



## Steven Pinker

**Psychologist, professor & author**

Steven Pinker is a Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University.

## Steven's biography

### Steven Pinker's background

He conducts research on language and cognition, writes for publications such as the New York Times, Time and The Atlantic and is the author of ten books, including *The Language Instinct*, *How the Mind Works*, *The Blank Slate*, *The Stuff of Thought*, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and most recently, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*.

Pinker was born in 1954 in the English-speaking Jewish community of Montreal, Canada. He earned a Bachelor's degree in Experimental Psychology at McGill University and then moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1976, where he has spent most of his career bouncing back and forth between Harvard and MIT.

He earned his doctorate at Harvard in 1979, followed by a postdoctoral fellowship at MIT, a one-year stint as an assistant professor at Harvard and in 1982, a move back to MIT that lasted until 2003, when he returned to Harvard.

Currently he is the Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology. He also has spent two years in California: in 1981-82, when he was an assistant professor at Stanford and in 1995-96, when he spent a sabbatical year at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Pinker is an experimental psychologist who is interested in all aspects of language and mind. His doctoral dissertation and much of his early research focused on visual cognition, the ability to imagine shapes, recognize faces and objects and direct attention within the visual field.

But beginning in graduate school he cultivated an interest in language, particularly language

development in children and this topic eventually took over his research activities.

In addition to his experimental papers, he wrote two technical books early in his career. One presented a comprehensive theory of how children acquire the words and grammatical structures of their mother tongue. The second focused on the meaning, syntax and acquisition of verbs and what they reveal about the mental representation of reality.

For the next two decades his research focused on the distinction between irregular verbs like bring-brought and regular verbs like walk-walked. The two kinds of verbs, he showed, embody the two cognitive processes that make language possible: looking up words in memory and combining words (or parts of words) according to combinatorial rules.

He has also published several studies of the genetics and neurobiology of language. Most recently, his research has begun to investigate the psychology of common knowledge and how it illuminates phenomena such as innuendo, euphemism, social coordination and emotional expression.

In 1994 he published the first of seven books written for a general audience. *The Language Instinct* was an introduction to all aspects of language, held together by the idea that language is a biological adaptation. This was followed in 1997 by *How the Mind Works*, which offered a similar synthesis of the rest of the mind, from vision and reasoning to the emotions, humor and art.

In 1999 he published *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language* which presented his research on regular and irregular verbs as a way of explaining how language works.

In 2002 he published *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, which explored the political, moral and emotional colorings of the concept of human nature. *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*, published in 2007, discussed the ways in which language reveals our thoughts, emotions and [social relationships](#).

In 2011 he published *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. His latest book is *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*.

Pinker frequently writes for The New York Times, The Guardian, Time, The Atlantic and other magazines on diverse topics including language, consciousness, education, morality, [politics](#), genetics, bioethics and trends in violence.

Pinker is the Chair of the Usage Panel of The American Heritage Dictionary and has served as editor or advisor for numerous scientific, scholarly, media and humanist organizations, including the American Association the Advancement of Science, the National Science Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Psychological Association and the Linguistic Society of America.

He has won many prizes for his books including:

- The William James Book Prize three times
- The Los Angeles Times Science Book Prize
- The Eleanor Maccoby Book Prize
- The Cundill Recognition of Excellence in History Award
- The Plain English International Award

And his research including:

- The Troland Research Prize from the National Academy of Sciences
- The Early Career Award from the American Psychological Association
- The Henry Dale Prize from the Royal Institution of Great Britain
- The William James Award from the Association for Psychological Science

He has also been named the Humanist of the Year, Honorary President of the Canadian Psychological Association, Time magazine's Hundred Most Influential People in the World Today, Foreign Policy's 100 Global Thinkers and the recipient of eight honorary doctorates.

Pinker lives in Boston and in Truro with Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. The other writers in the family are his stepdaughters Yael Goldstein Love and Danielle Blau, his sister Susan Pinker and his nephew Eric Boodman.

## Steven's talks

- **Enlightenment Now Invoking the Age of Reason in the Boardroom**

What does a book about 19th century philosophy have to do with 21st century corporate culture? Plenty! In this keynote—drawn from the book Bill Gates called the best he'd ever read—the lessons are clear. The values of The Enlightenment transformed an entire planet: creating wealth, inspiring creativity, advancing science, empowering individuals, and introducing Democracy to America, France, and the globe at large. If these values can transform the world, they can transform an organization. A perfect discussion point for today—Steven Pinker will lead your audience through an exploration of who we are and where we are going, minus the baggage of today's headlines.

- **Synthesizing Inspiration**

Steven Pinker is an experimental psychologist and cognitive scientist currently teaching psychology at Harvard University. In this contemplative Steven Pinker speech, the respected scientist examines the need for an easily accessible universe of ideas in order for one to draw on it for inspiration in a process of synthesizing innovation.

Pinker argues that in order for one to be capable of creating original ideas, one must experience exposure to as many ideas as possible, both within and outside of their chosen area of work, as he says inspiring ideas can come from anywhere. Providing specific examples from his own career in psychology, Pinker discusses how he has repurposed ideas from other fields and disciplines into his work.

- **The Science of Free Will**

This free will speech by Steven Pinker raises some interesting points and facts about the process involved in our choices as human beings.

Steven's idea of free will does not involve an inner being that, as he describes, "pulls levers." Instead, he attributes it to complex processes in the brain. Because of the intense complexities of the brain, Steven says we can't predict the choices of humans.

Steven does say that there are certain reactions that can be predicted, such as natural reflexes like our pupils shrinking from light or our legs kicking when our knees are tapped. But these are completely different than choices such as picking what to have for dinner. The decisions are also derived from another part of the brain.

- **Enlightenment Now The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress**

If you read the news today, you might come to the conclusion that the human race is doomed, that democracy is on the decline, that authoritarianism and tribalism are on the rise. But is the world really falling apart? In this bold keynote, Steven Pinker urges us to step back from the gory headlines, which play to our psychological biases. Instead, follow the data. Pinker shows that life, health, prosperity, safety, peace, knowledge, and happiness are on the rise, not just in the West, but worldwide. This progress is a gift of the Enlightenment: the conviction that reason and science can enhance human flourishing. But in 2018, have we become complacent? Have we taken the Enlightenment's breakthroughs and ideals for granted? The Enlightenment stands against many of the darker currents in the air, which demagogues are all too willing to exploit, resulting in attacks on liberal democracy and global cooperation. In a timely and hopeful keynote, Steven Pinker, one of the world's most influential public intellectuals, makes the case for reason, science, and humanism: the ideals we need to confront our problems and continue our progress.

- **Social Power of Language**

Steven Pinker is a psychology professor at Harvard. He conducts research on language and

cognition, fusing linguistics and societal atmospheres. His ideologies offer an interesting outlook on the true effect of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Pinker explores the surprising weight of language in social situations. There is a subtle but complex system in which language can alter a social interaction. Pinker explains that language aims to convey some content and negotiate a relationship type. These types include dominance, communality and reciprocity. The three relationships interact differently with each. It is a clashing in these relationships that creates awkwardness.

To prevent uncomfortable interaction, people often take to indirect speech acts. In committing an indirect speech act, it is presumed that the listener will pick up on the real intent between the innuendo. With overt language, you can't take it back.

Pinker makes a powerful argument for the power of language on social relationships.

- **A Descent Into Peace**

In a series of talks titled 'Everything You Know is Wrong,' psychologist Steven Pinker makes a compelling argument that challenges the common notion that the world we live in is extremely violent, if not the most violent. Such ideas are a product of living in the same century as such travesties of the Holocaust, Darfur or the Iraq war, but Steven Pinker, by charting the history of violence, attempts to reverse the seemingly logical assertion that we are amidst ultra-violent times.

Steven Pinker makes a compelling argument that violence has been in decline since Biblical times, something he calls a fractal phenomenon that stretches across millennia. This may be due to better reporting, but it also has to do with cognitive illusions such as recalling the scarier threats, like photos of bombs exploding, than of an old person dying in their sleep. Generally, though, according to Steven Pinker, there has been a longstanding process of humankind curbing their violent lifestyles in the hopes of a more peaceful future.

- **The Sense of Style The Thinking Persons' Guide to Writing in the 21st Century**

Why is so much writing so bad, and how can we make it better? Do people write badly on purpose, to bamboozle their readers with highfalutin gobbledygook? Is the English language being corrupted by texting and social media? Should we bring back the lost art of diagramming sentences? Have dictionaries abandoned their responsibility to safeguard correct usage? Do the kids today even care about good writing? Why should any of us care?

In this talk, Steven Pinker argues that we need to rethink usage advice for the 21st century.

Rather than moaning about the decline of the language, carping over pet peeves, or recycling spurious edicts from the rulebooks of a century ago, we can apply insights from the sciences of language and mind to the challenge of crafting clear, coherent, and stylish prose.

Don't blame the Internet, or the kids today; good writing has always been hard. It begins with savoring the good prose of others. It requires an act of imagination: maintaining the illusion that one is directing a reader's gaze to something in the world. A writer must overcome the Curse of Knowledge—the difficulty we all have in imagining what it's like not to know something we know. Skillful writers must be sensitive to the ways in which syntax converts a tangled web of ideas into a linear string of words. They must weave their prose into a coherent whole, with one sentence flowing into the next. And they must negotiate the rules of correct usage, distinguishing the rules that enhance clarity and grace from the myths and superstitions.

- **A History of Violence**

Faced with the ceaseless stream of news about war, crime, and terrorism, one could easily think we live in the most violent age ever seen. Yet as New York Times bestselling author Steven Pinker shows in this startling and engaging new talk, just the opposite is true: violence has been diminishing for millennia and we may be living in the most peaceful time in our species' existence. For most of history, war, slavery, infanticide, child abuse, assassinations, pogroms, gruesome punishments, deadly quarrels, and genocide were ordinary features of life. But today,

Pinker shows audiences how all these forms of violence have dwindled and are widely condemned. How has this happened?

This groundbreaking talk continues Pinker's exploration of the essence of human nature, mixing psychology and history to provide a remarkable picture of an increasingly nonviolent world. The key, he explains, is to understand our intrinsic motives—the inner demons that incline us toward violence and the better angels that steer us away—and how changing circumstances have allowed our better angels to prevail. Exploding fatalist myths about humankind's inherent violence and the curse of modernity, this ambitious and provocative talk is sure to be hotly debated, and will challenge and change the way we think about our society.

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