Basic requirements

— 4–6 pages
— Rough draft due at the start of class on April 14
— Final draft due at the start of class on April 28

Reading

— Ethan Bronner (p. 488–494 of *Language Awareness*)
— Dorothy Z. Seymour (p. 338–345 of *Language Awareness*)
— LSA resolution on the Oakland “Ebonics” issue (p. 346–347 of *Language Awareness*)

Background

The tension between prescriptivism and descriptivism is present throughout the history of linguistics.

Prescriptive linguists seek to establish a set of conventions for speakers to follow. They bemoan things like split infinitives, sentences that begin with but, and the very existence of ain’t and y’all. The work of prescriptive linguists is not scientific. It is normative. Good prescriptive linguists act like coaches, cheering their readers on to improve themselves as writers. Bad prescriptive linguists complain about a perceived decline in the state of the language, culture, and so on.

Descriptive linguists watch and listen to the way language is actually used. They attempt to find generalizations that hold across dialects and across languages. It is a fact that English speakers split up infinitival constructions like to go with adverbs like boldly (*To boldly go where no man has gone before*). Therefore, descriptive linguists seek to understand such constructions.

Your task

The task for this paper is to pick a position that is connected with the issues of descriptive and prescriptive linguistics and defend it. In (1)–(6), I offer some positions one could take for the paper.

(1) Prescriptivism has no place in a science of language.
Prescriptivism has no place at all, anywhere and should be forbidden.

Descriptivism is the only proper basis for a science of language.

Descriptive linguists who ignores prescriptivism can cause serious harm. If one does not heed prescriptive principles, one will be judged sloppy and uneducated to others, and suffer socially and professionally as a result.

Prescriptivism is appropriate where the aim is get people to write better.

Prescriptivism is appropriate where the aim is to get people to speaker respectfully.

I stress that these are only some of the many positions one could take. You are encouraged to find our own position. If you decide to pick one or more of (1)–(6), you should articulate it better, make it a product of your thoughts and your experiences.

Whatever position you pick, your job is to build a persuasive case for your (no doubt controversial) position. This is done most effectively by calling upon personal experiences, examples from our reading, and your own knowledge of the subject.

**Requirements**

Do not take for granted that your reader knows what ‘prescriptive’ and ‘descriptive’ mean in this context. Near the start of your paper, you should provide detailed definitions of each, with examples. (The examples part provides a relatively easy way to incorporate insights from our reading.)

Do not let any of the phrases in (1)–(6) appear in your paper. (This will help ensure that the position you take is your own.)

Consider alternatives. For example, if you say prescriptivism is bad, then spend some time thinking about why it might be good. Try to understand why someone might be opposed to you on this point. If the reasons seem valid, then temper your position (e.g., prescriptivism is fine in the classroom, but not in science). If the reasons seem invalid, then support these conclusions in your paper.

Make use of the class reading, and be sure to cite such uses fully and accurately.

**Other resources**

You might want to do research beyond our class reading. Here are some suggestions:

— Other pieces from *Language Awareness*


— Strunk, William Jr. and E. B. White. 1979. *The Elements of Style*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan. (This is a classic style manual, quite out of date, though. White was one of the last century’s finest English essayists.)

— William Safire’s column in the weekly *New York Times Magazine*