create new works rather than reworking existing ones. For Helprin, it’s about more than just creativity, however. It’s about the rights of authors to control and profit from their work. Even more than that, it’s about preserving the individualist spirit in an increasingly collectivist world, and Helprin holds the latter in Ayn Randian disdain. “Very clearly,” he says, “the choice is between the preeminence of the individual or of the collective, of improvisation or of routine, of the soul or of the machine” (p. 217).

Unfortunately, Helprin undermines his argument by wrapping it in ultraconservative politics that disapprove of modern culture and visions of equality and inclusiveness. He distrusts digital media and dislikes gender-neutral language. In his view, the university is “a privileged semi-socialist anomaly sustained from without by the wealth of the market economy it disdains” (p. 213). Teachers are “factory-floor soviets” (p. 54).