real

The adverb *real*, which is used only as an intensifier, developed from a use of the adjective to modify compound noun phrases like *good turn*. By the 18th century the *real* was apprehended as an intensifier modifying *good* alone, and its independent use grew from then. It was a development that took place, apparently, outside of mainstream British English; the OED identifies it as chiefly Scottish and American, and we have some slight Irish evidence. It has been from the start primarily a spoken use.

Criticism of the adverbial *real* began as early as Ayres 1881, and it has not begun to drop off yet. Insofar as this criticism tells you that *real* is informal and more suitable to speech than to writing, it is fairly accurate. When it wanders from this line to insist that *real* is an adjective only, or that *real* is a substitute for *really*, it is wrong. It is potentially misleading to label *real* as an error for *really*, because *real* and *really* are not very often used in the same way. *Real* is a simple intensifier, more or less equivalent to *very*; it is used only with adjectives and adverbs. *Really* is a full-fledged adverb; it is only sometimes used in an intensive function, and even then is more likely to mean "truly, unquestionably" than simply "very." The difference can perhaps be suggested by this passage from an interview:

> ▸ You work at writing for a couple of years and you get to feeling real sociable. By the end of a day spent sitting in a room with a typewriter, you're really ready to meet and greet and go hang out with your friends —Garrison Keillor, quoted in *Update* (Univ. of Minn.), Fall 1981

While it is still true that *real* is more likely to be encountered in speech than in writing, we notice that it has spread considerably in general writing—primarily that of newspapers and magazines—as a part of an informal, conversational style.

> ▸ A booth with a real different look was set up by a Los Gatos, Calif., shop —*Antiques and the Arts Weekly*, 3 Dec. 1982

> ▸ … he didn't follow politics real closely —Larry Pressler, *People*, 12 July 1982

> ▸ Also, armadillos are real special to Texans —Wayne King, *N.Y. Times*, 7 Dec. 1982

> ▸ … who will see viewers real soon —Guy D. Garcia, *Time*, 29 Oct. 1984

> ▸ … promising ourselves another visit real soon —Teresa Byrne-Dodge, *Houston Post Mag.*, 9 Sept. 1984

> ▸ … with the stereo turned up real loud —Jack McCallum, *Sports Illustrated*, 3 Nov. 1986

> ▸ On the first real warm day, you can sit on the back steps in your PJs —Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 1985

Although this is mainly an American usage, we do have just a bit of British evidence:

> ▸ I'm having a real good time —Ellen Terry, letter, 7 Dec. 1896

> ▸ The baddies were real bad, and the hero was intensely heroic —Benny Green, *Punch*, 4 May 1976