

Descriptive Grammar: How does it compare with prescriptive grammar?

By [Richard Nordquist](#)

Updated on September 20, 2019

The term **descriptive** grammar refers to an objective, nonjudgmental description of the [grammatical](#) constructions in a [language](#). It's an examination of how a language is actually being used, in writing and in speech. [Linguists](#) who specialize in descriptive grammar examine the principles and patterns that underlie the use of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. In that respect, the adjective "**descriptive**" is a bit misleading as **descriptive** grammar provides an analysis and explanation of a language's grammar, not simply a description of it.

How Experts Define Descriptive Grammar

"Descriptive grammars do not give advice: They detail the ways in which [native speakers](#) use their language. A descriptive grammar is a survey of a language. For any living language, a descriptive grammar from one century will differ from a descriptive grammar of the next century because the language will have changed."—From *In "An Introduction to Language"* by Kirk Hazen

"Descriptive grammar is the basis for [dictionaries](#), which record changes in [vocabulary](#) and [usage](#), and for the field of [linguistics](#), which aims at describing languages and investigating the nature of language."—From *"Bad Language"* by Edwin L. Battistella

Contrasting Descriptive and Prescriptive Grammar

Descriptive grammar is more a study in the "why and how" of language, while **prescriptive grammar** deals with the strict rules of right and wrong required for language to be considered grammatically correct. **Prescriptive grammarians**—such as most [editors](#) of nonfiction and teachers—do their darndest to enforce the rules of "correct" and "incorrect" [usage](#).

Says author Donald G. Ellis, "All languages adhere to [syntactical](#) rules of one sort or another, but the rigidity of these rules is greater in some languages. It is very important to distinguish between the syntactical rules that govern a language and the rules that a culture imposes on its language." He explains that this is the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive grammar. "Descriptive grammars are essentially scientific theories that attempt to explain how language works."

Ellis admits that human beings were using language in a variety of forms long before there were [linguists](#) using **descriptive** grammar around to formulate any rules about how or why they were speaking as they did. On the other hand, he likens **prescriptive** grammarians to the stereotypical uptight high school English teachers who "'prescribe,' like medicine for what ails you, how you 'ought' to speak."

Examples of Descriptive and Prescriptive Grammar

To illustrate the difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammar, let's look at the sentence: "I ain't going nowhere." Now, to a **descriptive** grammarian, there's nothing wrong with the sentence because it's being spoken by someone who is using the language to construct a phrase that has meaning for someone else who speaks the same language.

To a **prescriptive** grammarian, however, that sentence is a virtual house of horrors. First, it contains the word "ain't," which strictly speaking (and we must be strict if we're **prescriptive**) is slang. So, although you'll find "ain't" in the dictionary, as the adage says, "Ain't ain't a word." The sentence also contains a double negative (ain't and nowhere) which just compounds the atrocity.

Simply having the word "ain't" in the dictionary is a further illustration of the difference between the two types of grammar. **Descriptive** grammar notes the word's use in the language, pronunciation, meaning, and even etymology—without judgment, but in **prescriptive** grammar, the use of "ain't" is just plain wrong—especially in formal speaking or writing.

Would a **descriptive** grammarian ever say something was ungrammatical? Yes. If someone utters a sentence using words or phrases or construction that as a native speaker they would never even think of putting together. For instance, a native English speaker wouldn't start a sentence with two query words—as in, "Who where are you going?"—because the result would be unintelligible as well as ungrammatical. It's one case in which the descriptive and prescriptive grammarians would actually agree.

Sources

- Hazen, Kirk. "An Introduction to Language." John Wiley, 2015
- Battistella, Edwin L. "Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others?" Oxford University Press, Aug 25, 2005
- Ellis, Donald G. "From Language to Communication." Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999

About the Author:

Richard Nordquist, English and Rhetoric Professor

- Ph.D., Rhetoric and English, University of Georgia
- M.A., Modern English and American Literature, University of Leicester
- B.A., English, State University of New York

Dr. Richard Nordquist is professor emeritus of rhetoric and English at Georgia Southern University and the author of several university-level grammar and composition textbooks.

Cite This Article (MLA Format):

Nordquist, Richard. "Descriptive Grammar." ThoughtCo, Apr. 5, 2023, [thoughtco.com/what-is-descriptive-grammar-1690439](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-descriptive-grammar-1690439).