

Grades 11–12 Playlist: Recognizing Usage as a Matter of Convention

Aligns with *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.1.A*:

- Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time, and is sometimes contested.

Welcome

Language changes. Like a living creature, it evolves and grows over time in response to a shifting environment. New words are invented or borrowed from other languages, word meanings are altered or added to, and punctuation usages and sentence mechanics are adapted for new communication technologies. The people who use language make these changes in order to better suit their current needs. Learning about language usage helps readers understand both how language works and how people use it to express themselves in different ways.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- identify conventions of language usage, including how they change over time.

Exploring the Standard

Usage is the habitual or customary practices that are followed in spoken or written language. For example, if a word begins to be used in a specific way, the word's new usage might spread and become common knowledge. However, a great deal of usage depends on context. Because usage changes alongside the people who speak a language, something that was once a convention may now seem outdated or confusing. In addition, there are some conventional usages that are not widely accepted but continue to be used conversationally, such as the word *ain't*. Being aware of past and present usage conventions, both formal and informal, helps people better understand what they read and hear.

Watch!

Watch this video to review some of the most common usage mistakes made in English and how to avoid making them again:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCkRW5_ZINI



A Closer Look: How Conventional Usage Changes Over Time

Keeping up with usage can be tricky. It is always shifting, whether subtly or drastically, to meet the needs of different people. With the addition of communication methods like social media and text messaging, the task of keeping up with changing usage trends would require almost constant attention. Thankfully, the majority of usage changes can be grouped into a few common categories. This makes it easier to identify conventional usages whenever and wherever they're encountered.

Take a look at the following categories of common usage changes for the English language:

Analogous Words: Some words are created (or forgotten) based on their correspondence or partial similarity to the structure or use of other words. For example, a particular word may have once had a different past tense form than it does today. The old past tense form was once the conventional usage, but it has since been replaced with an analogous word.

Borrowed Words: Over time, many words that originated in different languages and cultures have become widely accepted as parts of the English language as well. For example, the Chinese word *typhoon* is now used and understood by English speakers as a word that means the same as the English term *tropical cyclone*.

Contested Conventions: Usages are determined to be acceptable or unacceptable mostly by educators, writers, and the compilers of dictionaries and other reference materials. However, some conventional usages persist in conversational or informal language. This can include slang words like *adorbs* (adorable) and *hang out* (spend time together) as well as contested grammar practices, such as ending a sentence with a preposition.

Cultural Reflections: Some words and phrases are a direct reflection of the culture in which they are used. For example, the word *drone* had fewer possible meanings fifty years ago than it does today. In addition to its traditional definitions, such as a low humming sound, a monotonous speech, or a male bee, the word *drone* can now also refer to a remote-controlled pilotless aircraft. This meaning was added because of changes in the world at large—in this case, technological advances.

Economical Words: A frequently used word or phrase is sometimes made shorter over time. Other times, multiple word sounds are combined to make certain words and phrases easier and faster to say. For example, the words *wanna* and *gonna* are quicker, informal versions of *want to* and *going to*.

Means of Communication: People create, change, or abandon some words and phrases depending on the methods they use to communicate. For example, abbreviations like *LOL* (laughing out loud) and *BRB* (be right back) emerged from the use of electronic communication, such as text messaging and instant messaging.

Watch!

Watch this video to see recent examples of how cultural changes affect usage and the creation of new words:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siLI2VOajRQ>



Teaching Notes: Recognizing Usage as a Matter of Convention

The goal of L.11-12.1.A is for students to be able to apply their understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time, and can sometimes be contested. These teaching notes contain ideas and resources for instruction around this standard.

Activities

1. Ask students to work with a partner. Assign each group a different list of four or five nonstandard words, phrases, or usages that have now become conventional and are included in dictionaries. Provide dictionaries or other usage guides and ask the students to look up each example on the list. Once they have finished, have the groups share their findings as part of a class discussion. Encourage each group to brainstorm what kinds of change might have created each of the words on their lists.
2. Assign students a grade-appropriate excerpt from a literary text that contains several examples of usage that might be contested today, such as split infinitives, dangling participles, or incomplete sentences. Then ask students to explain when these breaks in convention occur, whether they are appropriate, and why.
3. Review with students how conventional usage can be affected by many different factors. Then ask them to find three words, phrases, or usages that represent each of the following types of usage changes:
 - analogous words
 - borrowed words
 - contested conventions
 - cultural reflections
 - economical words
 - means of communication

Writing Prompt

Assign students a list of familiar English words that were borrowed from other languages, such as *tsunami*, *loofah*, *graffiti*, *karaoke*, *guru*, *rodeo*, and *camouflage*. Direct them to look up the meanings and origins of these words using reference material such as a usage guide. Then, ask them to write down the country where each word originated and an example sentence that correctly uses each word.

Additional Resource

Consider this additional resource when teaching L.11-12.1.A:

- **“Guide to Grammar and Writing”**: This index provides a wealth of information, activities, and quizzes related to usage conventions:
<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>

