THE MODERN WRITER'S HANDBOOK

FRANKO'HARE

THE MODERN WRITER'S HANDBOOK

To my parents Frank O'Hare and Theresa Sutherland O'Hare for their encouragement and support and for their love

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PREFACE

Whether produced for the academic community or for the world at large, discourse usually involves someone writing to others about a matter of mutual concern. The Modern Writer's Handbook is designed to facilitate communication between writers and their readers, to help writers, in the words of Kenneth Burke, to "identify" with, to become "consubstantial" with, their readers, and thus to win their respect.

The Modern Writer's Handbook assumes commitment on the part of the developing writer. We are not interested in the individual who dashes down the first thing that comes into his or her head, checks for superficial errors in mechanics, usage, or spelling, and produces a final draft that earns a yawning So what? from its readers. For this book to be useful, the user must be prepared to spend time examining a topic, generating information about that topic in a variety of ways, carefully analyzing the needs of the potential audience, finding the best organizational frame, and then working through several drafts en route to a final draft that must be edited and proofread with care.

The Modern Writer's Handbook is based on the premise that eventually, at the final draft or proofreading stage of the writing process, maturing writers will be energetically concerned with the surface features of their papers and will, out of respect for themselves and their potential readers, work strenuously to ensure that their prose conforms to the conventions of modern edited written English. The first half of this book, therefore, presents a comprehensive survey of those generally accepted principles we call grammar, usage, and mechanics.

Although the organization of the book follows a sequence that allows the user to learn progressively—the parts of the sentence precede the parts of speech because an understanding of the former gives functional meaning to the latter—the primary consideration in planning the organization was to make the book convenient as a reference. Each section covers its topic thoroughly so that the user seeking an explanation can be confident of finding it under one heading. In some instances, the policy of gathering related topics together has led to repetitions, but the result is ready access to a solution.

Points of grammar, mechanics, and usage are explained as clearly as possible and demonstrated by numerous examples. The examples have been selected with particular care in the realization that the user cannot always associate the stated principle with his or her immediate problem but can usually discover a parallel construction or similar problem in the examples. Many examples are from published sources in a variety of disciplines because an actual usage is often more eloquent than a fabricated one. Following each section of explanation is a brief set of exercises applying the principle discussed. These exercises are designed to help users familiarize themselves with the principle and gain confidence in putting it to work. Where modern usage clearly shows ambiguity in the application of a principle, the explanation includes all the options, as in the case of the serial comma before the conjunction.

The second half of *The Modern Writer's Handbook* summarizes the writing process and offers guidance in invention, drafting, and revision. It ends with an analysis of the library research paper, including directions on using the library, taking notes, styling source references (in accordance with the most recent *MLA Handbook* prescriptions), and preparing a bibliography.

In the back of the book are a glossary of usage, which addresses common confusions and misuses, and a glossary of grammatical terms for convenient reference.

In order to become a confident, competent writer, the inexperienced writer should develop two complementary habits: intensive, thoughtful reading and discussion of the best prose available and abundant practice with the composing process, ideally in a writing workshop. The Modern Writer's Handbook

is designed to help the inexperienced writer grow. It is not an alternative to writing but an aid to writing. If it is studied as though it were a compendium of basic information, it will fail its user, for it is, in essence, a reference tool designed to build confidence. Paradoxically, the more diligently this book is used, the less it will be needed.

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INTRODUCTION

This book will not teach you to write. Writing is a complex creative process that you must learn by your own system of trial and error, and unless you try—and keep trying—no volume of advice and information is going to make you proficient. But this book does have a purpose. It will help you direct your writing efforts in two ways: first, by providing you with the ground rules of writing, which are the conventions of grammar, punctuation, and usage, and second, by describing the writing process itself—the numerous options facing writers as they think about, plan, draft, and revise their work.

To understand how the contents of this book relate to your writing, think back to the time you were learning to drive. Probably one of the first things you did was to learn the rules of the road; indeed, you had to pass a written test on the rules before you could get behind the wheel. The rules did not teach you to drive a car, but they did give you guidelines by which you could operate your car on the road in a way other drivers expected. The principles of grammar, punctuation, and usage are analogous to the rules of the road. They establish a common ground of conduct between writer and reader so that writers may make themselves understood and that readers may understand.

When you began to drive, you learned by getting the feel of the car how to make it respond as you wanted it to. You were not taught that feel; you acquired it through intensive practice, through trial and error. However, you were probably told by an experienced driver what you should do to get the car moving—how to turn on the ignition and start the engine, how to shift into gear, and where the brake pedal was. This book contains the advice of experienced writers and instructors on how to get writing started, on how to approach revising a draft, on how to analyze and improve paragraphs and sentences, and on what steps to follow in writing a library research paper.

None of this advice will give you the feel of writing, but it may help you find the feel with a little less fumbling and frustration.

The principles of grammar, sentence form, punctuation, spelling, and diction constitute the first half of the book. Because many of these principles have been imposed on the language over centuries by people trying to produce an orderly system, the principles consist not only of the logical but also of the arbitrary, the foreign, the dated, and the debatable. They are complicated, and most of us need occasional reminders of the accepted code. The first half of this book is a compilation of reminders for your reference.

Some of these principles reflect commonsense logic. The sentence My sister handed Harriet her keys contains an ambiguous pronoun. Are the keys my sister's or Harriet's? Under "Pronoun reference" (Section 10b) in this book, you will find instructions for recognizing and avoiding such ambiguities. Other principles are—or at least seem—entirely arbitrary. Why, for example, should a period or comma come inside a closing quotation mark and a colon or semicolon outside the quotation mark? (See Section 24, "Quotation marks.") The only answer is that convention has it so. Many other principles derive from the histories of the languages from which English is descended, languages in which a word ending changed according to the relation of the word to other words. From this heritage we preserve a distinction between who and whom (see Section 11, "Pronoun case") and the practice of adding s to a verb with a third-person singular subject (see Section 9, "Subject-verb agreement"). And still other principles are today under debate or in a state of change—whether, for example, the pronoun he alone is appropriate in reference to a noun that could apply to a man or a woman (see Section 10a, "Pronounantecedent agreement) and whether there really is a difference between that and which (see Glossary of Usage).

The second half of the book consists of suggestions for writing. These suggestions are not principles. It is not wrong to write a draft without outlining first (see Section 40, "The process of writing: first draft"), but you, individually, may find outlining helpful, and we therefore explain it as an option. Do

not regard this half of the book as some sort of prescription for success in writing. We recommend, instead, that you note what is there and see if anything strikes you as a method you would like to try. You may also find the second half helpful in the case of a specific writing task facing you.

Most sections of the book are followed by brief exercises involving application of the principle discussed. If you are aware of particular weak spots in your writing, we suggest you round out your review of the points in question by trying the exercises to fix the principles in your mind.

Finally, if we have not said enough here about the need to practice writing to be successful at writing, we recommend that you look at Section 39, "Preparation for writing." This book is only one element in a long-term commitment that will require your dedication and persistence. The result will, we believe, be worth the effort. The competent writer achieves not only a better standard of communication but a better understanding of how thoughts become ideas that ultimately influence action. Writing is a way of knowing: a means of growing emotionally and intellectually and of understanding yourself and your world.

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