

Francis L. Fennell

E COLLEGIATE
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HANDBOOK

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Collegiate English Handbook

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Francis L. Fennell

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Preface: To the Student

This book assumes that you want to learn how to write better. Not that you are especially cheerful about it, mind you—few people like tasks that have no clearly defined beginning and end and for which progress is so hard to measure. But in my experience, most students really do recognize the need to improve their writing skills. Their attitude is usually a kind of resigned willingness.

If you have that resigned willingness, you are on solid ground. “Writing is an important skill”—you’ve heard the cliché countless times. And like so many clichés, it just happens to be true. When National Institute of Education researchers asked 4,000 college graduates what courses they would have taken in college if they had known what they know now in their careers, their number one response was more writing courses.

So improving your writing is an eminently practical step. The problem is that many students spend more energy yearning for it than doing it. They substitute the wish for the work.

The reason is that writing, unlike most other subjects, makes elastic requirements on your time. Twenty calculus problems may take a certain number of hours. But when you’re finished, you’re really finished. A writing assignment, on the other hand, is often given in terms of a word or page limit. When the 500 words are on paper, it might seem as if you are really finished here, too. But you’re not—if you want to write well, that is. Those 500 words need to be gone over a second time, a third time, a fourth time—whatever it takes to make it the best writing you can produce. The difference between students who improve their writing during a com-

*What is written without effort is
in general read without pleasure.*
—Samuel Johnson

position course and those who don't lies not so much in desire as in the latter group's willingness to stretch their elastic time limit—to write a third draft, or to proofread,

or to revise a graded paper. If you make that second effort, your writing can and will improve.

Let's assume you have this second kind of willingness, as well as the resigned willingness that almost all students have. Here is how this book can help you:

1. Your instructor may assign the handbook as he or she would assign any other textbook. In other words, you may be asked to read certain chapters or sections of chapters. This book has been written so that it can be read continuously, one section or chapter leading into another. It is also written so that you can understand it. Exercises at the ends of the major parts of each chapter give you an important chance to test yourself on the skills you have been acquiring. Notice, by the way, that the example sentences, in the exercises and in the text itself, are taken from works by professional writers and by student writers like you.

2. Your instructor may ask you to use *The Collegiate English Handbook* as a resource. When your papers show certain weaknesses, you will be asked to consult the appropriate section of the handbook and make whatever changes are necessary. If you will be using the handbook in this way, remember that every problem covered in the text is listed in the index. Each section mentions the many possible abbreviations, symbols, or code words your instructor might use on your paper. These symbols, along with the numbered chapter sections and the list of symbols on the inside back cover of this book, should make it easy for you to find what you need. The exercises at the ends of the major parts of each chapter can help you test your knowledge.

3. You may use *The Collegiate English Handbook* as a reference book. In fact, after your composition course is over, you might be keeping the book for just this purpose. Here again the index and the list of symbols on the inside back cover will be important location aids. The sections you

will probably find the most valuable are Chapter 6 on grammar, Chapters 7 and 8 on conventions such as punctuation and capitalization, Chapters 12 and 13 on research papers, and the Glossaries of Grammatical Terms and Usage.

One more thing: writing is important and practical, yes. But it need not be approached in hushed tones, as if you were conversing in an operating room during open-heart surgery. In this book, you will find a more personal style than you may be accustomed to in most textbooks. You will also find some cartoons and some apt quotations. We have an important subject, but it should never appear to be a grim one.

F.L.F.

Preface: To the Instructor

This book offers several important advantages to you as the instructor.

First, the text is a teaching handbook. Each section has been written with one question in mind: Is this explanation detailed enough so a student can understand it and use it? That is not to say that the writing is below college level. Rather, my approach has been to take into account the student's perspective and background and then to make the explanations as clear as possible. Macaulay's dictum that "nothing is so useless as a general maxim" ought to have special application to handbooks. There are no big red-letter RULES here. In their place are attempts to discuss writing, with an emphasis on understanding the process of writing—how one *does* it, not how one corrects it. If certain linguistic patterns must be changed, as at times they must, the emphasis is on understanding *why* mistakes are made—no one makes them on purpose—and what can be done about them.

Second, I have tried to give this book both a logical structure and clear transitions. Deliberately absent is the bewildering and discouraging chemistry-text appearance that handbooks so often adopt. Consequently, you can assign it to a class the way you would any other textbook—working from the first chapter to the last, for example, using the exercises to strengthen the students' mastery of each skill. Yet the chapter subsections and other signposts also allow students to use the book conveniently as a reference work, if you or they prefer. A special feature is the listing of the alternative correction symbols that might apply to a particular topic or section. Thus, if you use symbols you can

continue with whatever system you find natural, without having to adopt the chart used in the back of the book unless you wish to do so.

Third, the advice this handbook offers is as up to date as possible. For example, it assumes that students are just as likely to be composing with word processors and e-mailing their papers as they are to be typing or writing longhand and that they are just as likely to be researching on the Internet as they are to be browsing library shelves. This book also distinguishes between severe faults and less grievous ones, between genuine errors and matters of taste. Whenever practical, this advice reflects recent research in stylistics and in the composing process. Guidance is desirable, but it need not be prescriptive or pontifical. *The Collegiate English Handbook* respects the diversity and flexibility of modern English, summarizing the practice of good writers rather than simply issuing orders, such as “Do not do X” or “A writer should never use Z.”

Fourth, this handbook gives lengthier treatment to the problems students encounter more often. Research into student error patterns gives us the data needed for proportioning the emphasis according to the frequency or severity of the problem. Concretely, this means relatively more intensive discussions of such matters as run-on sentences, sentence fragments, subject-verb agreement, and even spelling. It means a lesser emphasis on mistakes that occur less often, such as capitalization errors or confusing *like* for *as*, although these matters are of course included for those who need them.

Fifth, the great majority of examples, exercises, and sample assignments are drawn from student and professional writing and from actual writing assignments given in a wide variety of courses (not just composition courses). They therefore have the flavor of “real” writing. Because they are words that somebody somewhere really did use, they will not be dismissed as easily as those contrived “Sue and John (is, are) going to the store” example sentences that many books provide. Furthermore, the experiences of professional writers engaged in their craft—men and women

from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds—are enlisted wherever they seem appropriate.

Sixth, and perhaps most noticeably (according to users of the previous editions), the tone of this handbook is different from that in other English handbooks. The tone here is more informal, less didactic, reflecting the fact that one human being is speaking to others. Complementing the tone are numerous marginal quotes and some cartoons that provide relevant comments. They offer a respite, but more important, they remind us that writing is indeed part of a larger world “out there.” They also help to restore perspective, to make us aware again of the fact that writing is after all an art, not a science. Such material is common enough elsewhere, but somehow it has been excluded from handbooks, precisely the works most in need of some leavening.

The Collegiate English Handbook will succeed or fail on the strength of its ability to teach students what they need to know in terms they can understand. If teaching does not take place in this book—real teaching, not just rule making—then it loses its reason for existence. For unless we see handbooks as more than just compendiums of rules, unless we see how they can be made to both delight and instruct, we ought not write them or publish them or ask students to buy them.

F.L.F.

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