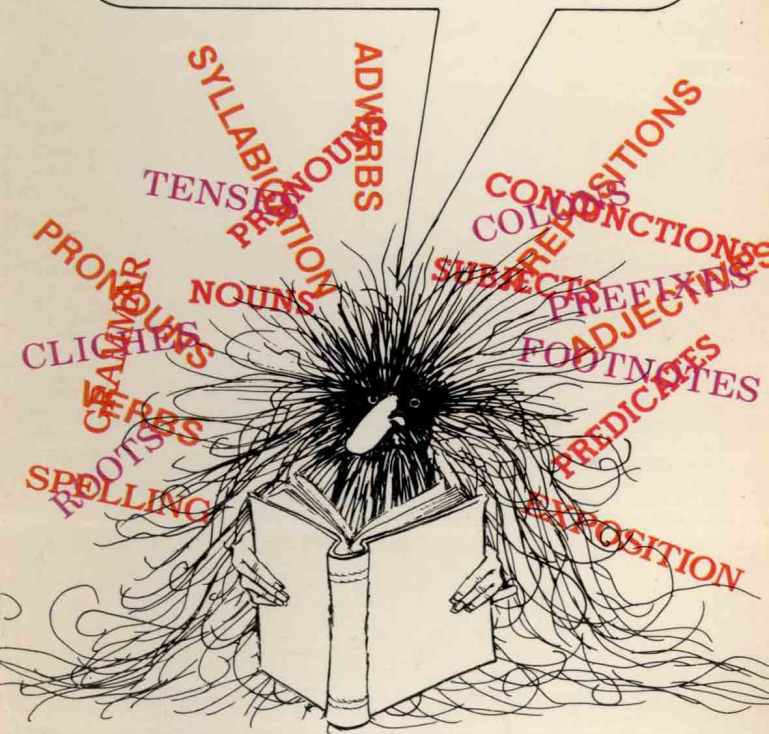


The indispensable guide  
to good English for everyday use

# How to Achieve Competence in English

A Quick-Reference  
Handbook

Eric W. Johnson



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★ New Revised Edition ★

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Eric W. Johnson

Illustrated by Howard S. L. Coale



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HOW TO ACHIEVE COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH:  
A QUICK-REFERENCE HANDBOOK

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## PREFACE

This book is brief and practical. It is not a course of study, although it can be used to back up a course of study. It provides a quick, simple, practical way to look up whatever you need to know, either because you have never learned it or because you have forgotten it. It aims to be useful for people from age ten to senility.

The book contains concise explanations, many examples, no exercises. Everything is arranged alphabetically for quick use; an index of large letters printed at the top of each page makes entries in the book even easier to find. The book contains entries as specific as "bibliography," "colons," "dashes," "footnotes," "letters," "prefixes," "roots of words," "spelling demons," "syllabication," and "underlining"; you may want to look up any of these for particular information. The book also contains some longer, more general articles under headings you might not expect. Some of these are:

- books
- clichés
- conventions of English
- debating
- essays
- exposition
- figurative language
- grammar
- interviewing
- language
- libraries
- marks
- memorization
- note-taking
- organization
- parallel construction
- persuasion
- plagiarism
- plays
- poetry

proofreading, proofreader's marks  
purpose  
reading  
reports  
reviewing for tests and exams  
sentences  
short stories  
speech-making  
spelling  
study skills  
symbols to guide revision of papers  
taking tests and exams  
tenses  
titles  
transitions  
vocabulary building  
writing for whom?

I suggest that you look up a few of these entries to get an idea of the sort of material that is at your disposal.

A book that is as strictly alphabetized as this one is needs many cross references, and there are scores of them shown thus:

Predicates    see SENTENCES

Editing    see REVISION OF PAPERS; PROOFREADING

Metaphors    see FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

It is also *important to remember* that any word in the text set in this type—for example, PREPOSITIONS—is the subject of a separate alphabetized entry, where more information can be found.

At the end of each letter section are one or more lined pages on which you can write information, definitions, reminders, spelling, or vocabulary words that will be useful to you.

I have tried throughout to avoid theoretical discussions and to emphasize common usage. However, I have taught English in grades five through twelve for over twenty-five years and am thus well aware that English teachers and linguists disagree among themselves as to just what common usage is. Where an opinion is needed, I give one simply because a sensible

opinion is usually better than none. If you disagree with the opinion, no harm. Do it your way if you have reason to. As Mark Twain said, "Loyalty to petrified opinion never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul."

I think the book will be useful to people who are faced with various writing tasks, whether in English class or elsewhere; to entire classes in English and in other subjects, in school or college; to academic departments that need a reasonable set of suggestions and standards to use throughout an academic institution; and to anyone, in school or out of it, who needs a quick-reference handbook when questions come up about writing, and to some extent about speaking, English.

ERIC W. JOHNSON

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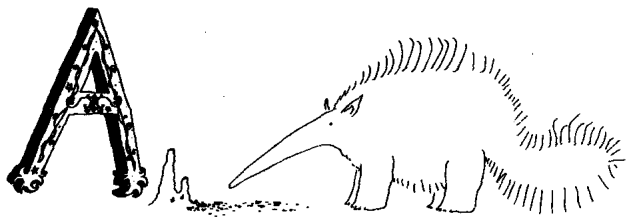
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Eric W. Johnson



## **abbreviations**

An abbreviation of a word is a shortening of it, as *prep.* for *preposition* or *Dr.* for *Doctor*. Abbreviations are followed by a period.

A common writing error is to overabbreviate. You will not go too far wrong if you avoid abbreviations except where they are conventional, as *Dr.*, *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, names of states in addresses, *A.M.*, *P.M.*, and the like. See also **PERIOD**, 2.

## **addresses**

In writing out addresses, every item after the first is enclosed by commas.

*Example:*

My uncle lives at 3752 Chunk Street, Peach Bottom, Pennsylvania 17563, where he has a small business.

**NOTE:** There is no comma between the state and the zip-code number; a comma is placed at the end of the address (unless it comes at the end of a sentence, in which case the period takes its place). For addresses in letters and on envelopes, see **LETTERS**.

**adjective clauses**      see **CLAUSES**, A.

## **adjectives**

An adjective is a word used to modify **NOUNS** or **PRONOUNS** (see also **MODIFIERS**). It is one of the **PARTS OF SPEECH**. It often answers the questions *what kind?*



# A

(descriptive adjective), *which one?* or *how many?* or *how much?*

*Examples:*

1. The *green* soup was *disgusting*. [what kind?]
2. She looked at *that* boy with interest. [which one?]
3. *Five* geniuses made *several* errors. [how many? how much?]
4. The house looks *spooky*. [what kind?]

Adjectives telling *what kind* can be compared (see COMPARISON OF ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS).

Here are some FRAME TESTS for adjectives.

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ thing came near.  
(adjective)
2. The thing was very \_\_\_\_\_.  
(adjective)
3. \_\_\_\_\_ apples are needed to make a pie.  
(adjective)

See also PHRASES, A.

**adverbials**      see ADVERBS.

## adverbs

An adverb is a word used to modify a VERB, ADJECTIVE, or another adverb (see also MODIFIERS). It is one of the PARTS OF SPEECH. Most adverbs modify verbs. An adverb often answers the question *how?*, *where?*, *when?*, or *to what extent?*

*Examples:*

1. He ate *enthusiastically*. [how?]
2. She *calmly* pushed him into the pool. [how?]
3. He sank *there*. [where?]



# A

## agreement of subjects and verbs

**SUBJECTS** and **VERBS** must agree in number in all **SENTENCES**: that is, if the subject is singular, the singular form of the verb must be used; if plural, plural. (*Singular* means one only; *plural* means more than one.)

*Examples:*

1. The *pupils* all *sleep* during class.  
(plural subject) (plural verb)
2. *One* of the boys *beats* up weaklings.  
(singular subject) (singular verb)
3. *He* *doesn't* like it.  
(singular subject) (singular verb)

**NOTE:** Usually nouns add an *s* or *es* to form their plurals, while an *s* ending on a verb usually shows that it is singular.

**announcements** see **SPEECH-MAKING**.

**apostrophes** see also **FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, C**.

The apostrophe is used for two purposes.

A. The apostrophe indicates possession.

1. When the possessive noun is singular, add *'s*. (*The cat's collar is too tight*); (*the girl's dress is short*.)
2. When the possessive noun is plural and ends in *s*, add apostrophe only. (*Girls' sports deserve facilities equal to boys'*.)
3. When the possessive noun is plural and does not end in *s*, add *'s*. (*The men's, women's, and children's shouts brought the police*.)
4. If the possessive noun is singular and ends in *s*, add either *'s* or *'* only. (*Charles's tonsils were larger than Mrs. Jones's*.) Or: (*Charles' Honda was faster than Mr. Jones' tricycle*.)

**NOTE:** Except for *one's*, possessive pronouns use no apostrophe (*hers, its, ours, yours, etc.*)

B. The apostrophe is used to show that a word has

been contracted or shortened. Use an apostrophe in a contraction at the place where letters have been omitted.

1. *Music's* the medicine of a troubled mind.  
[Music is]

2. Please *don't* eat the daisies. [do not]

Other common contractions are cannot = *can't*;  
it is = *it's*; who is = *who's*; she is = *she's*; of the  
clock = *o'clock*.

**appositives** see also PHRASES, C.

An appositive is a word or phrase within a SENTENCE that follows a NOUN and gives information about it.

*Examples:*

1. This handbook, *a dull but useful volume*, should not be burned at the end of the year.
2. Fido's barking awoke Smirk, *the neighborhood grouch*.

Appositives are set off from the rest of the sentence by commas, except when they are short and when there is no pause before them.

*Example:*

The painter *Michelangelo* ate clams.

NOTE: A group of words that begins with *who* or *which* is not an appositive but a *clause*. It contains a subject and a verb; an appositive does not.

*Example:*

Sara Ogle, *who arrived late*, was spurned.  
(a clause, not an appositive)

## articles

The words *a*, *an*, and *the* are PARTS OF SPEECH called articles. They are the most frequently used ADJECTIVES. They are also called DETERMINERS.

**audience for writing** See WRITING FOR WHOM?

**auxiliary verbs** see VERBS, C.

**A**

[illegible]



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**be**      see **VERBS, B.**

**beginning, middle, and end**      see **ESSAYS, C.**

### **bibliography**

In writing **REPORTS** you will probably use books and magazines as source material. At the end of the paper you should list your sources in a *bibliography*, arranged alphabetically by each author's last name. Each entry in a bibliography should include information as to the author, title, place of publication, publisher and date of publication of your source. For magazines and newspapers, specify the title of the article you read, and if there is one, list the volume number of the publication from which this article is drawn after you write the name of the publication. While there are a number of acceptable ways of listing information in a bibliography, the following is perhaps the most common:

**book** Mailer, Norman. *The Fight*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975.

**magazine** Dubrow, Marsha. "Female Assertiveness: How a Pussycat Can Learn to Be a Panther." *New York Magazine*, July 28, 1975.

**NOTE:** Titles of books and names of magazines are underlined (italicized); titles of articles or chapters in magazines or books are enclosed in quotation marks.

# B

## book reports

Book reports have several uses: to provide a record of your reading; to share information and opinions about books with your classmates; to keep your teacher informed about your independent reading; to provide subjects for original writing based on a book but drawing on your own thoughts and experiences as you discuss its subject matter, ideas, style, plot (if any), characters, setting, strengths and weaknesses, and so forth.

A simple, very useful book report can be done on a single page of a reading notebook or on a 5 x 8 card, which can be posted or filed for sharing with classmates. Here is an example:

*Author:* Mike Littwin

*Title:* ¡Fernando!

*Publisher, etc.:* Bantam, New York, © 1981, 117 pages

*Difficulty rating:* easy

*Enjoyment rating:* quite enjoyable

*Brief summary* [25–50 words to inform prospective readers and your teacher]: Tells the life history and amazing performance of L.A. Dodgers pitcher Fernando Valenzuela. He reached the U.S. major leagues from Mexico at age twenty and even had lunch with President Reagan. Lots of facts and personal stories. Fifty pages in English, fifty pages in Spanish translation.

*My reaction* [25–50 words giving your opinion of the book and why you liked or disliked it]: I liked the factual reporting and the amazingly fast way young Fernando rose to the top. Also, it's a valuable book for Spanish-speaking readers. Somewhat brief and superficial, but fun to read.

See also BOOKS; REPORTS

## books

The world's best teaching machines are books. They are compact, convenient, durable, comparatively inexpensive, and they don't get out of order. The

American writer Jesse Lee Bennett said, "Books are the compasses and telescopes and sextants and charts . . . to help us navigate the dangerous seas of human life." Here are a few facts that will enable you to navigate the contents of books.

#### A. *The table of contents*

At the front of most nonfiction and some works of fiction there is a table of contents listing the titles of sections and chapters of the book. Reading it will give you an overview of the book, help you decide if it is one you want or need to read, and show how the various parts of the book fit into the whole.

#### B. *The index*

Nonfiction books often end with an index, which is simply an alphabetical list of topics, subjects, and names covered in the text. If you need to know whether a specific piece of information can be found in a book, or where to find it, use the index.

#### C. *Preface or introduction*

Many books open with a preface, introduction, or foreword in which the author explains the nature of the book, his purpose in writing it, and the readers for whom he thinks it will be of value. Although his judgment of the value of the book may not be entirely objective, what he says may help you benefit from the book—or it may even make you decide not to read it.

#### D. *Copyright notice*

At the very front of the book is the *title page*, which lists the title, author, and publisher of the book. On the back of this page is given the copyright date—when the book was finished and sent to the Library of Congress (for books published in the USA) for copyrighting. It will probably look like this: © 1982. Sometimes there are several dates, the latest one being that of the most recent revision, major or minor. It is often important to know when a book was written so that you can tell whether the information in it is up to date.



## B

See also **BOOK REPORTS; LIBRARIES; READING; STUDY SKILLS.**

### **brackets ([ ])**

Brackets are used in two situations.

A. Brackets indicate that your own words are inserted or substituted within a quotation.

*Example:*

Samuel Johnson wrote in 1775: "There is now less flogging in our great schools than formerly,—but then less is learned there, so that what the boys get [win] at one end they lose at the other."

B. Brackets indicate a parenthetical expression within a set of PARENTHESES.

*Example:*

The King James Version of the Bible (provided in most hotel rooms by Gideons International [see the article on page 356]) is written in the English of the seventeenth century.

**business letters**      see **LETTERS, C.**

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