## [Fitzgerald's Distinctly American Style of Writing](http://www.enotes.com/topics/great-gatsby/critical-essays/essays-criticism)

One of the simplest yet most profound reasons *The Great Gatsby* is considered an American classic is its use of language, more particularly the emerging “American Idiom.” Writers of the 20s and beyond sought to find a way of using English that was more than simply a rehash of the great British writers, a style of writing that was distinctly American. Fitzgerald not only tapped into the “American Idiom,” influencing writers to come, but elevated the language above street slang and regional distinctions into a truly artistic form that reflects the high and low of American society. The beginning and ending passages of the novel clearly illustrate the way Fitzgerald creates a uniquely American expression from the basic building blocks of the English language.

The beginning of the novel sets the bar immediately, as Fitzgerald speaks with Nick’s voice, a “typical Midwesterner” with, one would assume, a typically Midwestern accent:

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

“Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.”

He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. (1-2)

One of the first features that stands out in this passage is Nick’s almost conversational tone. Fitzgerald freely uses contractions and independent clauses separated by commas and articles like “and so” and “because.” Here, the sentences retain much of the length common in the British novel, but what may be the most resonant sentence in the first chapter—“Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope”—is remarkably short in comparison. The short sentences that characterize the work of Hemingway and generations to follow weave into Gatsby, usually to set off particular ideas as important ones.

Fitzgerald’s figurative language in the opening passage is similarly reserved, but equally telling. Nick is faced with “veteran bores,” and “privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men,” and he is aware of “intimate revelation[s] quivering on the horizon.” And of course, one of the central themes of the novel revolves around the idea of “infinite hope.” The notion of “reserving judgment” is skewered as well in Nick’s comparison between “normal” and “abnormal” minds; in fact, the entire section devoted to reserving judgment passes judgment on “wild, unknown men” by describing them in figurative terms.

Fitzgerald opens the novel strongly, asserting Nick’s unique voice through his informality and hints that he is hardly as fair-minded as he would like to be. Through language alone, Fitzgerald is able to establish Nick as an unreliable narrator. In essence, Nick betrays himself before the novel even begins.

As one might expect, the ending passage of *The Great Gatsby* builds on the language—voice, tone, figurative devices—used throughout the novel. It also expands on them as the story expands beyond the confines of Long Island. Just before Nick boards the train to return to the Midwest, he visits the beach at Gatsby’s house one last time:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.… And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (180)

In this long passage, Fitzgerald develops a much broader metaphor, one that is perhaps appropriate to the major characters of *The Great Gatsby* and their experiences. The Midwestern transplants themselves are “Dutch sailors” of a sort, and their experience of New York was undoubtedly as magical when they first arrived. Their wonder, coupled with a focus on the “inessential houses … melt[ing] away,” provide an excellent, sly recap of the novel’s themes—the Dutch sailors’ wonder is substituted for Gatsby’s wonder at the green light on Daisy’s dock, and (in a nice bit of juxtaposition) Gatsby’s dream is as dead and long-past as the trees that the sailors enjoyed, and which were cut down to build Gatsby’s house. In a sense, Gatsby was the architect of his own demise, as are we all. Fitzgerald expertly builds comparison upon comparison to make this point.

As in the opening of the novel, this passage makes extensive use of independent clauses connected by commas and articles, but additional punctuation—dashes and ellipses—added to the mix. Like [Emily Dickinson](http://www.enotes.com/topics/emily-dickinson) in [Poetry](http://www.enotes.com/topics/poetry) Fitzgerald allows his punctuation to make the piece “breathe.” The result is the illusion of shorter, more distinctive sentences, which inevitably leads to others’ use of the shortest sentences possible. Fitzgerald opens a door for writers to experiment with sentence length, and with the possibilities of different rhythms that could in retrospect be called American.

The language in the conclusion is actually elevated beyond that used in the introduction. The passage itself is longer and more dramatic, the scene is wispy and almost unreal, and Fitzgerald’s language choices allow a shift from a more conversational tone to a more refined, almost poetic expression. The conversational tone had been used in the writings of Mark Twain; in using it, Fitzgerald was merely adopting popular nineteenth century American style. However, by elevating the language at the end, by appealing to something more, he leaves us hanging on his last words. Indeed, the last sentence—in fact one long sentence “chopped up” by punctuation as described above—is one of the best-known sentences in American literature.

Fitzgerald used *The Great Gatsby* as a vehicle for his ideas on social change and corruption; along the way he changed the way Americans write novels. By using genuine American language, he was able to truly show American life and its concerns even in a story that could best be described as a sort of twentieth-century allegory. Fitzgerald’s experiments in the music of American language worked, and his literary descendants continue to explore the linguistic ground he laid at the beginning of the century.

**Work Cited**  
Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner Paperback Edition, 2004.