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A Brief Handbook of English

Second Edition

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Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers

San Diego/New York/Chicago/Washington, D.C./Atlanta
London/Sydney/Toronto

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ISBN: 0-15-505556-9

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 80-85075

Printed in the United States of America

Preface

This second edition of *A Brief Handbook of English* retains the compact format of the original. Instructors familiar with the book through its first edition will find an old friend. Those who are new to it will readily note that it is designed to help students improve the conciseness, clarity, and correctness of their writing. An *Exercise Book* to accompany *A Brief Handbook of English* provides exercises or tests, so that an instructor may use the handbook as a teaching text as well as a reference work.

Changes in content respond to changing needs. Chapter 17, "The Research Paper," now conforms to the *MLA Handbook* (1977). Additional changes include revision of the definition of the sentence, a more forthright discussion of subject-verb agreement, an expanded treatment of the subjunctive, and a clarification of essential and nonessential constituents. New illustrations and examples have been introduced throughout.

One of the primary assumptions of this book is that the average student cannot, in one term, master the basics

as well as the refinements of writing. For that reason, this second edition again avoids such subtleties of grammar as “squinting modifiers” and such disputed areas of usage as “reason is because.” The book does not bog down in lists of exceptions. Short explanations are presented—rather than exhaustive analyses—of why the rules are what they are. Students learn in a straightforward manner what they may safely and correctly use. In that sense some may call it prescriptive; as a handbook of grammar and usage, it takes a positive stance in presenting basic rules that students can rely on.

In so far as possible, each section of the book is self-contained and offers a minimum of technical explanation. Since students using the book in a nonsequential way may encounter unfamiliar terms that are not explained at that point, the opening chapter presents the basic system of English as scholarly-traditional grammarians see it. The book may be used with profit even if Chapter 1 is ignored; but many instructors will want their students to become familiar with the organization and content of this chapter, which is designed to be a reference book within a reference book, at the beginning of the composition course. Students will find easy access to Chapter 1: the book’s outside back cover indexes all the grammatical terms defined in that chapter.

Two different correction charts are provided for the instructor’s use in guiding the student’s revisions. One chart gives number-letter symbols according to the book’s organization, with the name of the error or weakness accompanying the number-letter symbol. Instructors who use this chart will therefore make such marks as 3A, 10C, 22D, and so forth on the student’s paper, and the student will know which section to refer to for guidance. This chart can also be used more generally, as when the instructor uses the number 10 to indicate an error in the use of the comma without specifying which rule has been violated.

The other chart is composed of traditional symbols, such as *agr*, *DM*, *W*, and so on, with the full name of the

error following the symbol. The section of the handbook devoted to that error is identified in parentheses after the name of the error. Thus instructors who do not want to use number-letter symbols have a traditional correction chart available to them. The student will find the systems equally usable.

Most of the examples in the text are from student writing. Those that are not are nevertheless typical of problems that appear in student papers. The corrections address themselves only to the particular error and do not try to improve the sentence in other ways. To change more than the error under discussion might well distract the student. Every example is clearly labeled *wrong*, *right*, *poor style*, and so on, to reduce the possibility of confusion.

Two sections of the book may be called glossaries. Section 16G is composed of homophones—such as *course* and *coarse*—and other words that are often confused in spelling but not in meaning. Section 22B is composed of words often confused in meaning—such as *infer* and *imply*—and these are listed in the index. Both correction charts allow the instructor to refer the student to the glossaries.

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Introduction to the Student

A Brief Handbook of English, Second Edition, is a guide to usage and grammar that will help you improve the conciseness, clarity, and correctness of your writing. It avoids minor points and long, complicated quibbles about what *could* be done under certain circumstances. Instead, it gives short, straightforward directions and clear examples of constructions and expressions that are correct and that will work effectively for you. You may choose to begin at page one and read to the end. More likely, you will look up various items that puzzle you or that your instructor directs you to study. Even when you are not using the book to revise one of your papers, you may use it to look up rules of punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and so on, so that your work will require less revision.

Skim through the book and become familiar with its organization and content. Knowing where to look is often as important as knowing what to do, especially at the out-

set. An index, two correction charts, and a list of grammatical terms will help you find what you want to know.

Start with the index as your most valuable tool. Each item of the text is listed at least once; some are under several headings. If, for example, you are puzzled about whether to place a period before or after closing quotation marks, look up *Period* in the index. The entry refers you to general information about periods, but it also lists *inside quotation marks* and the section and page (13E:120) where you will find the explanation you are looking for. (You'll also find the same reference under *Quotation marks, periods and commas within*.) Or suppose your instructor has marked DM (for "dangling modifier") next to one of your sentences. The entry *Dangling modifier* refers you to the pages in Chapter 23 where you can learn what a dangling modifier is and how to correct it.

Another useful tool is the correction chart on the inside front cover. It lists the information that appears in the table of contents and will help you to locate materials quickly. Notice that each page of the text itself shows the section number and letter (for example, 16D) in the upper corners of the pages; page numbers appear in the lower corners. The second correction chart is on the inside back cover. This chart directs you to sections in the text that treat common flaws in writing. When you revise your work, read whole sections so that by understanding general principles, rather than correcting only isolated errors, you can write your next essay satisfactorily.

The alphabetical list of grammatical terms on the outside back cover provides a quick reference to Chapter 1, "The Basic System of English Grammar." Although you will probably not be required to master this chapter all at once, read through it quickly to see what information it contains and how that information is organized. Thus if you need to find out what, say, a conjunctive adverb is, you can refer to the index on the back cover and then to the page in Chapter 1 that clearly explains what a conjunctive adverb is.

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