

RHETORICAL GRAMMAR

GRAMMATICAL CHOICES,
RHETORICAL EFFECTS

FOURTH EDITION

MARTHA KOLLN

Rhetorical Grammar

Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects

FOURTH EDITION

Martha Kolln

The Pennsylvania State University



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*For Jeannine Johanna and Eleanor Robin,
two remarkable language users.*

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Preface

Grammatical choices. Rhetorical effects. These two phrases tell the story of rhetorical grammar, the marriage of grammar and rhetoric for the composition classroom. Writers who recognize the choices available to them will be well-equipped for controlling the effects of their words. As I explain to students in the Introduction,

To study grammar in this way—that is, to consider the conscious knowledge of sentence structure as your toolkit—is the essence of rhetorical grammar.

But is there really a place for the study of grammar in the composition class? Is there time for grammar in a syllabus already filled with prewriting, drafting, and revising and with reading what others have written? The answer is “yes.” In fact you are already spending time on grammar—when you discuss cohesion and transition; when you explain in a conference why a structure is misplaced or awkward; when you help students understand the effects of certain words on the reader; when you point out redundancy; when you suggest sentence revision; when you praise gems of precision. These are principles of grammar and style and revision that are now part of your writing class. *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects* will help you teach these and many more such principles—and it will do so in a systematic way.

You’ll discover that the lessons in this book are not the definitions and categories and rules of traditional grammar that your students encountered back in junior high. Rather, *Rhetorical Grammar* brings together the insights of composition researchers and linguists; it makes the connection between writing and grammar that has been missing from our classrooms. It also avoids the prescriptive rules of handbooks, offering instead explanations of the rhetorical choices that are available. And, perhaps what is most important, it gives students confidence in their own

language ability by helping them recognize the intuitive grammar expertise that all human beings share.

This difference in the purpose of *Rhetorical Grammar* is especially important. Too often the grammar lessons that manage to find their way into the writing classroom are introduced for remedial purposes: to fix comma splices and misplaced modifiers and agreement errors and such. As a consequence, the study of grammar has come to have strictly negative, remedial associations—a Band-Aid for weak and inexperienced writers, rather than a rhetorical tool that all writers should understand and control.

This book, then, substitutes for that negative association of grammar a positive and functional point of view—a rhetorical view: that an understanding of grammar is an important tool for the writer; that it can be taught and learned successfully if it is done in the right way and in the right place, in connection with composition. The book can also stimulate class discussion on such issues as sentence focus and rhythm, cohesion, reader expectation, paraphrase, diction, revision—discussions of rhetorical and stylistic issues that will be meaningful throughout the writing process. And the students will learn to apply these grammar concepts to their own writing.

Readers familiar with an earlier edition of *Rhetorical Grammar* will notice substantial changes in this fourth edition. The chapters have been substantially reorganized: the study of Cohesion, Chapter 2, now precedes that of Sentence Rhythm, Chapter 3; Coordination now occupies a chapter of its own, with Brevity and Subordination combined into another; expanded discussions of Appositives and Absolutes together occupy a new chapter.

Perhaps the most substantial additions are those in Chapter 1: two new exercises, a summary chart of the sentence patterns, and new discussions of expanded verbs and the passive voice. This added information will be especially welcome in those classes where *Rhetorical Grammar* is used for training future teachers.

Every chapter now opens with a Chapter Preview and closes with Key Terms. Most chapters have been revised substantially, with improvements in organization, new professional examples, and updated exercises. Among the seven additional exercises are two, in Chapter 6, that direct the students to analyze their own writing style, following the model in Edward P. J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. The self-instructional quality of the earlier editions has been retained, with the inclusion of answers to the odd-numbered items in the exercises.

The primary focus throughout the book remains on revision and style, on the importance to students of understanding the writer's tools.

Depending on the goals of your course, you may find that *Rhetorical Grammar* is the only text your students need; on the other hand, it can certainly work well in conjunction with a reader or rhetoric. In either case,

you'll discover that class time can be used much more efficiently when your students come to class with the shared background that the text provides. The *Instructors Manual* includes answers to the even-numbered items in the exercises, further explanations of grammatical principles, and suggestions for class activities.

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—*Martha Kolln*

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Introduction

WHAT IS RHETORICAL GRAMMAR?

To understand the subject matter of a book with the title *Rhetorical Grammar*, you'll obviously have to understand not only the meaning of both *rhetoric* and *grammar* but also their relationship to each other. *Grammar* is undoubtedly familiar to you. You've probably been hearing about, if not actually studying, grammar in your English classes since middle school. *Rhetoric*, on the other hand—and its adjective version, *rhetorical*—may not be familiar at all. So, to figure out what rhetorical grammar is all about, we'll begin with the familiar *grammar*.

If you're like many students, you may associate the idea of grammar with rules—various do's and don't's that apply to sentence structure and punctuation. You may remember studying certain rules to help you correct or prevent errors in your writing. You may remember the grammar handbook as the repository of such rules.

But now consider another possibility: that YOU are the repository of the rules. You—not a book. Consider that there is stored within you, in your computer-like brain, a system of rules, a system that enables you to create the sentences of your native language. The fact that you have such an internalized system means that when you study grammar *you are studying what you already "know."*

Linguistic researchers¹ now tell us that you began internalizing the rules of your language perhaps before you were born, when you began to differentiate the particular rhythms of the language you were hearing. In the

¹See the section on Language Development in the Bibliography.

first year of life you began to create the rules that would eventually produce sentences.

You were little more than a year old when you began to demonstrate your grammar ability by naming things around you; a few months later you were putting together two- and three-word strings, and before long your language took on the features of adult sentences. No one taught you. You didn't have language lessons. You learned all by yourself, from hearing the language spoken around you—and you did so unconsciously.

This process of language development is universal; that is, it occurs across cultures, and it occurs in every child with normal physical and mental development. No matter what your native language is, you have internalized its grammar system. By the time you were five or six years old, you were an expert at narrating events, at asking questions, at describing people and places, probably at arguing. The internalized system of rules that accounts for this language ability of yours is our definition of *grammar*.

When you study grammar in school, then, you are actually studying what you already “know.” Note that the verb *know* needs those quotation marks because we're not using it in the usual sense. Your grammar knowledge is largely subconscious: You don't know consciously what you “know.” When you study grammar you are learning *about* those grammar rules that you use subconsciously every time you speak—as well as every time you listen and make sense of what you hear.

But as you know, studying grammar also means learning other rules, the conventions of writing—rules that have nothing to do with the internalized rules that enable us to speak. When you write, you must pay attention to rules about paragraphing and sentence completeness and capital letters and quotation marks and apostrophes and commas and, perhaps the trickiest of all, spelling.

To be effective, however, writing also requires attention to rhetoric—and here is where the adjective *rhetorical* comes into the picture. *Rhetoric* means that your audience—the reader—and your purpose make a difference in the way you write on any given topic. To a great extent, that rhetorical situation—the audience, purpose, and topic—determine the grammatical choices you make, choices about sentence structure and vocabulary, even punctuation. Rhetorical grammar is about those choices.

This meaning of *rhetoric* is easy to illustrate: Imagine writing a letter to your best friend describing your first week at school this semester; contrast that with the letter on the same subject to your great-aunt Millie. Think of the differences there might be in those two letters, those two different rhetorical situations. One obvious difference, of course, is vocabulary; you wouldn't use the same words with two such different audiences. The grammatical structures are also going to be different, determined in part by the

tone or level of formality. For example, you might use longer sentences in the more formal version, the letter to Aunt Millie:

My roommate, Peter Piper, is a very nice fellow from New York City.

or

My roommate, who grew up in New York City, is named Peter Piper.

In the letter to your buddy, you'd probably say,

You'd like my roommate. He's a nice guy—from the Big Apple.

And would you believe? His name is Peter Piper.

You would probably write this less formal version almost as easily as you speak; it sounds like something you'd say. The Aunt Millie letter, especially the sentence with the *who*-clause, would take a little more thought on your part. It doesn't sound as much like speech. In fact, a *who*-clause like that, set off by commas, is a modifier used almost exclusively in the written language.

Understanding rhetorical grammar, then, means understanding the grammatical choices available to you when you write and the rhetorical effects those choices will have on your reader. Aunt Millie will probably recognize—and approve of—your letter as evidence of a serious-minded, articulate student. She will feel assured that your twelve or more years of education have not been wasted. The good friend who gets your letter will hear your familiar voice and know that all is well.

You can think of the grammatical choices you have as tools in your writer's toolkit. You have a variety of tools for the differences in language that different rhetorical situations call for. To study grammar in this way—that is, to consider the conscious knowledge of sentence structure as your toolkit—is the essence of rhetorical grammar.

We begin this study of the tools by focusing, in Part I, on the sentence as a whole. In addition to the actual structure of sentences, you will learn to think about the connections of sentences in paragraphs, about sentence rhythm, about your writer's voice, and, finally, about the construction and effect of long and short sentences.

The five chapters in Part II examine the sentence in greater detail, emphasizing the importance of choosing effective verbs and the modifiers we call adverbials and adjectivals. It closes with an important discussion of stylistic choices. In all of these chapters, as you make these grammatical choices, you will learn to do so with your reader in mind. You will also come to understand the conventions of punctuation, including those places

where you have a choice, where you will consider the effect of that choice on your reader.

In considering the word classes in Part III, you will find yourself consulting—and appreciating—your subconscious language expertise in two chapters covering the word classes: form classes in Chapter 12 and Pronouns in Chapter 13.

Part IV describes the purpose and hierarchy of punctuation. In Chapter 14 you will review the knowledge of punctuation that you have accumulated throughout the first eleven chapters. The Glossary of Punctuation that follows this chapter pulls together all of the punctuation rules you have studied in context throughout the book.

The Bibliography that follows the Glossary of Punctuation lists the works mentioned in the text, along with other books and articles on rhetoric and grammar. The future teachers among you will find them useful for research purposes and for your teaching preparation.

Throughout the book you will find exercises and issues for group discussion that you are encouraged to work on. Answers to the odd-numbered exercise items are included in the back of the book.

Be sure to use the Glossary of Terms and the Index if you are having problems understanding a concept. They are there to provide help.