

FUNDAMENTAL  
COLLEGE  
COMPOSITION



# FUNDAMENTAL COLLEGE COMPOSITION

*A Grammar and Style Guide  
(2nd Edition)*

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Fundamental College Composition:  
A Grammar and Style Guide (2nd edition)

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This book is dedicated to my family  
in the order set forth under  
the Common Law rules of consanguinity  
for distribution of intestate estates.



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## **PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION**

A preface is a personal note from an author to the reader. In this case, the preface offers a few random thoughts on the second edition of this book. Prefaces are generally beloved by both authors and readers because they are short. This makes them easy to write and reasonably painless to read. In keeping with this tradition of economy, I will write a reasonably short preface and hope that the reduced length will encourage every reader to read it.

This second edition contains nine new chapters and revises to some extent the original 12 chapters of the text. The new chapters represent materials that should have been included in the original but were not considered sufficiently “fundamental” to be part of the first edition. When I wrote the first edition of the book, I thought I understood perfectly what a good college writing text needed to include to do its job well. Similarly, when I first married, I thought I understood what a fellow needed to do to be a good husband and father. Time changes our understanding of things, and hopefully the changes are for the better. I hope this second edition demonstrates that my book-writing skills have improved significantly, just as I hope that more than four

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decades of married life have improved me as a husband and a father. My wife and children may be skeptical as to the later, and my publisher will wait to review the sales reports as to the former. Improvement is not an easy road to travel.

In any case, the book awaits your use and judgment. You will do me a great honor if you read and study it diligently, and a great kindness if you judge my efforts to improve it gently.

WILLIAM P. DEFEO

New Fairfield, CT

January, 2023

## FOREWORD

This is a book about writing. It presumes to make plain to the college level student the mysteries of good writing. It hopes to do so briefly and efficiently, but brevity and efficiency are not chums; things done quickly are not usually done well. Nevertheless, my plan is that this volume will be a notable exception to that rule. In a relatively short space, it will reveal the fundamentals of sound college composition. Writing a textbook on any subject is a challenging task because the final product needs to be instructional. Conventional books can inform or entertain; textbooks must teach. Even with the aid of a very competent instructor, good textbooks must clear a high pedagogical bar.

Writing a college level textbook about writing shoulders an additional burden. A college writing textbook must teach, but it must teach material that students often believe they already know well enough. Most college students have been writing successfully for more than a decade, and many others for much longer. A textbook that presumes to teach college level writing needs to overcome the significant obstacle of compositional complacency -the belief that our adequate skills are.... adequate, and that the need for study and improvement in the

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use of language arts is unnecessary. This “adequacy mindset” is a prodigious villain with which writing teachers must do battle.

Additionally, many troubling questions present themselves. How will the writing textbook present timelessly old material in new and interesting ways? How will the book meet its primary objective to demonstrably improve student writing? In a culture crowded with sound bites, e-mailing, text-messaging, and hand-held devices that intuit what a writer thinks even before the keys are touched, how can a conventional book ever succeed? How does any book or any teacher seriously propose to convince 21<sup>st</sup> century students accustomed to our high-speed culture that they need to slow down? And when the message is delivered – the message that good writing demands slow, deliberate, often painful effort – how can a teacher reasonably expect a student to respond affirmatively? What possible persuasions can the author of a writing textbook use to win the hearts and minds of modern, speed-conscious learners when those learners discover that writing one well-constructed paragraph may often demand the better part of an hour of writing and revision?

These have always been difficult questions. They become even more difficult in a digital, and perhaps soon to be a quantum, computing age where delivering a message quickly has become more important than constructing a message that is clear, precise, and unambiguous.

Whatever the answers to these questions may be – and specific answers to them will be offered in different parts of the text – certain truths remain inviolate; good writing has value, people capable of producing good writing are increasingly scarce, and scarcity makes good writers very valuable commodities.

Students who apply themselves to learning the skills necessary to become good writers will flourish in every professional and many non-professional fields. This is a strong argument in favor of learning to write well. Of course, as Shakespeare explained, “If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches...” (The Merchant of Venice, I, ii, 12-13). Students may know that learning to write well is a good thing to do, but the mere knowing does not get the doing done.

At the beginning of any academic pursuit, honesty and truth are best. Therefore let us honestly acknowledge a hard truth; reading a college textbook is almost always an exercise in tedium. For one reason it is an imposed rather than a voluntary labor. For another, reading a textbook usually draws the reader into still further imposed, involuntary labors. Understanding terse definitions, digesting entangled concepts, and completing programmed writing exercises are just some of the many irritating elements of a college writing text. There is no point in trying to deceive ourselves. We know in our heart of hearts that squaring our shoulders to academic difficulty and working our way through it are the only true paths to learning.

This book will teach writing to those who confront and overcome that difficulty by reading and studying the text. Without careful reading and determined study, this book will fail and the promise of learning it holds for the student will be jealously and appropriately withheld. There is no substitute for hard work. Successful athletes and accomplished musicians and artists know this well; they are not born, they are made. The endless repetitive drills that painfully produce the slowly emerging skills must be undertaken with determination and as much

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good cheer as possible. An abundance of natural talent is a very fine thing, but it is no substitute for focused, deliberate, unrelenting labor. After a particularly brilliant performance, a famed international American-born pianist was approached by a fan who adoringly said, “I would give everything in my life to play the piano the way you do.” Without the slightest hesitation, the artist replied, “I did.”

Students may rest assured I will invest the time and energy to make the text as effective as my skills allow. However, I must seek assurance from each student reader that they will invest their time and energy and allow the book to give them all it has to offer.

At the end of the book I will provide an Afterword that will evaluate how closely I believe the book has come to meeting its intention to teach writing. However, a good part of our human nature is our self-interest and conceit, and so I strongly suspect the Afterword will reveal that my book has been wonderfully successful. Nevertheless, the only true evaluation of a book that teaches is a reader that learns, and so the reader’s success and the author’s success are interdependent. It appears we both have our work to do. Education may well be a labor of love, but it is labor nonetheless, and very shortly you and I will be left to do our work.

I will begin my labor by thanking my wife for helping me to maintain the presence of mind I will need to complete this text. Her cool patience and iron strength are frightening things, yet they have supported and sustained me in all I have done. I hope she will continue her vigilance through completion of this volume. If she does not, I will make particular note of it in the Afterword.

Danbury, Connecticut

WPD 2017

## **A NOTE ON CHAPTER NUTSHELLS AND CHAPTER EXERCISES**

At the end of each chapter the student will see two concluding elements: a “chapter nutshell” and a “chapter exercise.” They are provided to assist understanding and application of each chapter’s materials.

The nutshell will attempt to reduce each chapter’s important points to a few concise sentences. Nutshells are not provided as alternatives to reading and understanding the chapters. Rather, they are in the nature of study aides that can help students quickly refresh their recollection of the major chapter elements. If the nutshells succeed in jogging student memory and bringing back into focus chapter details, they will fulfill their primary objective.

A chapter exercise will follow each of the nutshells. Each exercise is brief and clearly explained. The exercise will direct the student to first access and then carefully read a short sample of world-class writing from an author who has stood the test of time. Once the sample has been read and understood, the student will be prompted to compose a brief essay not to exceed one hundred words that follows the instruction of the particular prompt.

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These exercises are specifically designed to stretch the student's reading comprehension and writing skills to the uttermost. They will also provide the course instructor with a valid assessment tool. The reading samples often contain dense, complex ideas expressed in varying writing styles that will challenge most college level readers. Some students may struggle to understand the sample writings, but struggle that promises illumination is always worth the burden. Learning to improve writing skills is a vigorous undertaking. The successful student will not shrink from the prospect of intellectual struggle, but approach it with dogged determination.

Permit me to run contrary to much modern pedagogy and modestly make the following suggestion. As you read the selections assigned in the chapter exercises you may very possibly come across a few lines or sentences that resonate in your heart or mind. Memorize them! With a very little effort, you will have a treasure in your pocket for a lifetime. Today memorization is not held in high educational esteem. It is considered too structured and too disciplined. On the contrary, structure and discipline have never been enemies of learning.



## CHAPTER ONE

# WHAT IS GRAMMAR?

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## Introduction

A simple definition is always a good place to start when trying to explain a complicated idea, and English grammar is certainly a complicated idea. The simple definition is as follows: *English grammar is an acknowledged set of rules that provide for the clear expression of the English language.* Like most simple definitions, this one begs many questions, such as what exactly does “acknowledged” mean? Who made these so-called “rules?” What makes certain combinations of words “clear?” Are “expressions” formal written language only? – what about e-mails,

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texts messages, tweets, voice mails, spoken words, song lyrics, and poetry? Finally, what precisely is this thing we call “language?”

If you were counting, you may have noticed that there are five questions asked in the paragraph above. As a teacher, I am obliged to address every question I pose, so let us take a look at each of the five questions noted.

When grammar rules are referred to as rules that are “acknowledged,” it means that many generations of deep-thinking people over several hundreds of years agree that using words in certain ways works well. These “certain ways” are memorialized by being used over and over again down through the years, then written down in grammar books as rules because they are conventions that get the job of writing done. “Acknowledged” is just a fancy word that means lots of people over long periods of time have all noticed that doing things a certain way is good. Acknowledgment does not prove that a thing is good, but it does present a very strong argument that it is. So, when we claim that grammar rules are “acknowledged,” we are paying them a very high compliment.

The answer to the question “who made these...rules” may be surprising. The most complete answer is that *you* made the rules! Readers, and the cognitive skills they bring to the written page of every sentence, paragraph, chapter, and book they read, conclusively determine what works best. Only the best working formulations of word-combining survive and become rules for writers to follow. How well we understand what we read is the basis for writers to adjust their writing and revise it into a form that readers’ minds can best absorb. In small and subtle ways, these formulations shift and evolve over the long centuries that a

language develops, but it is always the reader (or the listener) that controls the changes and “makes” the rules. When a large enough sample of writer/speakers discovers that a certain way of combining words produces the greatest level of reader clarity, the rule is born. Of course, these rules are not made hastily. Rather, they form slowly as generations of writers and readers come and go. You and I cannot change grammar rules on a whim – they are born in a very slow process, and once made, they are stubbornly intractable things.

The third question is “what makes certain combinations of words clear?” Clarity can be an uncomfortably subjective word, but in the world of writing it has some reassuring objectivity. Clear writing is the combining of words in ways that makes the decoding and assimilation of them into the intended thoughts of the writer an uncomplicated process. Put another way, clarity in language occurs when the writer/speaker’s ideas are communicated to a reader/listener without misunderstanding or ambiguity. You may have just read the foregoing sentences and thought to yourself, “Professor, your writing here has just failed your own ‘clarity test.’” I apologize for whatever my own writing shortcomings are, and for what trouble they may cause my readers, but we must all live with our limitations. On the other hand, when a writer is trying to communicate a complex idea, he or she is “up against it.” Forgive me, but in spite of being very “clear,” not every reader is capable of absorbing every writer’s ideas. I love reading the ancient philosophers like Plato and Socrates, but modern philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus are way beyond me. When a subject is dense, or the process being explained is complex, writing about it is especially challenging,

and reading that writing is a struggle. In any case, as writers and readers, we do our best. On a simpler level – and as I explain in more detail later in the book – writing is “clear” when the human mind is able to “get its arms around” a written idea easily. On a basic structural level, this embracing of ideas seems to happen most easily when the subject of the idea is the first element presented in a sentence. When that subject is followed by a word or phrase that impacts or affects the subject, that “subject – followed by a subject-impacting word/phrase,” seems to be the best formula for a reader’s understanding of the written expression of a complete thought. Therefore, the “active voice” sentence which employs this “subject followed by impact word” has developed as a modern “rule.” Shakespeare was fond of placing the “impact word” at the very beginning or the very end of the sentence. This style of word placement is unusual for 21<sup>st</sup> Century readers, and so we struggle a bit with Shakespearean writing. He was not trying to make it difficult for us; it was simply the style of clear English writing for the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Clarity in writing is a moving target.

The term “expressions” contained in the fourth of our original five questions, is an inclusive, not an exclusive, term. Every example of written and spoken communication is contained in the large basket of language labeled “expressions,” and the rules of grammar apply to all of them. Formal writing, such as the writing a student will produce for a research paper, should comply strictly with the rules of grammar. This “strict compliance” is important because student term-paper writing is research-based, and the purpose of research is the revelation of truth. The two most important characteristics of such writing is its reliability and

credibility. To expose the reader of a research document to poor, weak, or unconventional grammar compromises these two characteristics. Research writing must be grammatically precise. However, other writing forms can be less rigid. When we write either informally or creatively, grammar standards and rules can be relaxed. Written expressions such as e-mails, texts, and tweets are usually dashed off quickly. When we write quickly, clarity is almost always compromised, but like it or not, some writing occasions demand speed. The meaning of a hastily composed text message sent off in a rush may be very clear to the message sender, but often the message receiver will stare at the words in utter confusion. These situations are common and can be readily remedied by a follow-up message, but they demonstrate how in writing, speed and clarity work at cross purposes. Nevertheless, hurried (and harried) electronic expressions, along with a large variety of creative writing styles, can bend and even break certain grammar rules. These bends and breaks, however, can only be done to a limited extent. Once the grammar bar is lowered to the point that a reasonably skilled reader is disjoined from the writer's message, the writing fails in its primary objective which is to convey an idea. When expression of a writer's idea is blurred or indistinguishable because grammar rules have been relaxed too far or utterly abandoned, understanding grinds to a halt.

The final question, "what is language," is the most essential and elemental of the five, and the most difficult to address. The difficulty comes from our having taken language for granted for so long. We use the magic of language so instinctively, so unconsciously, that we seldom appreciate how precious and charming a gift it is. Far back in our history as a species, language

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was only the sounds and gestures we made to each other as signals. A shout signaled danger; a groan, pain; a laugh, joy; a growl, aggression, and so on. As human life slowly became more complex, our more complicated circumstances gave rise to the need for a wider variety of signals, and our sounds and gestures became more specialized. At some point, one of our ancestors wanted to make certain sounds for a certain someone to hear who was out of earshot. How could they signal them if they could not use their voice? It was then that the idea of drawing symbols to represent the sounds first occurred, and the alphabet was born. This was no simple matter. Lots of sounds needed lots of symbols and every symbol needed to look different from every other symbol so that no one symbol was confused for another. Alphabets in several different languages came into existence thousands of years ago, and our English alphabet is no exception. Without our 26 highly distinguishable symbols or “letters,” our history, our poetry, our song, and our science would never have been written and would therefore not exist – not any of it. Our language skills seem like such simple things, and they are. Simply put, language is little more than using sounds and symbols as signals. Thankfully, the signals, and our means to express them, have moved well beyond “I am hot,” “I am cold,” and “I am hungry.”

Grammar is the science behind human signaling. Like language itself, grammar has developed slowly over centuries, and it is not done developing by a long shot. Much of our understanding of it is innate. Essentially, we learned it when we learned to speak, but understanding it fully requires study. Our “grammar school” educations were so named because grammar was the original “science,” and a working knowledge of it was

considered a primary goal of human understanding. The “Three R’s” (Reading, Riting, and Rithmatic) all require a working knowledge of grammar; it is the foundation of both of the first two “R’s,” and the third “R” could never be explained clearly without it. When thought of in these terms, room for grammatical humility is scarce. Grammar – the science of language – is responsible for the totality of human knowledge and understanding. Without the rules of grammar, human communication would be a hopeless struggle of competing conflicting signals, and humankind would barely ever have emerged from the darkness of chaos.

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## **Chapter One in a Nutshell**

Grammar is the original science. It began as a simple system of rules for human communication and has become complex along with us as we have become complex. Today, grammar is the disregarded step-child of the sciences. Strangely enough, all the new sciences – each and every one of them – could never have developed if the grammatical complexities of our language had not developed first. All that we know and have been able to learn from others has followed in the steady wake of language and its scientific principles known as “grammar.”

## **Chapter One Exercise**

Choose a song you know that has lyrics that speak to you in a special way. Remove the musical accompaniment and look carefully at the words only. In a paragraph of not more than 100 words try to explain how the lyrics of the song create that special lyrical message for you. The task is not to explain why the lyrics are special, but how the words make the lyrics special for you.



## CHAPTER TWO

# WHY STUDY GRAMMAR?

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## Introduction

All college students possess a familiarity with the elements of language arts. This familiarity ranges from a very mild, passing acquaintance at one end, to a deep and abiding love of language at the other. In between these extremes lie a myriad of degrees. The purpose of this book is to draw all students closer to that love of the art of language – a love that should be stronger than their love of music, of art, of literature, of science, of mathematics, or even of sweet philosophy. That may seem far too ambitious a purpose for a book of grammar, but it is not. Language art is the seed and soil of all thought and all learning. It is the parent art of all consequent