



# Spread the Word

*William Safire*

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## **Spread the Word** William Safire

As William Safire writes in his introduction to **Spread the Word**, the eleventh book collecting his "On Language" columns from *The New York Times Magazine*, in language matters "it's a comfort to have a rule." And yet, as he makes clear throughout this entertaining collection, the question that confronts writers and public speakers daily is deciding when a rule should be applied rigorously to a linguistic dilemma, and when that rule is best sidelined by common sense.

In the two decades that Safire has entertained and enlightened readers of his weekly column, he has consistently enlivened our national conversation about what's new and what's acceptable in language. In **Spread the Word**, he adroitly dissects the evolution of current phrases, verbal trends, and the origins of colloquialisms that often go unexamined. He tackles all topics, from the habits of newspaper editorial writers to teenagers' argot to the often tortured speech of politicians.

Here, Safire examines such conundrums as the origin of There is no free lunch; the correct use of among and between; the evolution of the word babe; the subtle distinctions between diddly squat, diddle-daddle, and just plain diddle; the meaning of bad hair day, tough sell, hard love, and shoulda, coulda, woulda; the vogue status of such words as daunting, same-old-same-old, and dope; and the inherent humor of bananas.

In this vigorous and erudite assemblage, which is organized alphabetically by topic, Safire shares his infectious curiosity about how we use words with an approach that is often amusing and always thought-provoking. In fact, "On Language" columns often elicit passionate comments from Safire's readers, the Lexicographic Irregulars. A lively selection of their letters on specific linguistic issues is interspersed throughout the book.

From a reader in Providence, Rhode Island, "on the indispensability of the hyphen: Personals ads seem to be a goldmine of casual usage, never proofread and seldom submitted to grammarians for grading. One gem was from a man who started describing himself as a BIG FIRM ATTORNEY."

And this from Fred Cassidy, chief editor of The Dictionary of American Regional English: "Your picture of the stupid dog not responding to the command 'sic 'em' reminds me of the corresponding cat story of the man who had made three holes in the bottom of his door so that his cats could come and go when the door was closed. An efficiency-minded neighbor asked him, Couldn't all your cats use a single hole? 'No!' he glared. 'When I say scat I mean scat!'"

Shown by the many letters included here--and in the delight that the Gotcha! Gang takes in correcting America's foremost language maven--readers take great enjoyment in the national dialogue that William Safire fosters about words every week.

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