

# Grammar? Oops!

"You teach English? Oh, oh—I'd better watch my grammar."

This introductory quip goes with the territory. English teachers have learned to force a smile and try to keep the conversation alive. Behind the defensive joke, though, lies a spontaneous gut equation: English = grammar. And too often, grammar = guilt.

Many adults, otherwise well educated, articulate, and successful in their lives, feel queasy about grammar. They know it has something to do with nouns and verbs, and they know they've never really learned it—probably because they were never really taught it. Now it seems to be too late. They find grammar texts written for students needing basic remediation, inching along step by tiny step. They find grammar handbooks written for the initiated, explaining the finer points of the game to those who already know the players. So the educated adult remains trapped in uneasy ignorance.

Some English teachers cheerily assert that grammar doesn't matter. Most professionals know better. Journalism classes bog down with students who can't write a straight sentence. Law schools struggle with students whose prose would baffle Blackstone. Engineering students can't prepare clear spec-

ifications. Graduate students write dissertations that choke in tangled syntax. Business offices mire down in muddy memos. And everyone knows that government means gobbledygook.

Grammar does indeed matter. It is an integral piece of man's unique talent—language. The ability to use grammar is as natural a part of each person as the ability to breathe. True, we can talk or write—that is, use grammar—without knowing the anatomy of a sentence. But knowledge is empowering. If we understand how sentences work, we are better able to write precisely and effectively. A familiarity with grammar can lessen the paralyzing fear of error, so that we can use our language with confidence.

Grammar also makes sense. This book explains the larger concepts of grammar as a framework for the smaller details. It shows you how the parts of a sentence fit together logically to operate in an intelligible statement and how those parts can be rearranged to give variety and style to your writing. As you read it, you will begin to understand the grammar that you've been using most of your life. Best of all, your guilt will melt away. You may continue to “watch your grammar,” but only because it is a fascinating thing to watch.



II

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**what this  
book is  
all about**

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# 2 |

## You and This Book

Perhaps you are an engineer or a business executive whose livelihood depends on producing well-written reports. As you organize your ideas, you find yourself stumbling over questions of grammar. Perhaps you are a graduate student, in your seventh year of university work. As you prepare the dissertation upon which your academic future hinges, you too may come face to face with grammatical bugbears.

Or you may be an upperclassman who whizzed through freshman comp but whose term papers are now returned red-inked from grammar errors. Or a secretary who must disentangle your boss's sentences. Or a parent overseeing your child's homework. Or an attorney polishing your brief. Or a doctor preparing a paper for a medical journal. Whoever you are, if your activities — professional, academic, or personal — require an ability to write correctly, and if your last formal grammar training has left you unsure of the difference between a predicate nominative and a nominative absolute, this book is designed to help you.

It is not a complete grammar of the English language. It is not a grammar handbook for quick reference to forms and terms. In fact, you will see neither *predicate nominative* nor *nomi-*

*native absolute* defined in these pages. The Latinate terms are not important when you write a paper. Furthermore, the book won't teach you how to write the paper—how to gather your ideas and organize your material. Rather, it assumes that you already can write, so teaching the act of writing is also outside its purpose.

This book is based on one firm belief: *if you understand the grammar of a sentence and can consciously manipulate that grammar, your writing will gain in style, precision, and effectiveness.*

What this book offers you, then, is a survey of the essential grammar needed by a writer. It attempts, moreover, to present this survey in a perspective that illuminates the rationale and logic of grammar. For, despite what your experience might suggest, grammar is not an arbitrary maze of rules concocted to trip you up. Grammar is a reflection of the way the human mind thinks and speaks. Written grammar (that is, the grammar that writers rather than speakers use) represents the clearest way to transmit thoughts from the writer's mind to the reader's through the medium of words, paper, and ink. A clear thought is a logical thought, and written grammar encapsulates that logic.

More specifically, what this book offers is a survey broken into ten sections. After a brief examination of the nature of grammar, you'll meet some of the terms used to discuss sentences. Then comes a look at the independent clause, the basic unit of all written thought. Punctuation is next—the special punctuation that reflects grammatical patterns. After you've learned about writing and punctuating single sentences, you'll find a discussion on why you may not have learned grammar in school. Following this is a section on creating longer sentences, then another one on creating more *stylish* sentences in polished prose that hangs together smoothly. Unfortunately, grammar has its sticky pitfalls, and the next section looks at some of these problem areas. Finally, a brief epilogue leads you from the confines of a grammatical sentence to the wider fields of real writing.

Scattered throughout the book are blocked-off items labeled "FYI," which offer miscellaneous additional information that might answer some questions you have. The FYIs don't give you any *needed* facts, but you might find them interesting—even,

at times, entertaining. If you do, read them. If not, don't.

This book is as concise as its subject permits. To get the most benefit from it, you should read it from cover to cover because its ideas build cumulatively. Once you are familiar with its contents, you might want to use it as a handy reference. But after you have absorbed its lessons, you may feel so relaxed and reassured about grammatical problems that you will have few occasions to consult it. If you don't need to use this book again, it will have served its purpose well.

that you can diagnose and correct errors or recognize and improve weaknesses. That is what the rest of this book is about.

As you begin to read this discussion of grammar, you will hit terms that may initially seem a bit confusing. Grammar, unfortunately, is a circular subject: you can't understand A until you know X, but you can't know X without understanding A through W. So if at first the terms seem a shade incomprehensible, don't despair. Just try to grasp the general concepts and keep going. Things will clear up as the terms repeat and reinforce one another.

It's time now for some preliminary definitions.

The word *GRAMMAR*, as we shall be using it, refers to a study of the forms, structures, and functions of a grammar language. We met this definition earlier, in Chapter 3. Now we can examine its terms more closely.

First, *FORM*. We can look upon words as the fundamental units of written grammar. Words have specific spellings. The arrangement of letters in a form word gives it a shape or form. Some words can change their forms for certain purposes: a noun may add an *-s* when it is plural, or a verb may add *-ed* in the past tense. The term *form* will be used to refer both to a word and to the special changes that can be made in it to show different grammatical characteristics. Thus, we could say that *babies* is the plural form of *baby*. Obviously, *form* is quite basic—so basic that you probably began to learn spelling in first grade and studied rules like “change *-y* to *-i* and add *-es*” to turn *baby* into *babies* long before junior high school. Knowing which form to use when is a prerequisite for all writing.

Words (or forms) are sometimes classified into categories known as *PARTS OF SPEECH*. Some grammatical systems list eight parts of speech, some nine, some several dozen. We can make do with seven: nouns, pronouns, verbs, parts of speech adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions.

Very roughly, nouns and pronouns represent things that we wish to talk about, verbs represent actions or states of some sort, adjectives describe things,

adverbs describe actions, and both prepositions and conjunctions show connecting relationships between words or word groups. These definitions are neither complete nor totally accurate, but they will suffice to get us started.

Although forms are fundamental, they are in themselves lifeless and uncommunicative. If you imagine a mammoth listing of dictionary entries minus their definitions, you'd have a catalogue of all the *forms* of English. But the forms could transmit no message unless they were put together with proper *structure* and *function*. These last two concepts add utility and fascination to grammar because, by playing games with forms, we introduce creativity into language.

A grammatical **STRUCTURE** is a sequence of related forms. English has but two basic kinds of structures – phrases and clauses.

*structure*

Each kind, however, has several varieties, as we shall

see later. Just as you put certain forms of wood and nails together to build the structure of a table (or a coat rack), so too you put certain forms of words together to build the structure of a prepositional phrase (or a dependent clause). When you join word

*syntax*

forms together into structures, you must follow the

rules of **SYNTAX**, the permissible ways to arrange forms to create specific structures. Syntactical rules are somewhat akin to blueprints: one blueprint for tables or prepositional phrases, another blueprint for coat racks or dependent clauses.

A grammatical **FUNCTION** refers to what a given structure

*function*

can do in a sentence, what roles it can play in creating

the desired meaning. As we shall see, the functions of a grammatical element are both determined and limited by its structure.

In carpentry, the function that you want accomplished influences the structure that you build. If you want a surface to eat upon, you build a table rather than a coat rack. So in one sense, the desired *function* determines the choice of *structure*. But a given structure might serve several functions. You can eat at a table, but you can also write at it, or play cards on it, or even stand on it. However, you can't hang a coat on it. In another