THE Right Handbook

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Preface

This is not a traditional handbook. That is, if you have a question about the punctuation of a particular sentence, or about word choice, you won't find the answer in here. Because every sentence you write is new, because it has never existed before in the context you have created for it, no handbook can tell you what to do with it. What that sentence offers you is the opportunity for choices. This book is meant to help you make those choices by presenting to you some ideas about English – some guidance to understanding what you already know about your language, some reasons for the ways people discuss it, some new ways to think about how you use it when you write, some awareness of the role of context. We hope that what you find here will not just ease some of your writing anxieties, but also spark an appreciation of how your language works and an understanding of its richness and diversity.

At the end of the book, we've included a short index. We debated among ourselves about having one at all since its very existence suggests you can look in one spot and find answers to specific questions – and you can't. But, we decided to provide one and ask you to use it sensibly – just as a way to send yourself to spots in the book to read related discussions – *after* you've already read the book; that is, the index can help you get back to a spot you remember reading, but can't find.

We would like to thank our colleagues and students at New York University and SUNY Stony Brook for their support and encouragement as we wrote and rewrote. We would especially like to thank Paula Johnson for asking us to write this book;

Lil Brannon, Paul Connolly, Peter Elbow, and Peter Stillman, who gave extensive critical comments that helped us revise it; Sandra Boynton for giving us permission to use her delightful observations on us language animals; and Bob Boynton for all his suggestions, but mostly for thinking as we do about language handbooks.

Contents

Introduction

We're teachers of writing. We're not grammar teachers; we're not even English teachers in the usual sense; we're writing teachers. We believe it's important for people to write effectively because communication nurtures individual fulfillment and societal health. We know also that this is a belief each writer discovers for herself; it can't be imposed by a teacher.

What does it mean to write "effectively"? Most of us recognize an effective piece of writing – we recognize it by the "effect" it has on us. Such a statement presupposes that not all of us would agree on what's effective – that's true, we don't – all we're saying is that each of us can make the judgment.

How do we, as teachers of writing, help students become "effective" writers? Because of how we define "effective," we believe that the best way to help student writers is to create a classroom situation in which they can judge for themselves the effect of their writing on others – not just on teachers, but on classmates. All writing involves saying something to someone (including oneself) for some reason; that is, all writing is created within a context and has its effect within that context. If you were in our classroom, we'd ask you to discuss with your peer-readers which parts of your writing they find effective and which parts don't work well for them. We hope you would care enough to let that discussion guide your revisions. Notice we said "guide"; your writing belongs to you as well as to your audience. Consequently, your idea of what's effective is important also.

In some sense, all of us can improve on everything we write. W. B. Yeats revised almost everything he had written

when it was reprinted. (He hoped that the thirteenth reprinting, in 1895, of his continually revised poems would be "the final text of the poems of my youth; and yet it may not be.") At some point, however, a writer must, for whatever reasons, cease work on a particular piece, at least for the moment. In the classroom, you usually stop at some point because your teachers need to fulfill their obligations by giving you grades. In our classes, just before students submit papers for a grade, we ask them to do careful proofreading and copyediting. At its most basic level, proofreading locates and corrects typographical errors. (Writing can't be very effective if your reader has to supply missing words or substitute one letter for another.) At a level slightly above this, copyediting locates and corrects usage errors.

It's important to emphasize here the appropriate time to proofread. We said that we ask our students to proofread *just before they submit their papers for evaluation.* That is, as they are generating and developing their ideas – getting started and then figuring out what they want to say – we don't ask for or expect perfect texts. When writers are concentrating on ideas, they don't have time to worry about punctuation and verb tenses.

But after writers are satisfied that they've said all they had to say, and that they've made it as clear and as complete as possible, then is the time to look carefully at the language and mechanics to see if they conform to the conventions appropriate to the subject and audience. These conventions include both grammar and usage, and this book deals specifically with usage. (In Chapter 1 we discuss the differences between grammar and usage.)

Usage depends highly on context – on subject and audience, on purpose, even on the writer herself. When you write a letter to a friend, your language and tone may depend on your own mood as well as on what you have to say; and the language of any letter you write to a friend will probably differ greatly from that of an essay you write for a professor. Your friend may not be bothered by words like "ain't" or by an overabundance of "I," but your professor may feel strongly that such usages are unacceptable in an essay written for his course. Every time you write something, you're working within a context that is defined by you, by your subject, by your purpose for writing, and by your audience. Our aim in this book is to help you learn which usage is appropriate in which context.

Providing you want to, how can you learn usage? First, you need to be sensitive to the demands of your audience. You become sensitive through feedback – if, for example, your history

teachers fail you because you use contractions and too few commas. If you leave a note for your roommate written in the same language you use for your history paper, your roommate may look at you peculiarly the next time the two of you meet. This too is feedback. Second, exposure to language, spoken or written, goes far to develop intuitions about usage. The more you read, write, listen, and speak, the more you're likely to feel comfortable about usage. For example, reading essays on historical issues and listening to your professor lecture should make you more aware of the usage acceptable in this field, just as reading the sports page tunes you in to acceptable usage in sports writing. Third, consulting an expert, text or person, as one would consult a dictionary for spelling, is another way to strengthen intuitions. As you get more answers to more questions, you begin to internalize a sense of what the appropriate answers are.

Finally, becoming familiar with the basics of usage by reading a book like this one also strengthens your intuitions. This is why we suggest that you read this whole book now, to get a sense of what it's about and also to get a sense of your own abilities to make appropriate choices. Maybe the best reason for reading the whole book first is to get a sense of the right attitude toward language use. One thought we hope you continue to keep in mind: if you're a native speaker of English, you probably make appropriate choices most of the time when you speak. After all, you've had lots of practice. You understand the different contexts of speaking to a friend, parent, teacher, stranger, potential lover, etc. And you can switch roles – "voices" – in a matter of moments to meet the demands of each context. Reading this book will help you understand how to make appropriate choices for the different contexts of writing.

But we want this to be more than just a book you read once and then place on your shelves between your dictionary and your thesaurus. We want you to use it as you edit your writing, to help you make choices and then be satisfied with those choices. Yet, once you've read it through, how can you use it when you have specific questions about editing? Chances are if you know what usage rule you need to rely on, you can find it in any good grammar book. But if you don't know what rule you need, then you also don't know where to look for it. (It's like trying to look up the spelling of a word you can't spell.)

We've organized this book to make it easier for you to find help with your problems. Each of the sections is designed as a unit. If you have a problem to solve, see if you can categorize it – as a problem in verb tense, in paragraphing, in pronouns, or

whatever. Having done this, you should reread the entire section on that topic. We suggest, for example, that if you have a decision to make about a comma, you reread the punctuation section and then make a decision. Commas are part of a system; knowing that system is more helpful in making decisions than memorizing a list of rules about commas, almost all of which have exceptions.

If you can't categorize your problem, reread the following paragraphs which will help you decide what kind of problem you're dealing with and where to look for suggestions to solve it.

Chapter 2 – "Paragraphs" – doesn't need much explanation; in it, we talk about grouping sentences into paragraphs.

Chapter 3 – "Sentences" – covers sentence division (run-ons and fragments), sentence structure (syntax, active vs. passive voice, subordination, parallelism, comparisons, variety, "awkwardness"), word order (dangling participles, misplaced modifiers), punctuation, and so forth. If one of your sentences doesn't seem right to you (or to your teacher, another student, or a friend), we suggest that you look in this chapter for possible strategies for revision.

Chapter 4 – "Phrases" – covers problems which don't require a reworking of a whole sentence, but do require more than the alteration of one word. These problems include subject-verb agreement, double negatives, double comparisons, split infinitives, and pronouns.

Chapter 5 – "Words" – is divided into two parts. The first covers the form (usually endings) of nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives; the second covers the choice of words (slang, colloquialisms, repetition) and includes a list of common errors and words often confused.

Within each of these chapters, you'll discover that we refer you to one of the other chapters (sometimes even to all of them!). We hope this doesn't confuse you, but the truth of this book's philosophy makes this cross-referencing inevitable: choices made while writing depend upon context: immediate context (words before and after), and context within the sentence, within the paragraph, within the entire piece.

Once you've categorized your problem, what happens next? If you've done a lot of searching through grammar books in the past, looking for the answer to your particular question, you've probably noticed that none of the examples match your problem sentence exactly. The search for an answer is always frustrating, because usage isn't like spelling. Most words have only one spelling, so once you've found the word in the dictionary, you've found the answer to your question. Usage, however, as

we've said before, depends on context; as the context varies, so do the possible answers to your questions about which choices to make. No handbook can give all the answers to all the questions, because there simply isn't enough space for a handbook that big – and it would take a few thousand lifetimes to write it in the first place, even with the help of computers. There are just too many questions, each with too many answers.

This handbook can't provide absolute answers, and it isn't meant to. We've designed it to help you find ways to arrive at answers on your own, relying on your own intuitions about which choices are best and trusting that your intuitions are well founded. Which brings us back to what we said earlier: each time you use the language, receive feedback on the effectiveness of your choices, and think about that feedback, you'll strengthen your intuitions. As you do more writing and as you read more, you'll become more familiar with the different contexts for language and more secure about your own abilities to write effectively.

~~A little over eighty years ago---~~
~~Eighty-seven years ago---~~
~~About seven eighths of a century ago---~~
Eight decades and seven years ago---

1

Debunking Myths

Or, the Truth About Language, Plus a Few Explanations

Maybe you never read "Dear Abby," or maybe recently people's concerns have shifted away from language etiquette, but several years ago there were letters to Ms. Van Buren asking whether, when answering the telephone, one should say "This is I" or "This is me." Now here's a person whose job is to advise people about the things that matter, and evidently enough people wrote about this telephone problem that she felt compelled to publish a representative letter and then give some advice. (She suggested you choose a third alternative, "This is [your name here].")

This is a long way of getting to an important point about language: people, for often unfathomable reasons, are insecure about their language. So insecure that many adults, when introduced to English teachers, suddenly become nervous about the way they talk. So insecure that some people make efforts to disguise their regional accents. So insecure, in fact, that the business of giving advice about how to "fix" your language will always support a few writers. This is part of the reason why we have popular, or "pop," grammarians – people like John Simon, Edwin Newman and William Safire – telling us about the mistakes we make when we use English without watching our grammar.

But there's one thing that these pop grammarians never mention: the "decline" of the language is no new phenomenon; popular writers have been complaining about the sorry state of the English language for several hundred years. Samuel Johnson wrote his *Dictionary of the English Language* in the 1750s. In the Preface he complained about how the language

had been allowed to run out of control, "exposed to the corruptions of ignorance, and caprices of innovation"; and he wrote yearningly of his wish "that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote." Several decades earlier, Jonathan Swift had complained that the English language was being allowed to deteriorate through the forces of various bad influences. And Chaucer, in 1385, though not complaining, had obviously noticed that the language was changing:

> Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
> Withinne a thousand yer, and wordes tho
> That hadden prys now wonder nyce and straunge
> Us thenketh hem, and yet they spake hem so.
>
> Troylus and Criseyde, *II, 22-25*

Why so much continual concern and alarm? Has English always been on the verge of collapse because of outrageous misuse by the untutored masses? No, that's not the problem. The problem is with linguistic snobs, people who see the language changing and who don't like the changes they can see happening. Swift complained about the influence of pedants – i.e., scientists – on the language; Johnson deplored the new words introduced by translators, words that diluted the purity of English. This moralistic tone has resurfaced today: In *On Writing Well* (2nd ed.), William Zinsser uses words like "atrocity," "horrible," and "detestable garbage" to describe usages he doesn't approve of. William Safire, in his column "On Language," once wrote that Brooke Shields was "pure" in choosing the correct verb to agree with the subject of a relative clause. All these self-styled experts grow angry about changes in the language; they'd like to freeze it in a perfect state, one that has never existed except in their heads.

But language changes. Always. You can't stop it. People who write dictionaries or grammar handbooks can't stop it. Even people writing language columns for newspapers or journals can't stop it. The only time a language stops changing is when people stop using it. Latin, a dead language, stopped changing the moment people stopped using it in everyday give and take. Latin grammar books don't have to be revised regularly, but handbooks for living languages do, in order to take into account the changes since the last editions of those books.

Languages and Dialects

Because languages change, or evolve, dialects develop. When people spend extended periods of time separated from others who speak the same language, they naturally develop their own ways to say things. (Darwin's theory of evolution, somewhat modified, applies to language as well as to species. Obvious examples of divergent evolution in the English language are British "lift" and American "elevator," British "in hospital" and American "in the hospital.") All major languages have a standard or "high" dialect, with various other nonstandard or "low" dialects: Demotic Greek, Low German, Cockney English, Black English—each an example of a dialect that is not accepted as standard. Any widespread language needs a standard dialect to ease communication. Without Mandarin, the Chinese could communicate only in writing; without official state languages, several African nations would comprise tribal groups who could never talk to each other.

But nonstandard dialects do have their own grammars, their own systems for structuring sentences. Native speakers of each dialect have an intuitive knowledge of the grammar, and when they speak they rarely make mistakes. These dialects are judged to be nonstandard, not because of any inherent lack of value—no language or dialect is any better or worse than any other language or dialect—but because those in power insist, consciously or unconsciously, that their dialect is the standard one.

We don't want this handbook to be a political diatribe about language and power. What we want you to get out of this discussion are two points, which few pop grammarians acknowledge: every dialect and language has a systematic structure, and every native speaker of each dialect and language speaks it fluently without any explicit knowledge of that system.

Problems arise when people are faced with new situations in which to use language. It may be something as basic as your first job interview; or it could be that you're trying to express new, complex ideas that you're not quite sure about; or you could be trying to learn how to use a new dialect. All of these situations, and others like them, will cause you difficulty, and in all of them you'll be likely to make mistakes. But the mistakes aren't the result of any moral inadequacy or mental deficiency on your part—they just prove that you're operating in unfamiliar territory. So, the problems you may have with academic writing—for many people, an unfamiliar territory

when they begin college – could simply result from your attempt to write in a wholly new context.

Grammar Books and Handbooks

As we mentioned earlier, a standard dialect develops to aid communication in a widespread language. Eventually, this dialect is codified in grammar and usage books, where discussion of the language is divided into sections for each term (nouns, verbs, clauses, fragments, etc.) and each problem (spelling, punctuation, etc.). Then these versions of the language are presented to students for them to memorize and master, the terms providing a convenient way to talk about the language. Somehow (probably because of the types of discussions in language classes), students get the impression that these categories and terms have always existed in the form the books present.

Nothing could be further from the truth. This belief is, in fact, one of the myths about language, and our purpose in this chapter is to debunk the myths that act as hobbles on language users. Grammar books have perpetuated many myths about language, myths that people accept unquestioningly. That is, after all, what myths require. Faith; acceptance. The problem with myths, though, is that most people have the impression that they can't control or change myths. They believe that myths are self-generated, rather than human creations that have gained supernatural power. People become overawed by the supernatural and thus are unwilling to examine myths carefully. Since myths can be apocryphal, they hinder us – there's nothing worse than firmly believing something which simply isn't true. If you believe the world is flat, you won't try sailing around it; if you believe that certain groups of people are inferior, you'll enslave and refuse to educate them; if you believe that language is outside your control, you'll open yourself to being controlled by others through language. The linguistic myths that have been passed down all these years, myths about decline, superiority, and correctness, hinder people, making them feel insecure and thus making them prey to the often foolish cautions of pop grammarians.

So, because we believe that knowing about language helps you get control over it, that is, helps make you a more effective language user, we wanted to include a chapter that would explode some of the myths about language and give you some

background that would help you recognize other myths. First, let's look at the myth that the "rules" presented in grammar books are immutable.

Historical studies help us use the past to understand the present, and the history of languages (etymology and historical linguistics) provides evidence that the grammars of languages do change. On the surface, the myth of nonchange makes sense: Major grammatical structures change so slowly that differences aren't noticed immediately – you can't point to the specific dates when Chaucer's English changed into Shakespeare's English and then into the English we use now, just as you can't observe the changes in your physiognomy actually happening. Yet photos of you, separated by twenty years or so, will reveal quite marked changes. You can't deny that those changes occur.* And, in a sense, grammar and other books about language are like photos, stop-action records of an unending process. Because of this process, some books, especially dictionaries, are out of date even before they reach the bookstores. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, an immensely useful reference tool for anyone reading books written 100 years ago or earlier, took fifty years to write – by the time the tenth volume had come out in 1928, the first volume was fifty years out of date. One supplement has since been published, to update the earlier volumes only to 1928. Other dictionaries are usually revised every five to ten years, to incorporate newly coined words and phrases as well as new meanings for old words. But, especially with regard to slang expressions, it's safe to assume that if a saying has been around long enough to get itself into a dictionary, it's probably no longer in vogue, and new connotations for words develop almost daily. Dictionaries simply can't keep up with the changes.

It's a bit easier for books about grammar to keep up, but since most of them are prescriptive rather than descriptive – they tell you how you ought to speak and write, rather than how most people actually do speak and write – these books also lag behind actual language use. For many years into the 1950s and 1960s, grammar books were urging the shall/will distinction despite the fact that few people actually made that distinction when writing or speaking. (Many of you probably won't even know what the fuss was about.) And there's another problem with prescriptive grammar books: they tend to contradict each other, since grammar-book writers don't always agree on what correct usage is.

*Our physiognomy analogy makes us wonder if the writings of pop grammarians are like facelifts – the nip and tuck approach to language, in the hope of hiding the inevitable changes for a few more years.