

## SUZANNE BRITT

SUZANNE BRITT was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and studied at Salem College and Washington University, where she earned an MA in English. Britt has written for *Sky Magazine*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, the *Boston Globe*, and many other publications. She teaches English at Meredith College in North Carolina and has published a history of the college and two English textbooks. Her other books are collections of her essays: *Skinny People Are Dull and Crunchy like Carrots* (1982) and *Show and Tell* (1983).

*Neat People*  
vs.  
*Sloppy People*

“Neat People vs. Sloppy People” appears in Britt’s collection *Show and Tell*. Mingling humor with seriousness (as she often does), Britt has called the book a report on her journey into “the awful cave of self: You shout your name and voices come back in exultant response, telling you their names.” In this essay, Britt uses comparison mainly to entertain by showing us aspects of our own selves, awful or not. For another approach to a similar subject, see the next essay, by Dave Barry.

I’ve finally figured out the difference between neat people and sloppy 1  
people. The distinction is, as always, moral. Neat people are lazier and meaner  
than sloppy people.

Sloppy people, you see, are not really sloppy. Their sloppiness is merely 2  
the unfortunate consequence of their extreme moral rectitude. Sloppy people  
carry in their mind’s eye a heavenly vision, a precise plan, that is so stupen-  
dous, so perfect, it can’t be achieved in this world or the next.

Sloppy people live in Never-Never Land. Someday is their métier. Some- 3  
day they are planning to alphabetize all their books and set up home catalogs.  
Someday they will go through their wardrobes and mark certain items for ten-  
tative mending and certain items for passing on to relatives of similar shape  
and size. Someday sloppy people will make family scrapbooks into which they  
will put newspaper clippings, postcards, locks of hair, and the dried corsage  
from their senior prom. Someday they will file everything on the surface of

their desks, including the cash receipts from coffee purchases at the snack shop. Someday they will sit down and read all the back issues of *The New Yorker*.

For all these noble reasons and more, sloppy people never get neat. They aim too high and wide. They save everything, planning someday to file, order, and straighten out the world. But while these ambitious plans take clearer and clearer shape in their heads, the books spill from the shelves onto the floor, the clothes pile up in the hamper and closet, the family mementos accumulate in every drawer, the surface of the desk is buried under mounds of paper, and the unread magazines threaten to reach the ceiling.

Sloppy people can't bear to part with anything. They give loving attention to every detail. When sloppy people say they're going to tackle the surface of a desk, they really mean it. Not a paper will go unturned; not a rubber band will go unboxed. Four hours or two weeks into the excavation, the desk looks exactly the same, primarily because the sloppy person is meticulously creating new piles of papers with new headings and scrupulously stopping to read all the old book catalogs before he throws them away. A neat person would just bulldoze the desk.

Neat people are bums and clods at heart. They have cavalier attitudes toward possessions, including family heirlooms. Everything is just another dust-catcher to them. If anything collects dust, it's got to go and that's that. Neat people will toy with the idea of throwing the children out of the house just to cut down on the clutter.

Neat people don't care about process. They like results. What they want to do is get the whole thing over with so they can sit down and watch the rasslin' on TV. Neat people operate on two unvarying principles: Never handle any item twice, and throw everything away.

The only thing messy in a neat person's house is the trash can. The minute something comes to a neat person's hand, he will look at it, try to decide if it has immediate use and, finding none, throw it in the trash.

Neat people are especially vicious with mail. They never go through their mail unless they are standing directly over a trash can. If the trash can is beside the mailbox, even better. All ads, catalogs, pleas for charitable contributions, church bulletins, and money-saving coupons go straight into the trash can without being opened. All letters from home, postcards from Europe, bills, and paychecks are opened, immediately responded to, then dropped in the trash can. Neat people keep their receipts only for tax purposes. That's it. No sentimental salvaging of birthday cards or the last letter a dying relative ever wrote. Into the trash it goes.

Neat people place neatness above everything, even economics. They are incredibly wasteful. Neat people throw away several toys every time they walk through the den. I knew a neat person once who threw away a perfectly good

dish drainer because it had mold on it. The drainer was too much trouble to wash. And neat people sell their furniture when they move. They will sell a La-Z-Boy recliner while you are reclining in it.

Neat people are no good to borrow from. Neat people buy everything in expensive little single portions. They get their flour and sugar in two-pound bags. They wouldn't consider clipping a coupon, saving a leftover, reusing plastic nondairy whipped cream containers, or rinsing off tin foil and draping it over the unmoldy dish drainer. You can never borrow a neat person's newspaper to see what's playing at the movies. Neat people have the paper all wadded up and in the trash by 7:05 AM. 11

Neat people cut a clean swath through the organic as well as the inorganic world. People, animals, and things are all one to them. They are so insensitive. After they've finished with the pantry, the medicine cabinet, and the attic, they will throw out the red geranium (too many leaves), sell the dog (too many fleas), and send the children off to boarding school (too many scuff-marks on the hardwood floors). 12

*For a reading quiz, sources on Suzanne Britt, and annotated links to further readings on personality traits, visit [bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader](http://bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader).*

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### Journal Writing

Britt suggests that grouping people according to oppositions, such as neat versus sloppy, reveals other things about them. Write about the oppositions you use to evaluate people. Smart versus dumb? Fit versus out of shape? Hip versus clueless? Rich versus poor? Outgoing versus shy? Open-minded versus narrow-minded? (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on the next page.)

### Questions on Meaning

1. "Suzanne Britt believes that neat people are lazy, mean, petty, callous, wasteful, and insensitive." How would you respond to this statement?
2. Is the author's main PURPOSE to make fun of neat people, to assess the habits of neat and sloppy people, to help neat and sloppy people get along better, to defend sloppy people, to amuse and entertain, or to prove that neat people are morally inferior to sloppy people? Discuss.

## DAVE BARRY

DAVE BARRY is a humorist whom the *New York Times* has called “the funniest man in America.” Barry was born in 1947 in Armonk, New York, and graduated from Haverford College in 1969. He worked as a journalist for five years and lectured businesspeople on writing for eight years while he began to establish himself as a columnist. His humor writing now appears in several hundred newspapers and has been collected in more than twenty-five books, including *Bad Habits: A 100% Fact Free Book* (1985), *The World According to Dave Barry* (1994), *Dave Barry in Cyberspace* (1996), and *Boogers Are My Beat: More Lies, but Some Actual Journalism* (2003), the last ranging from humorous pieces to serious thoughts on September 11, 2001. In 1988 Barry received the Pulitzer Prize for “distinguished commentary,” although, he says, “nothing I’ve ever written fits the definition.” (He thinks he won because his columns stood out from the “earthshakingly important” competition.) Barry lives in Miami with his family.

*Batting Clean-Up and Striking Out*

This essay from *Dave Barry's Greatest Hits* (1988) illustrates Barry's gift, in the words of critic Alison Teal, “for taking things at face value and rendering them funny on those grounds alone, for rendering every ounce of humor out of a perfectly ordinary experience.” Like Suzanne Britt in the previous essay, Barry contrasts two styles of dealing with a mess.

The primary difference between men and women is that women can see 1  
extremely small quantities of dirt. Not when they're babies, of course. Babies  
of both sexes have a very low awareness of dirt, other than to think it tastes  
better than food.

But somewhere during the growth process, a hormonal secretion takes 2  
place in women that enables them to see dirt that men cannot see, dirt at the  
level of *molecules*, whereas men don't generally notice it until it forms clumps  
large enough to support agriculture. This can lead to tragedy, as it did in the ill-  
fated ancient city of Pompeii, where the residents all got killed when the local  
volcano erupted and covered them with a layer of ash twenty feet deep.<sup>1</sup> Mod-  
ern people often ask, “How come, when the ashes started falling, the Pompeii  
people didn't just *leave*?” The answer is that in Pompeii, it was the custom for

<sup>1</sup>Pompeii, in what is now southern Italy, was buried in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. —EDS.



the men to do the housework. They never even *noticed* the ash until it had for the most part covered the children. "Hey!" the men said (in Latin). "It's mighty quiet around here!" This is one major historical reason why, to this very day, men tend to do extremely little in the way of useful housework.

What often happens in my specific family unit is that my wife will say to me: "Could you clean Robert's bathroom? It's filthy." So I'll gather up the Standard Male Cleaning Implements, namely a spray bottle of Windex and a wad of paper towels, and I'll go into Robert's bathroom, and it *always looks perfectly fine*. I mean, when I hear the word "filthy" used to describe a bathroom, I think about this bar where I used to hang out called Joe's Sportsman's Lounge, where the men's room had bacteria you could enter in a rodeo.

Nevertheless, because I am a sensitive and caring kind of guy, I "clean" the bathroom, spraying Windex all over everything including the six hundred action figures each sold separately that God forbid Robert should ever take a bath without, and then I wipe it back off with the paper towels, and I go back to whatever activity I had been engaged in, such as doing an important project on the Etch-a-Sketch, and a little while later my wife will say: "I hate to rush you, but could you do Robert's bathroom? It's really *filthy*." She is in there looking at the very walls I *just Windexed*, and she is seeing *dirt! Everywhere!* And if I tell her I already *cleaned* the bathroom, she gives me this look that she has perfected, the same look she used on me the time I selected Robert's outfit for school and part of it turned out to be pajamas.

The opposite side of the dirt coin, of course, is sports. This is an area where men tend to feel very sensitive and women tend to be extremely callous. I have written about this before and I always get irate letters from women who say they are the heavyweight racquetball champion of some place like Iowa and are sensitive to sports to the point where they could crush my skull like a ripe grape, but I feel these women are the exception.

A more representative woman is my friend Maddy, who once invited some people, including my wife and me, over to her house for an evening of stimulating conversation and jovial companionship, which sounds fine except that this particular evening occurred *during a World Series game*. If you can imagine such a social gaffe.

We sat around the living room and Maddy tried to stimulate a conversation, but we males could not focus our attention on the various suggested topics because we could actually *feel* the World Series television and radio broadcast rays zinging through the air, penetrating right into our bodies, causing our dental fillings to vibrate, and all the while the women were behaving *as though nothing were wrong*. It was exactly like that story by Edgar Allan Poe where the murderer can hear the victim's heart beating louder and louder even though he (the murder victim) is dead, until finally he (the murderer)

can't stand it anymore, and he just *has* to watch the World Series on television.<sup>2</sup> That was how we felt.

Maddy's husband made the first move, coming up with an absolutely brilliant means of escape: *He used their baby*. He picked up Justine, their seven-month-old daughter, who was fussing a little, and announced: "What this child needs is to have her bottle and watch the World Series." And just like that he was off to the family room, moving very quickly for a big man holding a baby. A second male escaped by pretending to clear the dessert plates. Soon all four of us were in there, watching the Annual Fall Classic, while the women prattled away about human relationships or something. It turned out to be an extremely pivotal game.

For a reading quiz, sources on Dave Barry, and annotated links to further readings on gender differences, visit [bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader](http://bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader).

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### Journal Writing

Are you ever baffled by the behavior of members of the opposite sex—or members of your own sex, if you often find yourself behaving differently from most of them? List traits of men or women that you find foreign or bewildering, such as that they do or do not want to talk about their feelings or that they can spend countless hours watching sports on television or shopping. (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on the next page.)

### Questions on Meaning

1. What is the **PURPOSE** of Barry's essay? How do you know?
2. How **OBJECTIVE** is Barry's portrayal of men and women? Does he seem to understand one sex better than the other? Does he seek to justify and excuse male sloppiness and antisocial behavior?
3. What can you **INFER** about Barry's attitude toward the differences between the sexes? Does he see a way out?

### Questions on Writing Strategy

1. Barry's comparison is organized point by point—differences in sensitivity to dirt, then differences in sensitivity to sports. What is the **EFFECT** of this organization?

<sup>2</sup>Except for the World Series ending, Barry refers to Poe's story "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843).—Eds.