



How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die

By David Crystal

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Steven Pinker meets Bill Bryson in this landmark exploration of language.

In the author's own words, "*How Language Works* is not about music, cookery, or sex. But it is about how we talk about music, cookery, and sex—or, indeed, anything at all." Language is so fundamental to everyday life that we take it for granted. But as David Crystal makes clear in this work of unprecedented scope, language is an extremely powerful tool that defines the human species.

Crystal offers general readers a personal tour of the intricate workings of language. He moves effortlessly from big subjects like the origins of languages, how children learn to speak, and how conversation works to subtle but revealing points such as how email differs from both speech and writing in important ways, how language reveals a person's social status, and how we decide whether a word is rude or polite.

Broad and deep, but with a light and witty touch, *How Language Works* is the ultimate layman's guide to how we communicate with one another.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. A world authority on language, Crystal (*The Stories of English*) offers an impeccably organized guide to language and communication that brings clarity to a scholarly subject, and is sure to become a standard reference. Written in an unadorned style, Crystal's chapters are purposeful lessons ("How we use tone of voice"; "How children learn to mean"; "How we choose what to say") that demonstrate his pedagogical genius for rendering complex matters simple. Crystal's tome imparts a vast amount of knowledge concerning intricate and interrelated aspects of speech, the written word, lexicography, grammar and neurological aspects of communication; it encompasses issues of identity, ethnicity and the preservation of disappearing languages, the structural organization of the world's different language families, multilingualism, and the pragmatic uses of artificial and natural languages. A feat of academic distillation, Crystal's book abounds in wisdom and dry wit. (Nov.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Longtime language writer and linguistics professor Crystal (*The Stories of English*, 2004) offers a well-organized, thoroughly comprehensive guide to language and communication in 73 short chapters. The passionate word enthusiast addresses every aspect of language, including how we learn to speak, read, and write; the physiology behind the formation of speech sounds; how we choose what to say; how gestures and tone of voice impact communication; how the brain handles language; and how language tells us where we are from. After beginning with spoken and written language, Crystal moves on to sign language, language structure, discourse, dialects, language families, and multilingualism. The book also includes diagrams of the human tongue, ear, and brain; a chart of Egyptian hieroglyphs over time; and illustrations of finger spelling. Although its size and subject matter may suggest otherwise, this volume is aimed at and written for general readers, and Crystal makes for an especially genial guide. Whether expressing his fair-minded assessment of the prescriptive-descriptive debate or knowledgably discussing the connection between dialects and social status, he proves to be both accessible and informative. *Joanne Wilkinson*

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Review

"An impeccably organized guide to language ... sure to become a standard reference."

"An invigorating plunge ... A crash course in linguistics, covering spoken, written, and sign language ... The book will prove, to language geeks, invaluable."

"[Crystal] succeeds again and again with clarity, wit, and enthusiasm Time and again a point is made and illustrated with a fact or anecdote that perfectly drives it home....It is marvelous ride."

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"The New York Times"

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"The San Diego Union-Tribune"

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"Publishers Weekly" (starred review)

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Joshua Sigmund:

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Thelma Scott:

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