SECOND EDITION

CHETORICAL CRAMAR



GRAMMATICAL CHOICES,
RHETORICAL EFFECTS

MARTHA KOLLN

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Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects

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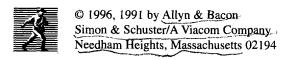
Vice President: Eben W. Ludlow

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Editorial-Production Service: Electronic Publishing Services Inc.



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kolln, Martha.

Rhetorical grammar: grammatical choices, rhetorical effects/ Martha Kolln.—2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-02-365871-1

1. English Language–Rhetoric 2. English Language–Grammar.

I. Title.

PE1408.K696 1996

808'.042-dc20

95-8300

CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 00 99 98 97 96 95

Printed in the United States of America

Preface

In the preface to the first edition of Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects, I posed two questions:

Is there a place for grammar in composition courses?

Can we justify spending time on grammar when our goal is to teach writing?

I firmly believed that the answer to both was "yes"—that not only does grammar have a place, but that we as writing teachers have an obligation to include language study in our classes.

The success of the first edition—and the responses to it from students and teachers—certainly confirmed those beliefs. In classes for both freshmen and advanced writers, in classes for teacher training, readers of Rhetorical Grammar have discovered that understanding the structure of language in a conscious way can, indeed, help students develop as writers.

And is there time for grammar in a syllabus that is already crowded with prewriting, drafting, and revising and with reading what others have written? You are probably already spending time on grammar. When you work on sentence combining; when you discuss coherence and transition; when you explain in a conference why a particular structure is misplaced or awkward; when you help students understand the effects of certain words on the reader; when you suggest that an idea be subordinated: when you point out redundancy; when you praise gems of precision—these are principles of grammar that are now part of your writing class. This book 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 the first edition of *Rhetorical Grammar* will notice several substantial changes in this edition. Most obvious are the two new chapters: The formerly brief section on cohesion has become Chapter 2, with expanded discussions emphasizing the connection between grammar and reader expectation, the known–new contract, parallelism, and repetition. Chapter 11, "The Rhetoric of Punctuation," added at the request of reviewers, summarizes the punctuation principles found throughout the book with both discussion and a glossary. Other major changes include a substantial revision of Chapter 1, making the description of sentence structure more accessible, and, throughout the chapters, the addition of exercises designed for class or small-group discussion. The self-instructional quality of the first edition has been retained, with the inclusion of answers to the odd-numbered items in the exercises.

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.

Acknowledgments

When we launched the first edition of *Rhetorical Grammar* in 1991, we weren't sure that a writing text devoted to language structure (especially one with the *G* word in the title!) would fly. But it did. So my thanks go to the writing teachers who believed that their students could profit from such instruction. And I'm certainly grateful to those who have written and called with their comments and suggestions.

I would also like to acknowledge the following individuals who gave me so much help with their reviews of the book: Avon Crismore, Ph.D., Indiana University-Purdue University-Fort Wayne, Nancy C. De Joy, Ph.D., Nazareth College, Cynthia Haynes-Burton, University of Texas at Arlington, and Michael W. Munley, Ball State University. And thanks to James Murphy, Carroll College who reviewed the entire manuscript. I'm sure these reviewers will be able to see their influence in this edition.

I reserve special thanks for the support and encouragement and goodwill that continue to come my way from the folks at Allyn and Bacon—especially Eben Ludlow, editor extraordinaire and friend.

Finally, I acknowledge the love and support of a wonderful family, which, since the first edition, has expanded to include Shelley, Devon, Riley, Dennis, and, most recently, Jenny.

Martha Kolln

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Chapter 1

CHELLALISTO .

Grammar and the Rhetoric of Sentences

A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. Sometimes he lives in his den for two days without leaving. Outside, he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home. Obedient to instinct, he bites his prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crunching the brain at the base of the skull, and he does not let go. One naturalist refused to kill a weasel who was socketed into his hand deeply as a rattlesnake. The man could in no way pry the tiny weasel off, and he had to walk half a mile to water, the weasel dangling from his palm, and soak him off like a stubborn label.

-Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk

U.S. mileage standards are another scandal. In 1975, during the oil crisis, the U.S. government gave American automakers ten years to improve their cars' mileage rate from 14 miles per gallon to 27.5 miles per gallon. When oil prices came back down in the 1980s, the government relaxed the standard again. Transportation experts at the E.P.A. argue that the mileage requirement might reasonably be raised to 40 miles per gallon. Meanwhile, every time we turn the key in a car's ignition, we turn up the planet's thermostat.

-Jonathan Weiner, The Next One Hundred Years

Management as a practice is very old. The most successful executive in all history was surely that Egyptian who, 4,500 years or more ago, first conceived the pyramid, without any precedent, designed it, and built it, and did so in an

astonishingly short time. That first pyramid still stands. But as a discipline, management is barely fifty years old. It was first dimly perceived around the time of the First World War. It did not emerge until the Second World War, and then did so primarily in the United States. Since then it has been the fastest-growing new function, and the study of it the fastest-growing new discipline. No function in history has emerged as quickly as has management in the past fifty or sixty years, and surely none has had such worldwide sweep in such a short period.

—Peter F. Drucker, "The Age of Social Transformation," *The Atlantic Monthly* (November 1994)

The three paragraphs you just read, while written by different authors on different topics, have a number of common traits. Perhaps the most conspicuous is the structure, in each case, of the first sentence. Read the three as a list, and you'll see—and hear—the similarity:

A weasel is wild.

U.S. mileage standards are another scandal.

Management as a practice is very old.

You probably noticed that in all three the main verb is a form of be (is, are), which serves as a link between the subject and a description or characteristic of the subject. This use of be as a linking verb—"something is something"—is a common sentence pattern¹ in English. You won't have to read far in most modern essays (or in this textbook) to find this "something is something" pattern. In fact, you will find three in the paragraph you are reading now.

You've had years of experience with the linking-be pattern. It is one of a handful of patterns that underlie the structure of all our sentences. These skeletal structures and our system for fleshing them out constitute the grammar of English.

In this book you will look at these patterns and their expansions from a rhetorical point of view—that is, from the view of a writer with a particular purpose and audience. You will learn about the choices available to you and the effect those choices have on your reader.

Thinking about grammar in this way—as a tool for the writer—may be new to you. The definition of the word grammar that we are using here may be new as well: Here grammar refers to the underlying system of rules that enables people to speak their native language. Every human being has such a system—an innate language ability that somehow, in some miraculous way, develops into speech at an early age.

You were little more than a year old when you began to demonstrate your grammar ability by naming things around you; within a few months 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.

¹Words in boldface are explained in the Glossary of Terms, beginning on page 235.

Linguists tell us that 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 telling stories, 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.

It's important that you recognize that expertise. Why? The answer is simple, based on plain old common sense. If you have confidence in your language ability, perhaps that confidence will carry over into your writing. Confidence breeds enthusiasm. And every teacher knows—students know, too—the importance of enthusiasm to success in any venture.

Those of you whose mother tongue is not English will bring varying degrees of grammar expertise to your writing. And, unlike the subconscious expertise you have in your native language, your knowledge of the grammar of English is likely to be conscious knowledge—rules about sentence structure that you learned in English classes or conclusions that you reached on the basis of experience, perhaps when you compared the rules of English to those of your native language.

Writing, of course, requires much more conscious knowledge than does speech: For starters, there's the alphabet to learn, the skills of handwriting and spelling and punctuation to master, all of which you began to do as soon as you started school. You've also learned that the written language is not simply written-down speech. Depending on the rhetorical situation—the purpose and audience—the vocabulary you use in writing may be more formal and the sentence structure more elaborate than that of the spoken language. Our conversations include slang and sentence fragments that are often inappropriate in writing.

Your conscious understanding of grammar comes into play most noticeably when you are rethinking what you have just written—when you are revising. And it's important to recognize that revising is not simply a step that you carry out somewhere toward the end of the writing process; it's not a coat of polish you apply before turning in your paper. Revising is itself a process—a recursive, back-and-forth rereading and listening and rethinking and selecting process that goes on in your head and on your paper, beginning with the first paragraph of the first draft. Writing involves grammatical choices from beginning to end.

The study of rhetorical grammar, then, is essentially a matter of consciousness raising, of learning to use the tools that our writing system has available. Understanding the structure of language in a conscious way will enable you to manipulate sentences, to use the tools, with genuine control.

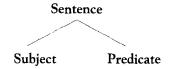
The Structure of Sentences

The linking-be pattern provides a good illustration of both our subconscious grammar ability and the importance of rhetorical awareness. As native speakers, we learn to use be, with its irregular past tense forms (was, were) and its three present tense

forms (am, are, and is) without even realizing they are related to be, the infinitive form. Nonnative speakers, of course, must spend a great deal of conscious effort on the uses of be in English, just as native English speakers must do when confronted with the equivalent of be in studying a foreign language. On the other hand, as your composition teachers may have warned you, it's very easy to overuse be. That first paragraph of discussion at the opening of this chapter, with its three linking-be sentences, may, in fact, illustrate such overuse. We'll come back to this subject in the discussion on "Choosing Verbs" (Chapter 6).

Meanwhile, the linking-be pattern can help illuminate the underlying structure of our sentence patterns.

Before looking at all of the separate slots in the sentence, we will examine their two-part structure: the subject and the predicate.



You probably know these labels from your study of grammar in junior high or high school. They name the functions of the two parts of every sentence. The **subject**, as its name implies, is the topic of the sentence, the something or a someone that the sentence is about; the **predicate** is the point that is made about that topic.

In the linking-be sentences we've been looking at, the first "something," of course, is the subject. In the following sentences, you'll find a "something" or "someone" occupying the subject slot, so you will probably have no trouble recognizing the dividing line between the two basic parts:

A weasel is wild.
U.S. mileage standards are a scandal.
Tomatoes give me hives.
Linda's sister graduated from nursing school.
Gino's father flew helicopters in Vietnam.
Management as a practice is very old.

If you divided the sentences like this,

A weasel / is wild.

U.S. mileage standards / are a scandal.

Tomatoes / give me hives.

Linda's sister / graduated from nursing school.

Gino's father / flew helicopters in Vietnam.

Management as a practice / is very old.

—and chances are good that you did—then you have recognized the two basic units of every sentence.

This two-part structure underlies all of our sentences in English, even those in which the two parts may not be apparent at first glance. In many questions, for example, the subject is buried in the predicate half of the sentence; to discover the two parts, you have to recast the question in the form of a **declarative sentence**, or statement:

Question: Which chapters will our test cover? Statement: Our test / will cover which chapters.

In the command, or imperative sentence, one of the parts may be deleted altogether, with the subject "understood":

(You) Hold the onions!

(You) Sit down.

(You) Come with me to the concert.

Another way to describe the sentence slots, the subject and the predicate, is according to the form of the structures that fill them:

The subject slot is generally filled by a **noun phrase**, and that's exactly what these six subjects are:

A weasel
U.S. mileage standards
Tomatoes
Linda's sister
Gino's father
Management as a practice

The term *phrase* refers to a group of words that acts as a unit. A noun phrase consists of a headword noun with all of the words and phrases that modify it. In the preceding list of noun phrases, the headwords are in italics.

In each of the six sample sentences, the predicate is a **verb phrase** in form, as the predicate always is. Like the noun phrase, the verb phrase is a unit with a headword, in this case, a verb. In the following verb phrases, the verbs are in italics:

is wild.

are a scandal.

give me hives.
graduated from nursing school
flew helicopters in Vietnam.
is very old.

Remember that the term *predicate* refers to the whole verb phrase and *subject* to the whole noun phrase—not to just their headwords.

You were probably able to make the divisions between the subjects and predicates on the basis of meaning, by identifying what was being said about something or someone. But if you're not sure, you can use your grammar expertise to double check: Simply substitute a **pronoun** for the subject. That pronoun, you will discover, stands in for the entire noun phrase:

He is wild. (It can also be used for animals.)

They are a scandal. They give me hives.

She graduated from nursing school. He flew helicopters in Vietnam.

It is very old.

Pronoun expertise is a good example of a native speaker's intuitive system of grammar. We use pronouns automatically, usually at the second mention of a noun or noun phrase:

A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks?

<u>Linda's sister</u> graduated from nursing school. <u>She</u>'s starting a job at our local hospital next week.

In Chapter 5 we will look further at pronouns, including the tricky ones that writers sometimes have problems with.

EXERCISE 1

Draw a line to separate the subject and predicate in each of the following sentences. Remember the trick of substituting a pronoun to discover where the subject ends.

- 1. The government relaxed mileage standards in the 1980s.
- 2. Transportation experts at the E.P.A. have argued for stricter standards.
- 3. When will oil prices go up again?
- 4. How many different chimes does this grandfather clock have?
- 5. Bill Clinton, the governor of Arkansas, was elected president in 1992.