

## Handout 1 – Prescription vs. Description

1. Linguistics is a **descriptive**, scientific discipline. This means that linguists study the forms of language, look for patterns in these forms, and then try to explain them.  
**Linguistics is not about what is “right” or “wrong”!**
2. Linguistics is the study of **competence/innate knowledge**.
  - a. Every person has intuitive knowledge about their own language
  - b. Linguistics studies the abstract mental representation of this knowledge
3. Syntax studies the module of this knowledge dealing with the organization of words into phrases and phrases into larger units and sentences.
4. Some other descriptive sciences: physics, biology, and chemistry
  - a. Do physicists tell atoms how to move? Do biologists tell birds where to nest? Do chemists tell molecules when to change from a solid into a liquid? NO!
  - b. Similarly, linguists do not tell native speakers how to speak.
  - c. They study the actual speech, and then form theories to explain the speech patterns.
5. **Prescriptive** means didactic, or instructional.
  - a. Prescriptive statements tell people how to speak, and make “right” or “wrong” judgments on language.
  - b. The norms for “correct” or “proper” speech are based on the speech of people with power.
  - c. If a different group in our society were more powerful, “correct” or “proper” speech would sound very different.
  - d. Foreign language teachers and teachers of formal or academic writing use prescriptive statements to help people learn the grammatical rules of a foreign language or the standards of socially acceptable written language.
  - e. While these rules may have social power and pragmatic value, they are not relevant to the scientific study of language.
6. Linguistics, therefore, is not prescriptive!