Description versus Prescription A descriptive approach is one which studies and characterises the language of specific groups of people in a range of situations, without bringing any preconceived notions of correctness to the task, or favouring the language of one social group as somehow ‘better’ than those of others. One could attempt a description of the language of royalty in formal and informal situations, of mineworkers at work in Wales, and of street vendors in Cape Town in neutral terms, the way a scientist might describe the object of his or her study.

By contrast, a prescriptive approach to language (or prescriptivism) is concerned with what might be termed ‘linguistic etiquette’. In this section, we focus on English mainly, since the prescriptive tradition has been best documented for this language. Prescriptivism is best exemplified by the traditional approach to the teaching of grammar in English schools. The role of the language teacher is seen as upholding certain forms of language as the norm to be emulated. Prescriptions are given covering different aspects of language:

• Grammar: Don’t end sentences with prepositions.  
• Vocabulary: Don’t say *cool*.  
• Meaning: *Nice* only means ‘fi nely nuanced’, as in a nice *distinction*.  
• Pronunciation: Don’t pronounce the fi nal *t* in *trait* (British English).