

THE  
LITTLE  
ENGLISH  
HANDBOOK  
英语小手册

*3ed.*

CORBETT

# **The Little English Handbook: Choices and Conventions**

**Third Edition**

Edward P. J. Corbett  
*The Ohio State University*

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# ALPHABETICAL LIST OF CORRECTION SYMBOLS























(The numbers following the translation of the symbols refer to the pertinent sections of the handbook.)

<i>Agp/pn</i>	faulty pronoun-noun agreement	23 (p. 22)
<i>Agv/sv</i>	faulty subject-verb agreement	22 (p. 16)
<i>apos</i>	use apostrophe for possessive case of noun	20 (p. 13)
<i>awk</i>	awkward expression	45 (p. 73)
<i>Coh</i>	coherence of the paragraph is weak	51 (p. 89)
<i>CS</i>	comma splice	30 (p. 43)
<i>Da</i>	use appropriate diction	42 (p. 66)
<i>dangl</i>	dangling modifier	25 (p. 28)
<i>Dev</i>	inadequate development of the paragraph	52 (p. 94)
<i>div</i>	improper division of word at end of sentence	88 (p. 151)
<i>Ex</i>	use exact, precise diction	41 (p. 64)
<i>fig</i>	faulty figure of speech	48 (p. 80)
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<i>Glos</i>	Glossary of Usage, (p. 227)	
<i>hyph</i>	use hyphen for the compound word	87 (p. 174)
<i>id</i>	unidiomatic expression	43 (p. 69)
<i>ital</i>	use italics	83, 85, 86 (p. 140, 144, 146)
<i>MS</i>	improper manuscript form	10-16 (pp. 6-8)
<i>num</i>	improper use of Arabic number	89 (p. 152)
<i>p/c</i>	use comma here	60, 61, 63, 64 (p. 103, 106, 111, 114)
<i>p/col</i>	use colon here	68 (p. 121)
<i>p/d</i>	use dash here	62, 70, 71 (p. 113, 114, 115)
<i>p/sc</i>	use semicolon here	66, 67 (p. 122, 123)
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<i>rep</i>	careless repetition	47 (p. 78)
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<i>trite</i>	trite expression	44 (p. 71)
<i>U</i>	unity of the paragraph is weak	50 (p. 85)
<i>wordy</i>	unnecessarily wordy sentence	46 (p. 76)
<i>WW</i>	wrong word	40 (p. 61)



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## PROOFREADERS' MARKS

	close up space
	delete
	delete and close up space
	separate with a space
	insert here what is indicated in the margin
	start new paragraph
	no paragraph; run in with previous paragraph
	insert period
	insert comma
	insert semicolon
	insert colon
	insert em dash
	insert pair of em dashes
	insert hyphen
	insert apostrophe
	use capital letter here
	use lowercase letter here
	set in italic type
	set in roman type
	set in small capitals
	set in boldface type
	transpose letters or words

This book is dedicated to all my students over the years, whose written prose sometimes mystified me, often enlightened me, and invariably beguiled me. Bless them all.

## Preface to Third Edition

It has been quite a struggle for me to keep this handbook little. In letters and in person, many teachers and some students have pleaded with me to "add a section on \_\_\_\_\_." There have been times when I too would have liked to have available "a section on \_\_\_\_\_." But on those occasions when I needed the guidance provided by such a section, I have been able to consult one of the comprehensive handbooks. Grateful as I have been for that help given in time of need, I am not yet prepared to sacrifice the succinctness of this handbook in order to gain comprehensiveness.

I have not, however, been totally resistant to additions. In this edition, I have added a section on the proper form of the verb (dealing primarily with the correct tense of the verb), have given a fuller explanation in the Legend section of the difference between phrases and clauses, have expended the section on the adequate development of the paragraph to include some advice about various ways of developing a paragraph, have included a section on the system of documenting a research pa-

## Preface

per prescribed by the American Psychological Association, and have finally yielded to the many requests for a Glossary of Usage. By adhering to the same principle governing my choice of what matters of grammar, style, punctuation, and mechanics to cover, I solved the problem of how to find room for a Glossary of Usage in a little handbook: I would deal only with those matters of usage that in my long years of teaching I found occurring most frequently in student papers.

Some of the additions I made have been balanced by cuts made in other sections of the book. In almost every section of the handbook, there has been some rewriting or rearranging of the material. Those who are familiar with the handbook will readily recognize the changes, but they will not find the changes to be so drastic that the book will now seem strange to them. One pattern that appears quite regularly in this edition is that the faulty examples cited at the beginning of the entry are presented in corrected form at the end of the entry.

The text has undergone subtle changes in response to the suggestions made by users of the book, and I am confident that the changes have enhanced the usefulness of the book. I wish I could feel equally confident about the decisions I made on my own initiative.

Edward P. J. Corbett



## **Preface to First Edition**

This handbook is designed to serve as a guide on basic matters of grammar, style, paragraphing, punctuation, and mechanics for those engaged in writing public prose. By "public prose" is meant that dialect of written English most commonly used in the newspapers, magazines, and books that the majority of educated native speakers read. This ranges in style from the formal to the casual, from the literary to the colloquial. But because public prose seeks to be intelligible to a general audience, it avoids the strictly ingroup vocabulary of various professional, regional, and social groups, and it observes the rules of grammar as taught in the schools.

The use of this term is not intended to disparage the other current dialects, most of which serve well the needs of some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time. Obviously, spoken English, with its own wide range of professional, regional, and social dialects, serves the needs of more people more often than written English does. In fact, many people speak more words in a single week than they will write dur-

## Preface

ing a lifetime. When linguists say that the spoken language is the primary language, they mean that the spoken comes first in point of time (centuries before the written form developed) and use (in a single lifetime, before the written language is learned). Also, more natives have a command of the spoken language than have a command of both the spoken and the written. However, despite the primacy of the spoken language, there are occasions when many, if not most, native speakers must use the written language in order to record or communicate their thoughts, needs, and feelings. It is for those occasions that this handbook is designed.

When a person wishes to communicate in the written medium, it is natural for him to resort—or wish that he could resort—to a more sophisticated style of language than the one he is accustomed to use in the conduct of his everyday affairs. Actually, in his first fumbling efforts at writing, he might succeed better if he used the lexical and syntactical resources acquired from daily practice in the oral medium. But as the written transcription of impromptu talk reveals, the spoken language is often marked by redundancy of language, imprecision of diction, and loose, rambling, dislocated sentence patterns. Words and structures that may have communicated adequately in the oral medium because of the aid furnished by voice and gesture are something less than adequate when inscribed on paper. For effective written communication, words must be more precise, structures tighter, and organization more discernible; and graphic devices of punctuation and mechanics must be relied on to do what the intonation of the voice does in the oral medium. The kind of public prose used by newscasters on television and radio and by writers in newspapers, magazines, and books has proven to be the most efficient medium for communicating on paper with a general audience.

In this little handbook, I concentrate on those matters of gram-

mar, style, paragraphing, punctuation, and mechanics that from years of experience in reading student papers and responding to telephone queries from businessmen and secretaries I know to be the most common and persistent problems in the expressive part of the writing process. For answers to the larger or more subtle problems in writing prose, you will have to consult one of the comprehensive rhetoric handbooks that are readily available. I do not, for instance, provide guidance in all the uses of the comma; some of these are never or seldom a problem for writers. Instead, I deal only with those half-dozen conventions of the comma that are most often ignored or misused and that are most crucial for the preservation of clarity. If you master these six, you can rest assured that there are no really serious mistakes that you can make in the use (or omission) of the comma.

Nor does this handbook carry a section that is a common feature of comprehensive handbooks, a glossary of usage. Although questions of usage—whether to use *contact* as a verb, the conjunction *like* or *as*, the preposition *due to* or *because of*, the construction *different than* or *different from*—are troublesome problems, a glossary of usage has been excluded from this handbook for two reasons: (1) to be really useful, it would have to be at least thirty pages long, which would make this a bigger book than I wanted, and (2) even if I knew more than I do about the current status of certain locutions, I would find it difficult to make pronouncements about questions of usage outside the norm of a context. If the writer has a question about usage, he can consult one of the book-length authorities, such as H. W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, Bergen and Cornelia Evans's *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*, or Wilson Follett's *Modern American Usage*.

The subtitle of this handbook, *Choices and Conventions*, reflects my approach to the matters I deal with. Some of the prin-

## Preface

ciples governing the system of writing have been established by convention; others represent a recommendation from a number of available options. Accordingly, in most cases, I have stated the guiding principle in definite, unequivocal terms. It should quickly be added, however, that there are no absolute prescriptions in matters of language. Where choices are available, a selection must be guided by a consideration of the subject matter, occasion, desired effect, and audience. But in my experience, the kind of person who needs the guidance of a handbook like this wants a simple, straightforward answer to his query—e.g. "How do I punctuate this compound sentence?" He does not yet have enough sophistication in the use of the written language to be much helped by the advice, "In most cases, you should separate the two clauses of a compound sentence with a comma, but often when the clauses are short, you can dispense with the comma without any loss of clarity." Such a person is better served if he is told that he should *always* put a comma in front of the coordinating conjunction that joins the two independent clauses of a compound sentence. There is also a practical value attaching to the unequivocal advice: rarely will the writer go wrong if he follows it, but he may expect to go wrong on occasion if he ignores it.

It is assumed that the user of this handbook has acquired at least a basic knowledge of formal grammar and that the grammatical system to which he has most likely been exposed is the "traditional" one. Thus when such terms as *compound sentence*, *independent clause*, *participial phrase* are used, the writer will probably be able to recognize the structures to which the terms refer. Also, the diagram of structures that accompanies many of the statements of principle will serve as a visual aid for those whose knowledge of traditional terminology has faded and for those whose training has been predominantly in structural grammar or in transformational-generative grammar.

## Preface

Thus, the "picture" of a structure will usually be a sufficient guide for those who are impatient with, or are baffled by, technical terminology. However, to ensure maximum comprehension, I have furnished the book with a glossary of grammatical terms.

About 90 percent of the examples—both those that illustrate the observance of the principle and those that illustrate the violation of it—have been taken directly from student writing. A few examples had to be invented, but even these are typical of sentences that students write. In the case of those examples that illustrate violations of the principle, no ridicule of the writer is intended. I simply want to exhibit from prose written in the 1970s, examples of aberrations from the prevailing conventions. In the explanatory matter that follows the examples, I frequently show why the aberration is a threat to clear communication and how it might be corrected.

By concentrating on matters of grammar, style, paragraphing, punctuation, and mechanics, I do not wish to imply that these are the most important concerns of "good writing." What is most essential for effective communication is the substance, originality, and sophistication of one's thoughts and the ability to organize them in a unified, coherent way. However, sloppy articulation of one's thoughts is often a reflection of sloppy intentional and organizational processes; it is easily demonstrable that careless expression stems ultimately from careless thinking. Observance of the "basics" treated in this handbook will not guarantee that your prose will be interesting or worth reading, but observance of the fundamental conventions of the writing system will at least guarantee that your prose *can* be read. Readable prose is no mean achievement. The next achievement to strive for is to write prose that others will *want* to read.

Edward P. J. Corbett

## Acknowledgments

Every textbook designed for the classroom profits from the criticisms and suggestions of experienced, knowledgeable teachers. I profited immensely from the criticisms and suggestions of those who reviewed the manuscript of the first edition: James T. Nardin of Louisiana State University, Gary Tate of Texas Christian University, William F. Irmscher of the University of Washington, James Karabatsos of Creighton University, Marinus Swets of Grand Rapids Junior College, Richard Lloyd-Jones of the University of Iowa, Mina P. Shaughnessy of City College of the City University of New York, Kirby L. Duncan of Stephen F. Austin University, Nancy Dasher of Ohio State University, Betty Renshaw of Prince George's Community College, and Raymond D. Liedlich of Portland Community College. Both the second edition and this edition have profited from the advice of dozens of teachers who buttonholed me at conventions or sent me detailed written critiques. I owe a special debt, however, to the following people who gave me detailed suggestions for improving the book: Peter DeBlois of Syracuse University,

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Edward P. J. Corbett

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