

# “On The Need Of Some Grammar” by Wilson Follett

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Wilson Follett’s “On the Need of Some Grammar,” from *Modern American Usage*, presents a strong argument for the importance of grammar in clear and effective communication. Follett believes that grammar is not merely a collection of school rules but a necessary system that gives language order, logic, and meaning. (Follett) Without grammar, language becomes uncertain and confusing because words cannot function properly unless they are arranged in meaningful relationships.

Follett’s essay is important because it defends the practical value of grammar at a time when some modern approaches to language were moving away from traditional rules. He argues that writers and speakers need grammatical knowledge in order to express ideas clearly. For Follett, grammar is not an unnecessary burden. It is a tool that helps people understand how language works and how sentences create meaning.

## Grammar as a System of Meaning

Follett sees grammar as the structure that governs language. (Follett) Grammar explains how words relate to one another in a sentence. It includes parts of speech, subjects, verbs, objects, modifiers, clauses, phrases, and sentence patterns. These elements are not separate from meaning; they are the means through which meaning is created.

For example, the order of words in a sentence can completely change its meaning. A subject tells who or what performs an action, while a verb shows the action or state of being. Modifiers add detail, but if they are misplaced, they can confuse the reader. Grammar therefore helps writers avoid ambiguity and communicate ideas accurately.

According to Follett’s view, grammar is not only about correctness. It is also about thought. A sentence reflects the order of a writer’s thinking. If the grammar is weak, the thought may appear weak or unclear. Good grammar allows complex ideas to be expressed with precision.

## Traditional Grammar

Follett’s argument supports the continued need for traditional grammar. Traditional grammar focuses on the structure of sentences and the functions of words within those sentences. It explains language through categories such as noun, verb, adjective, adverb, subject, predicate, phrase, and clause.

Traditional grammar is often associated with prescriptive grammar. Prescriptive grammar provides

rules for how language should be used in formal writing and speech. It distinguishes between standard and nonstandard usage and helps writers follow accepted conventions. Follett values this type of grammar because it provides writers with standards for clarity and correctness.

However, traditional grammar should not be understood as simply memorizing rules. Its deeper purpose is to help writers understand how sentence structure works. When students learn grammar properly, they gain control over language. They can write more clearly, edit their work more effectively, and understand why certain sentences succeed or fail.

## Prescriptive and Descriptive Approaches

A major issue in Follett's essay is the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language. Prescriptive grammar tells people how they should use language, especially in formal contexts. Descriptive grammar studies how people actually use language in speech and writing. Both approaches have value, but Follett is concerned that a purely descriptive approach may weaken standards of usage.

Descriptive linguists study language scientifically. They observe patterns in speech, dialects, pronunciation, word formation, and grammar. This approach is useful because it shows that language changes over time and that different communities use language in different ways. It also helps prevent unfair judgments against dialects or regional speech.

Follett, however, argues that description alone is not enough for writers. A person who wants to write clearly needs guidance, not only observation. If grammar only records how people speak, it may fail to teach how language should be used in careful writing. Follett therefore defends the need for standards, especially for educated prose.

## Morphology and Syntax

The original discussion of Follett's essay mentions morphology, but it is important to clarify the difference between morphology and syntax. Morphology is the study of word formation. It examines roots, prefixes, suffixes, inflections, and how words are built. For example, the words "teach," "teacher," "teaching," and "teachable" are related through morphological patterns.

Syntax, on the other hand, is the study of sentence structure. It explains how words combine into phrases, clauses, and sentences. Follett's concern is closer to syntax than morphology because he is mainly interested in how grammar helps writers form meaningful sentences.

Both morphology and syntax are important parts of language study. However, Follett's argument is that writers need grammatical knowledge that helps them compose clear sentences, not only scientific knowledge about word forms. He believes grammar should serve the practical needs of

communication.

## Follett's Concern About Modern Linguistics

Follett is critical of some modern linguistic approaches because he believes they can become too detached from the needs of writers. Modern linguistics often studies language objectively, focusing on how language is used rather than how it ought to be used. This can be valuable for research, but Follett worries that it may not help people write better.

His concern is that if language study becomes only descriptive, it may stop teaching standards of correctness, clarity, and elegance. For Follett, a writer needs more than knowledge of how people speak in everyday life. A writer needs discipline, judgment, and a sense of form. Grammar provides that discipline.

This does not mean that Follett rejects all language change. Language naturally changes over time. New words appear, old usages disappear, and social attitudes influence expression. However, Follett believes that change should not mean carelessness. Good writing still requires attention to structure, meaning, and precision.

## Grammar and Good Writing

One of the strongest ideas in Follett's essay is that grammar supports good writing. A writer who understands grammar can make better choices. They can decide where to place emphasis, how to avoid confusion, how to connect ideas, and how to create rhythm in prose.

Grammar also helps writers revise. Many writing problems are grammatical problems: unclear pronoun references, weak sentence structure, misplaced modifiers, fragments, run-on sentences, and faulty agreement. A writer who understands grammar can identify these problems and correct them.

Follett's argument is especially relevant for students. Students often think grammar is only a set of rules imposed by teachers. Follett shows that grammar is more than that. It is a way of understanding language and improving expression. A student who learns grammar gains confidence in reading, writing, and speaking.

## The Relationship Between Grammar and Thought

Follett connects grammar with thought. Language is the medium through which people express ideas, and grammar gives shape to those ideas. If a sentence is poorly constructed, the reader may struggle to understand the writer's meaning. If a sentence is well constructed, the idea becomes clearer and stronger.

This relationship between grammar and thought is important because writing is not just decoration. Writing is a form of thinking. A clear sentence often reflects clear thinking, while a confused sentence may reveal uncertainty. Grammar helps writers organize their ideas logically.

For Follett, grammar is therefore not a minor technical matter. It is central to intellectual life. People need grammar because they need clear language, and they need clear language because they need clear thought.

## Importance of Follett's Essay Today

Follett's essay remains relevant today because debates about grammar continue. Some people argue that grammar rules are outdated or too restrictive. Others argue that weak grammar leads to poor communication. A balanced view recognizes that language changes, but also that formal writing still requires standards.

In academic, professional, and public communication, grammar matters. Employers, teachers, readers, and audiences expect clarity. Poor grammar can distract from the message and reduce credibility. Good grammar helps writers communicate with authority and precision.

At the same time, grammar should not be used to shame people or dismiss different dialects. The purpose of grammar instruction should be to expand a person's ability to communicate, not to insult natural speech patterns. Follett's argument is most useful when understood as a defense of careful writing rather than a rejection of linguistic diversity.

## Conclusion

Wilson Follett's "On the Need of Some Grammar" argues that grammar is essential because it gives language structure, logic, and clarity. Grammar helps writers understand how words work together and how sentences create meaning. Follett defends traditional grammar because he believes writers need practical standards for effective communication.

Although modern linguistics provides valuable scientific insight into language, Follett warns that description alone is not enough. Writers also need guidance about clear and correct usage. His essay remains important because it reminds readers that grammar is not merely a set of rules. It is a tool for thought, expression, and communication. In this sense, grammar is necessary not only for writing well but also for thinking clearly.

## Work Cited

Follett, Wilson. *Modern American Usage: A Guide*. Edited by Jacques Barzun, Hill and Wang, 1966.