



A Basis for Composition

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To the Instructor

The typical students facing you and this text are not enthusiastic about grammar. Some even hate it! Many have had, probably, a lot of it. They “learned” definitions and rules long ago without any real understanding. To repeat those now would do no one much good. Grammar needs to make sense now to be useful at last.

This book makes sense. It does not talk down to students, oversimplify grammar, or leave out its complexity. It includes all of grammar but with important differences. First, it re-defines where traditional definitions have been found to be confusing, and it clarifies terms in understandable language. Second, it presents the whole of grammar in a logical sequence for learning.

Most grammar texts are organized according to the principle of classification. One section will consider all parts of speech, another the sentence complete with clauses and phrases, then the serious sentence errors, and so on. This text is a process analysis. It builds students’ understanding of grammar gradually and logically, moving from noun to verb to core sentences to combinations of and additions to core sentences.

The book starts with the noun because it is the one element most students “know.” At the same time, students can quickly eliminate some easy errors connected with the noun’s plural spellings, capitals, or apostrophes and avoid many red-penciled corrections in their paragraphs.

The text introduces sentence elements and punctuation rules as they emerge naturally. The noun, for example, leads to the adjective, but the adjective will also be considered later with the linking-verb sentence and still later with adverbs. Subject-verb agreement is introduced early because it develops from the fact that nouns can be plural, and also because its errors, too, draw costly teacher comments. But subject-verb problems are not explored exhaustively at first mention. The text will come back to this matter as it does to others at later, appropriate times.

The book then is obviously designed to be worked from front to back at a pace that accelerates as the student builds a base of

understanding. However, you as teacher or the individual student can adjust the pace. Frequent diagnostic tests will either show students proof that they need to learn the material that follows or reassure them that all they need to do is use it for a quick review. Instructor or student can also make use of the index and change the order of study.

The difficulty of the sentences within exercises increases gradually as the students build their knowledge of grammar. Early sentences contain no constructions not already explained. Thus students can work with the whole sentence right from the beginning, avoiding the frustration that can come when they are expected to focus on one or two words only and ignore anything else. There are comparatively few error-correction exercises, because understanding the operating principles of the language seems to be better medicine for errors than pages of comma splices and fragments.

Few, if any, students in your class would be happy to study grammar for its own sake. This book doesn't suggest that. Everything in the book leads to the improvement of students' ability to write with clarity and even grace. From the beginning, exercises make student writers think in specifics, work with examples, divide topics into parts and put the parts together logically. Grammar exercises direct students to turn vague words into clear ones, to make up sentences to illustrate various principles, to combine ideas with coherence and economy. Verb study leads to narrative, adjectives to description, and inter-sentence relationships to cause and effect explanation. Because the book starts with strong emphasis on the value of the concrete noun, even your students' first paragraphs should "say something" and hold their focus. As students work through the writing assignments, they will practice various techniques of development and organization, the traditional rhetorical patterns and orders.

Finally, the proof of the effectiveness of the text will come in the paragraphs and essays it produces.

To the Student

This book's aim is to improve your writing. Its focus shifts systematically from word to sentence to essay, and it includes all the operating principles (not "rules," please note) of grammar and syntax that control punctuation in writing and produce clarity.

You will probably work through this book from front to back at a gradually accelerating pace. There are certain "check points" or diagnostic tests where you (and your instructor) can assess your own particular strengths and weaknesses and where, at your instructor's suggestion, you may decide that you need to work all exercises or that you may skip some. The paragraphs and essays you write will also show directions your study should take. This book is carefully indexed so, if your work on an essay reveals a need for review of problems connected with verb and subject agreement or adverb usage or tense sequence, for example, you can find by yourself explanations and exercises. And for that kind of "independent" study, answers for odd-numbered exercises are given at the back of the book.

Unlike conventional rhetoric texts and "handbooks," few of this book's exercises ask you to correct errors that the author has collected or concocted. You must correct your own errors, of course, but you will find that you will make fewer and fewer mistakes once you understand grammar and see the logic in punctuation and mechanics. And as knowledge frees you from anxiety about "rules," you can develop a writing style of your own.

By the end of the book or the end of the term, you will have gone a considerable distance toward a realistic goal: besides being error-free, your writing will be clear and even graceful. The process of writing will have become easy and fun when the way you write develops directly from what you want to say.

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Words and the Sentence



1

Words and the Sentence

WORDS

The study of writing—of sentences, paragraphs, essays—might well begin with the smallest component of composition, the single word. One of the most influential writers of this century, Gertrude Stein, declared her fascination with the importance of the single word:

I found that any kind of book if you read with glasses and somebody is cutting your hair and so you cannot keep the glasses on and you use your glasses as a magnifying glass and so read word by word reading word by word makes the writing that is not anything be something.¹

Gertrude Stein's "sentence," however, unintentionally illustrates the desirability of logical syntax and punctuation for clarity's sake since it lacks both!

Gertrude Stein is not the only one fascinated by words. Columnist James Kilpatrick writes of "silver verbs and golden nouns . . . prepositions that fit their objects as precisely as a quarter fits a slot,"² and "soft little adjectives with rounded corners."³ Most English grammar books recognize the importance of words and usually begin their study with "Parts of Speech," the eight traditional categories into which all words fall: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. Certainly, understanding these categories is absolutely essential. Just as no self-respecting grocer would shelve his soap with his string beans, so no English student would confuse the part-of-speech labels. Before reading more, test yourself on identifying parts of speech in the following exercise.

DIAGNOSTIC TEST

Directions: What part-of-speech label would you give to each of the following words?

broom _____

friendly _____

bring _____
ah _____
an _____
am _____
and _____
although _____
however _____

gracefully _____
he _____
be _____
among _____
able _____
ability _____
them _____

The words in the Diagnostic Test were carefully chosen so that each can have only one part-of-speech label, a situation not possible for all words. Open your dictionary to the first page of entries under *A*. Here are, among others, the words *a* (article, adjective), *aardvark* and *Aaron* (nouns), and *aback* (adverb). These words are similar to the ones in the test: they have one part-of-speech designation only.

Now turn to the first page of entries under *B* in your dictionary. See *babble* labeled as both n. (noun) and v. (verb); *baby* as n., v., and adj. (adjective). Here in the dictionary entries, where each word exists apart from all other words, the word's part-of-speech label is the first element in its definition. But you see that a word's label is assigned according to the way, or ways, that the word can function in relation to other words in a sentence.

As a writer, you will find a dictionary most important as both text and tool. The following exercise will help you become acquainted with it.

Dictionary Exercise

Directions: Investigate your own dictionary by choosing a word from the following list and studying its dictionary entry. Then organize some of the information given about it and present that information in a clear, coherent paragraph. Report what seems interesting to you about the word—that it can function as several parts of speech, that it has an interesting history (called its etymology), or that it has many synonyms or more than one entry.

To follow customary practice, underline (to italicize) your word and any synonyms and put your definition of it (your own or the dictionary's) in quotation marks.

Examples: 1. *Hail* has three entries in the dictionary. The first entry labels *hail* as a verb meaning "to welcome with acclaim" or "to summon". . . .

2. The origin of the word *umbrella* is a clue to its meaning. Its ancestor word is the Latin word *umbra*, meaning "shade." The umbrella is protection from sun as well as rain. A second meaning of *umbrella*, however, has nothing to do with the idea of shade. . . .

age	figure	lift	refuse
back	finish	like	seersucker
caucus	grace	lodge	seed
compare	grate	minute	stamp
deal	hand	pocket	table
ease	head	produce	tomato
effect	kick	progress	worm
fence	kind	round	wake

One Route to New Words

One way new words come into being is by the turning of initial letters into words: for example, CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and scuba (self-contained, underwater breathing apparatus). A word produced by this process is called an **acronym**. If the combination of initials is unpronounceable, like FBI and CIA, the acronym will retain its capital letters. If the word is pronounceable, like scuba, the capitals may gradually disappear.

☐ EXERCISE 1.1

Directions: Explain the meaning of the following acronyms.

1. GNP, OMB, IRS
2. Radar
3. ZIP
4. AFL, CIO
5. NATO
6. ICBM
7. VIP, BMOC
8. VISTA
9. VFW
10. OPEC
11. NAACP
12. AP
13. UPS
14. NOW, ERA
15. SOS

Here is a professional essay about words and their etymologies.

essay

"Paying through the nose" and other taxing phrases

"Tax time" means, basically, "touching time." The word "tax" comes from the Latin *taxare*, "to value by handling," which in turn derives from *tangere*, "to touch." A deceptively gentle etymology, since most of us are likely to feel not so much "touched" as rather roughly handled by the Internal Revenue Service. To add verbal insult to financial injury, we are taxed most heavily upon such things as income from capital, things defined as "intangibles." The word "intangible" also derives from *tangere*, and means "untouchable." Why, then, should our intangible assets be the most heavily taxed, our "untouchables" the most rudely "touched"? A sorry state of affairs, etymologically.

When our capital is attacked, we feel it with particular anguish—rather like being hit with a swift blow to the head. And so we should, for our "capital" is the "head" part, or chief part, of our assets. The word derives from the Latin word for "head," *caput*, *capitis*, and the root *capit-* has given us a number of related terms. A capital letter is larger than other letters, and stands at the head of the word; the capital of a country is its chief city; the capital of a column is its ornamental top; capital punishment used to mean only the loss of one's head; the captain of a ship is its head officer; a chapter of a book is a section that has a new heading; to recapitulate an argument is to go again through its headings, or chief points. When our capital is taxed, then, we justly feel as though our heads had been none too gently touched.

Most taxpayers are soft touches, and pay up without protest or appeal. Even so, they are apt to complain of the "confiscatory" taxes that they pay. Yet all taxes, by definition, are "confiscatory." To "confiscate" means "to seize private money for the public treasury." The word comes from the Latin *fiscus*, "basket." From the primary meaning of "basket," *fiscus* had come, by Cicero's time, to mean "the public treasury," the central money basket. "The Fisk" is still the official name of the treasury department in Scotland, and our term "fiscal policy" refers simply to how much money, through taxes, should be deposited in the government's central money basket, or *fiscus*. Those most severely maimed by the government may prefer to fashion another etymology for "fiscal." If confiscatory rates cost an arm and a leg, may we not claim that "fiscal" policy is so named because it makes of us financial "basket cases"?

- 4 Few people are optimistic enough to suppose that they will survive tax time untouched, or that they will escape “scot free”—a phrase that is often misunderstood. We tend to think of it as meaning something like “free as a Scotsman.” It conjures up the image of a dour and parsimonious Scot, determined to surrender nothing. In fact, “scot free” means simply “tax free,” from the Middle English word *scot*, “tax, contribution, debt, reckoning.” And it is doubtful that many Scotsmen, however canny and frugal, get off scot free from the annual demands of their Fisk.
- 5 Those taxpayers who denounce IRS agents as “scavengers” may be as knowledgeable as they are indignant. “Scavengers” originally meant “collectors of tolls,” or “inspectors,” from the Flemish *scawuen*, “to look at.” Those officials performed a sort of customs service, inspecting goods and levying an excise tax upon them. So when we accuse the IRS agents of being “scavengers,” they may justly reply that they are simply doing their job, “looking at” our forms, and “collecting tolls.”
- 6 “Scavenger” was also the title later given to street cleaners. It’s certainly a more picturesque rubric than the pallid “sanitary engineer.” There was even a guild, or union, of scavengers. Its members took an oath, preserved in a 1419 legal text, the *Liber Albus*, which should perhaps be revived: “You shall swear that you shall diligently oversee that the pavements within your Ward be well and rightly repaired, and not made too high in nuisance of the neighbours; and that the ways, streets, and lanes are cleansed of dung and all manner of filth, for the decency of the City.”
- 7 Instead of abusing IRS agents as “scavengers,” we might instead praise them for cleaning up our messy returns. (So charitable an attitude should merit a deduction.) Nor, when they reject much of what we offer to their scrutiny, should we complain. “Scrutinize,” today, means simply “to inspect with care.” But originally it meant to pick through a trash pile: The word derives ultimately from the Latin *scruta*, “trash.” The best thing to do is to hand in a return unlittered by trashy deductions, and hence proof against even the keenest scrutiny.
- 8 Without some fairly imaginative deductions, the amount we end up paying may seem extortionate. An exquisitely appropriate word. To “extort” money is to “twist it out,” from the Latin *ex*, “out, away,” plus *torquere*, “to twist.” (The past participle of the same verb is *tortus*, which gives us the English word “torture.”) And when we come away from the torture of a tax audit, with every last drop of cash “twisted out” of us, we may justly complain of having been “put through the wringer.”
- 9 Such extortionate payments are sometimes described as “paying through the nose.” Why through the nose? Probably because such a loss seems like a spectacular flow of our very lifeblood, a hemorrhaging of our finances. Curiously, there was once an instrument of torture