

The

**ST. MARTIN'S
HANDBOOK**

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The
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HANDBOOK

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Preface

The story of *The St. Martin's Handbook* began in 1983. In the course of investigating the history of writing instruction, we came across some information about teaching composition that, though at first simply amusing, led us to a series of compelling questions. We discovered, for instance, that in the late nineteenth century, professors at Harvard perceived that their students had great difficulty distinguishing between the use of *shall* and *will*, and that in the 1930s, American students persistently misused *would* for the simple past. How quaint, we thought; look at how much student writers and their problems have changed.

We intuitively assumed that such changes must have taken place, but what exactly were they? This question took on greater significance as we focused our investigation on the history and development of composition textbooks. As part of that research, we found that the first edition of John C. Hodges's *Harbrace College Handbook* (1941) was based on an analysis of over 20,000 student papers written in the 1930s. So, we reasoned, that book reflected the writing problems of students of the time, problems that were decidedly different from how to use *shall* and *will*. How might the problems faced by our students, fifty years later, have changed?

With something of a shock, we realized that we didn't know. Further investigation showed us not only that Hodges's research seemed to be the last serious effort of that kind but that his handbook was still organized exactly as it had been in 1941. Since subsequent college handbooks had necessarily responded to that book, we realized with some surprise that the world of composition handbooks was still being tacitly guided by conceptions of error patterns that were almost a half century old.

We set out, then, to discover what patterns of error actually characterize student writing today, and which of these patterns seem most

important to their instructors. To answer this question, we gathered a nationwide sample of over 20,000 student essays that had been marked by instructors and carefully analyzed a scientifically stratified sample of them, eventually identifying the twenty error patterns most characteristic of student writing today. As you might imagine, we got some provocative results.

Most intriguing to us is the fact that many of these errors relate in some way to visual memory—wrong words, wrong or missing verb endings, missing or misplaced possessive apostrophes, even the *its/it's* confusion—which suggests that students today may well be less familiar with the visible aspects of writing than students once were. Part of the effect of an oral, electronic culture seems to be, then, that students do not automatically bring with them the visual knowledge of writing conventions that text-wise writers possess and use effortlessly.

This problem of visualization was most pronounced in terms of spelling errors, which occur—by a factor of 300 percent—more frequently than any other error. Interestingly enough, the words students most often misspell are homonyms, words that sound alike but have different meanings and spellings. These findings support our other data linking error patterns to visual memory and suggest that the visual aspect of spelling is particularly important, that in a world of secondary orality we need to find ways to help students visualize their language.

Our research also revealed that many errors are governed not so much by hard and fast rule as by rhetorical decisions involving style, tone, and rhythm. Among others, such errors include the omission of a comma after an introductory element, inappropriate shift in verb tense, and misuse of commas with restrictive and nonrestrictive elements. This finding suggested to us that students need help writing prose that is not only mechanically correct but rhetorically effective as well. Doing so, we believe, demands that they view the tools of writing—grammar, punctuation, mechanics—as having rhetorical force and as being based on choices they must learn to make.

Armed with this information, we set out to create a textbook that would address the needs of students at the end of the twentieth century. The result is *The St. Martin's Handbook*. In many ways it is a traditional handbook, with all the requisite materials on the writing process, grammar, punctuation, mechanics, and research. In other respects, however, it charts new territory, extending writing instruction in features not found in any other handbook. Among its distinctive features are the following:

Special attention to the twenty most common errors. An introductory chapter entitled “Learning from Your Errors” offers practical guidelines for recognizing, understanding, and revising each of the top twenty errors that our research identified. This chapter also serves as an index, with cross-references to all the places in the book where students can find more help on each error. Especially helpful, we hope, will be step-by-step guidelines that show students how to check their own drafts for each error and then how to revise accordingly.

In presenting these errors, we have tried always to give a clear message about “correctness” *along with* realistic discussion of actual usage. Without oversimplification, our goal has been to help students know *what to do*. Most important, we present errors as opportunities for improving skills, as something to be examined in context and learned from rather than as blots to be eradicated. We ask students not simply to amass information about errors but to analyze the sources and consequences of those errors in their own writing—to build, if you will, a theory about how to improve their writing based on a close study of the errors that they make.

Attention to writing, not just to correctness. We feel strongly that students need practice in *writing*, not only in revising incorrect sentences. Like all composition handbooks, *The St. Martin’s Handbook* provides guidance in checking and revising a draft for correctness; unlike most others, however, it also offers ample opportunity for student writing, in guided-writing and imitation exercises that get students to stretch their writing muscles, and in revising exercises that send them back into their own writing.

This attention to writing informs every chapter in the book, including those dealing with grammar and mechanics. In the chapter on adjectives and adverbs, for instance, we ask students to focus not only on how to use adjectives and adverbs correctly but also on the more compelling question of why and in what circumstances to use them at all. In the chapter on end punctuation, we provide rules for using periods, question marks, and exclamation points, and in addition, we ask students to try revising a piece of their own writing for sentence variety, using declarative, interrogatory, and exclamatory structures. In other words, we have tried to present grammar and mechanics as something to use for a writing purpose, not simply to use “correctly.”

And because we believe that students learn best by reflecting on the rhetorical characteristics of what they have written, we show them

how to keep a writing log—for recording their efforts at using grammatical structures, listing troublesome spelling words, jotting down noteworthy examples or images for future use. As a feature, the writing log is completely optional, but we recommend it as a means of helping students to reflect systematically on their own writing.

Systematic attention to reading. Because we see writing and reading as inextricably linked, we have included reading instruction throughout the text. Not only is there extensive guidance to help students read observantly and critically—whether evaluating a draft, an argument, a paragraph, or a source—but in addition, we present reading as one more tool that can help improve writing skills. Almost every chapter includes a special exercise asking students to “read with an eye for” some structure or element they are learning to use as writers—verbs, semicolons, hyphens, and so on. These exercises ask them to study passages from famous essays (and sometimes, poems) or from drafts of their own or other student work. In addition to the obvious benefits of studying expert use of basic rhetorical elements, such exercises will, we hope, help build students’ visual knowledge of writing and writing conventions. Many of these exercises ask students then to try to imitate something in the passage—in other words, to step from their reading into writing.

Five chapters on the research process. Nowhere do students need more thorough instruction in how to move back and forth between reading and writing than in the writing they do based on sources. For this reason, *The St. Martin’s Handbook* concentrates not simply on helping students produce a “research paper,” but on how they might use research for many writing purposes. We show students how to approach all sources with a questioning eye, to assess source materials critically, not just to find them and use them. Like all handbooks, we give detailed instruction in quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing; unlike others, however, we also show students how to discover patterns in the many discrete bits of data they find. With step-by-step guidelines in synthesizing data and drawing inferences, we help them to use their research in support of their own written arguments.

Focus on student writing throughout. To illustrate the points made throughout this text, we have drawn most of our examples and exercises from the 20,000 essays gathered for our research. These are not handy-dandy examples manufactured by textbook authors but il-

illustrations of conventions and error patterns as they really exist in student writing today. As such, these examples reflect the writing needs our students have as well as their interests. In addition, we have included seven full-length student essays.

A link with the most commonly studied essays. We have also drawn on examples from professional writing. And since we know that many of you use a handbook along with a reader, we have deliberately taken these from the essays most often included in composition readers—that is, from the essays your students are likely to be reading as they use this handbook. Many of these examples serve as models for imitation, as prompts for writing, or as occasion for readerly response. Such passages will of course serve as memorable examples; more important, however, they will provide the larger rhetorical context so often missing in most other handbooks. An index of authors and titles lists all the professional examples included in this book.

The greatest possible accessibility. As we worked on this book, we spoke with hundreds of colleagues about handbooks. Among the many concerns we found was one very common one—that a handbook must be accessible, that it has to be easy to get in and out of quickly. In then studying other handbooks, we noted that all put grammar, punctuation, and mechanics in easily accessible form, with many numbered headings, but that in no handbook were the rhetorical chapters as easy to use. Chapters on the writing process and on specific writing assignments were not set up to be dipped into quickly; they had to be read like chapters. In an attempt to make the rhetorical chapters in our handbook easier to use, we have deliberately added many more headings and put much of the information in list form. Many are in the form of questions, which we hope will guide students in making necessary rhetorical choices. Our goal here is for users of this book to be able to use it easily and quickly. Our greatest hope is that our readers will spend less time with our text and, as a result, have more time to contemplate their own.

Practical, helpful ancillary materials. Accompanying *The St. Martin's Handbook* are some companion materials we hope will facilitate its use: *The St. Martin's Workbook*, by Lex Runciman; an *Evaluation Manual* with diagnostic and competency tests and writing assignments, by Edward M. White; a *Guide to Teaching Writing*, by Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn; transparency masters, prepared by

Roger C. Graves; and additional exercises on disk, available for IBM-compatible systems. Especially exciting, we think, is *The St. Martin's Hotline*, a complimentary "pop-up" reference system available for both IBM-compatible and Macintosh systems. The handbook is available in both the student edition and an *Annotated Instructor's Edition*, prepared by Cheryl Glenn, Roger C. Graves, R. Gerald Nelms, and Dennis Quon, that includes practical and interesting information about using the handbook and about teaching writing.

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Andrea Lunsford
Robert Connors

A Note to Students

Our goal in writing *The St. Martin's Handbook* has been to produce a book that will guide you to becoming competent and compelling writers, a book that you can use easily and efficiently throughout your college years.

We began work five years ago by examining a scientifically selected sample of more than 20,000 essays written by students from all areas of the country—students probably pretty much like you. We discovered the kinds of writing errors you are most likely to make and studied the twenty most common error patterns in detail. Throughout this book you will find guidance on those patterns. You will find help first of all in the chapter immediately following, one we call “Learning from Your Errors.” This chapter will help you to analyze your own error patterns and especially to recognize, analyze, and overcome any of the twenty most common ones in your own writing.

Throughout this text, we ask that you look at errors in the context of your own writing, that you become accustomed to carefully analyzing your own prose. In almost every chapter, we will not only provide explanations and opportunity for practice, but also we will be asking you to apply the principles presented directly to your own writing. If you follow our directions, they will guide you in becoming a systematic self-critic—and a stronger writer. And since writing and reading in many ways go hand in hand, many chapters will also offer you a chance to read with an eye for various logical or stylistic or conventional aspects of writing, often in the work of some of the finest American and English writers. Sometimes you will be asked to try to imitate their sentences. As your writing improves, so will your reading.

Chapters 1–5 will guide you through the process of expository and argumentative essays—from your first choice of a topic to your final typed essay. Chapters 6–36 provide thorough discussion of writing

conventions—grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. These chapters provide examples and practice to guide you in mastering such conventions and in learning to use them appropriately and effectively.

Next come chapters that will help you understand, carry out, and use research in your writing; examine the writing of your chosen discipline; and practice taking essay examinations or producing job application letters and résumés.

This book has been designed to make its information as easy as possible to find and use. You can find what you are looking for by consulting the table of contents, the subject index, or the index of authors and titles. Once you find the correct chapter, you can skim the many headings. If your instructor uses our codes in marking your essays, you can find the code symbols at the top of each page. Even the exercises can be “used” easily, for we include at the end of the book answers to many of them, to allow you to check your understanding as you work.

Because we assume you will be consulting this book regularly when you are revising your drafts, we wish to call to your attention the many sections designed to help you *check* various elements and structures. Especially notable are guidelines to help you to check for—and revise—each of the twenty most common error patterns; to make these easy to find, we have marked them with a small red chevron: ➤

For those who compose on a computer, we offer the complimentary *St. Martin's Hotline*, a “pop-up” reference system available for IBM-compatible and Macintosh systems.

Finally, we'd like to call your attention to a small feature you might find valuable, a writing log. We urge you to keep a log as a repository of materials from and for your own writing—notable anecdotes, exemplary phrases, memorable images, troublesome words or structures. Procedures for keeping a log are described in 1c, and exercises throughout this text suggest materials to add to it. Keeping a log can help you to examine and contemplate your own writing.

We hope that this book will prove to be a useful reference. But in the long run, a book can be only a guide. You are the one who will put such guidance into practice, as you work to become a precise, a powerful, and a persuasive writer. Why not get started on achieving that goal right now?

Andrea Lunsford
Robert Connors