

HANDBOOK OF ENGLISH WRITING

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Preface

Can a handbook be so designed that it will be equally useful as a reference book and as a text for systematic study? Can it at the same time be adapted to the needs of different types of students, whether their previous training has been good, fair, or even distinctly poor? Can it be made serviceable alike to the teacher directing class work and to the unassisted student directing his own study? These are the problems that this book attempts to meet. The solutions that are offered can best be understood in the light of some general explanation.

The Significance of Grammar. What, first, about grammar? There are certain convictions, it seems fair to say, on which thoughtful, experienced teachers are fairly well agreed; and this book is an expression of these convictions.

One conviction is that much of so-called formal grammar is of little or no practical value for the student who is learning how to write. Analytical distinctions of purely logical character and subtle issues in parsing, interesting though they may be to the advanced student of language, need have no place in a handbook that aims primarily to be practical.

Another conviction, however, and one no less strong, is that there are certain grammatical conceptions so important that a student who has a sound mastery of them comes to the practical problems of writing with an inestimable advantage. His occasions for using these conceptions do not end when he has solved his problems of correct usage: he uses the same conceptions constantly

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in learning how to punctuate; and he finds them useful tools in mastering principles of rhetorical effectiveness.

Now it is common experience that many students go through high school without having laid an adequate grammatical foundation for their later work. Thoughtful teachers seem further agreed that such students can build better by pausing to lay a sound foundation than they can by trying to build on a foundation that is at best a shaky one.

Separation of Grammatical Issues. The student of grammar deals with two kinds of material: (1) he learns what grammatical function is and how different kinds of words and word groups may fulfil different functions, and (2) he applies this knowledge to problems of correct and incorrect usage. As here treated, the issues of usage, separated from those of function, are placed in the front of the book as a series of Grammatical Problems. The issues of function are placed later, in a division entitled Grammatical Material. The reason for this separation will appear presently.

The Grammatical Problems. The unit of each grammatical problem is not a specific rule, but a general statement of principle, so comprehensive in certain cases as to cover several related issues. The total number of problems has thus been reduced to thirty. To the teacher who is correcting papers, the advantage of this system is that he has a comparatively short list of issues to remember. To the student who attacks a given problem, the advantage is that he can give sustained attention to the principle involved until he has completely mastered it. If any term is not clear, he is referred by section number to a place where it is explained. Then he may note how the principle is applied to this and to that specific issue. Next he may apply the principle constructively to the shaping

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of correct sentences. Finally he may apply it critically to the task of distinguishing correct from incorrect sentences.

The Grammatical Material. The division called Grammatical Material is more than a body of reference material for students not sufficiently equipped to understand the grammatical problems. It is a compact treatise on grammar, designed to meet the needs of those whose training in grammar is negligible. It contains, in addition to a text with illustrative sentences, exercises of three kinds: (1) thought-provoking questions that test the student's understanding of the text, (2) sentence material for practice in analysis, and (3) terms to be illustrated by the student himself. Self-instruction is thus provided for.

The Use of Faulty Sentences. The providing of exercises raises inevitably the question, Is it psychologically desirable to put before the student examples of incorrect usage? The undesirability of putting before him incorrect spellings is freely granted, for the eye takes these in at a glance and impresses them upon the memory. The situation is, however, radically different when the point at issue is an entire sentence that is, for some particular reason, faulty. A faulty sentence is not, in the first place, impressed upon the eye, as is a misspelled word. Nor can one, alas, by keeping faulty sentences out of textbooks, keep them out of the experience of the student, who hears and sees them at every turn. What one can hope to do is, by carefully marking faulty examples as such, to establish an alert disposition to recognize, and so to avoid, the pitfalls that beset every writer, no matter how experienced. When such a disposition has been cultivated, furthermore, practice in distinguishing faulty from correct sentences has a very special value. Every teacher and every writer knows how difficult it is, even for one who is on the lookout for errors, to find them in his own writing. A student who is

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trained to read proof, as it were, on the printed page acquires corresponding alertness in searching his own manuscript for errors.

The Treatment of Punctuation. Punctuation, like grammar, is treated both in a series of problems and in a division of explanatory material. Either part may be used separately, or the two, by means of reference numbers, may be used in conjunction. The flexibility of the system seems to justify a certain amount of unavoidable repetition.

The method of approaching the issues of punctuation is unusual. The conventionally accepted method is to list under each mark of punctuation all the various uses which that mark may serve. This is unquestionably systematic, but its usefulness to the student may be doubted. The student, as he writes, does not begin with the thought of a particular mark and then go on to consider the various ways in which it may be used: he begins with the particular problem before him and wonders what mark will solve it.

With a view to meeting, then, the successive problems that a student faces in his actual writing, this book departs radically from the accepted method of organizing material. The problems that the student faces — problems of terminating, of separating, of setting off, and so on — are taken up systematically, and the uses of the various marks are explained as solutions of these successive problems. Exercises take the form of questions that test understanding and of sentence material for practice.

Treatment of Rhetoric. In this book a sharp distinction is made, it will be seen, between the issues of grammar and those of rhetoric. Such a division seems to have its use in impressing on the student the fact that grammatical issues of right and wrong, as determined by usage, are somewhat different from rhetorical issues of greater or less effectiveness, as determined by general psychological prin-

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ciples. One must freely admit, however, that although most issues belong clearly to one category or the other, certain others, such as the placing of modifiers, may easily be thought of as straddling a dividing fence. No harm can come, perhaps, of placing these doubtful issues squarely, even if a bit arbitrarily, on one side of the fence or the other.

It will be observed, also, that this book does not follow the practice of putting into a special glossary those words that should be used with caution if they are to be used at all. Such a glossary is useful for reference if the one who is about to use a given word realizes that it presents a problem. But experience shows that the one who most needs to use a glossary is the one who actually uses it the least. The method here used is to group appropriately, in the division entitled *Rhetorical Material*, many of the words with respect to which a writer should be especially on his guard. When the student has systematically gone through the words thus grouped, and has dealt, in the division of *Rhetorical Problems*, with the sentences illustrating them, he will be the more likely to recognize dangerous words when he sees them.

Miscellaneous Technical Problems. Many of the decisions that a writer is constantly making have to do with the forms of words — their spelling, capitalization, hyphenation, and so on. Although no small handbook can take the place of the dictionary that should stand on every writing-desk, a handbook can answer a large proportion of these technical questions by explaining such system as may be discerned in wayward usage. This book attempts not only to fulfil such a function, but also to supply reliable guidance in the making of footnotes, the writing of letters, and the construction of outlines. The Index makes all such material accessible for purposes of reference, and a

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series of exercises gives, to the student who has given the matter his systematic attention, opportunities for testing and practicing what he has learned.

Grammatical Nomenclature. The grammatical terms made use of in this book are in almost every instance those recommended by the Joint Committee on Grammatical Nomenclature. In the exceptional instances in which the use of a more familiar term has seemed especially desirable, the term recommended by the Committee is always mentioned as an alternative. A few terms that are not commonly found in grammars, such as *framework* and *sentence element*, may be considered merely convenient descriptions of familiar grammatical conceptions; their justification lies in the fact that they obviate the necessity of repeating clumsy phrases. One new term (though not used for the first time in this book) calls for special mention. When a word like *consequently* or *nevertheless* performs a certain use (see 265), it is referred to as an *adverbial connective*. The Joint Committee has no name for words of this class. The term *conjunctive adverb*, which is sometimes used, seems a bit clumsy, and it has the special disadvantage of being used in some grammars in another sense. It may, of course, be used at will as an alternative.

The Problem of Standards. Every writer on English usage is well aware, of course, that certain usages that he may condemn are sometimes found in the writings of reputable authors. He knows, too, that the standards of colloquial speech are not always those of formal writing, and that these latter, indeed, intruded into familiar speech, may sometimes seem unpleasantly pedantic. He may know all this; yet if he is writing a textbook, two principles may legitimately guide his practice.

There is, in the first place, no space in a compact handbook for setting forth the qualifying reservations with

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which a given statement might fairly be made. Even if there were, there is little doubt that the inexperienced student would find such a discussion confusing rather than helpful. A certain conservatism, then, even with a leaning toward dogmatism, may be, in the circumstances, more than justified.

Then again, the fact that a given usage may be acceptable in colloquial speech does not mean that it is also acceptable in formal writing. The person of cultivation, knowing the usage that is appropriate to each occasion, can feel secure in making his choice; but the less experienced student can gain the same happy freedom only after strict training and careful observation. The textbook should train him to know what the most exacting occasion requires, and observation may then show him how much freedom he may wisely take.

The aim of this book, then, is to set forth the standards that cultivated writers ordinarily use in their own formal writing. In certain issues (notably in the field of punctuation) in which tastes may differ, it seems more helpful to set forth clearly one sound method of procedure than to discuss a number of possible procedures. No matter what the problem, a judiciously liberal instructor, aided, it is hoped, by the temper of this book, has it in his power to steer a wise course between extremes.

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