

**FUNDAMENTAL  
COLLEGE  
COMPOSITION**



# FUNDAMENTAL COLLEGE COMPOSITION

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## Fundamental College Composition

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



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## 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 adequate writing skills are....adequate, and that improvement in the

use of language arts is unnecessary. This “adequacy mindset” is a prodigious villain with which a writing text author 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 fast-lane living 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 my 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). The student 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, not 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 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**

**THE LANGUAGE STUDY ARGUMENT**

Chapter One Nutshell .....21  
Chapter One Exercise .....21

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 arts and deserves nothing less than the devoted, unconditional love we reserve for a beloved parent, for without language we remain silent, untutored children. We recall nothing, calculate nothing, and communicate nothing. Without language there is

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neither song nor science. Without language we become prisoners of our short-term memories, condemned to an isolation of knowing only what our senses tell us of the world at present. Even romantic love, with all its force and power, pales in the absence of language. Without language, romantic love becomes little more than coarse colorless biology.

Despite its name, the study of “language arts” contains many unartistic sub-structures. These include grammar, syntax, rhetoric, vocabulary, logic, and the various mechanical conventions of Standard Written English such as punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, agreement, paragraphing and style. These language elements are seldom the chosen valentines of students. Nevertheless, they are unarguably the building blocks of sound composition. When we possess them, we have what we need to be good writers. They represent a body of knowledge without which improvement in writing is simply not possible. Natural ability and having “a good ear” for language may go far in helping to develop good writing skills, but taking the full tour and marveling at the buttresses and arches that support the grand architecture of good writing is an academic pursuit well worth the time.

And acquiring this body of knowledge will yield results far beyond improved writing. Good writers are almost always good speakers. Few of us will earn our bread as professional writers, but everyone can benefit from speaking well. The benefits of improved expression are practical things. Earning potential invariably increases for those who can speak well, who can explain what is complex, who can take dense detailed information and communicate it to others clearly and simply.

Written and spoken words become rich and expressive when language arts become a regular part of our educational diet. Without an appreciation for the structures that underlie language – without some level of understanding their mysteries – our writing and speech are shallow, diluted, and flavorless. Appreciate them and understand them, and you may take your reserved seat at the great feast of language.

Few authors have written about what writing is as well as Thomas Hobbes. As a philosopher, he ignores the frivolous and insubstantial and goes directly to the “pith and marrow.” Reproduced below (with its original spellings and punctuation) is an excerpt from the introduction to the fourth chapter of Hobbes’ book entitled *The Leviathan*.

The invention of *Printing*, though ingenious, compared with the invention of *Letters*, is no great matter. But who was the first that found the use of Letters, is not known. He that first brought them into *Greece*, men say was *Cadmus*, the sonne of *Agenor*, King of *Phaenicia*. A profitable invention for the continuing the memory of time past, and the conjunction of mankind, dispersed into so many, and distant regions of the Earth; and with all difficult, as proceeding from a watchful observation of the divers motions of the Tongue, Palat, Lips, and other organs of Speech; whereby to make as many differences of characters, to remember them. But the most noble and profitable invention of all other, was that of SPEECH, consisting of *Names* or *Appellations*, and their Connection. whereby men register their Thoughts; recall them when they are past; and also declare them one to another for

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mutuall utility and conversation; without which, there had been amongst men, neither Common-wealth, nor Society, nor Contract, nor Peace, no more than amongst Lyons, Bears and Wolves. (Hobbes, *Leviathan*)

This is a shining, albeit complex, example of our very own English language written circa 1630. You may imagine that the spell-check and grammar-check functions of my computer were given a strenuous workout when I entered this quotation. Yes, some of the words and spellings may be unfamiliar, but the idea is a consummate illumination: Speech, and its child, “Letters” (writing) utterly and particularly distinguish our species. Language arts have made possible all that is noble in us.

Perhaps you have never seriously applied yourself to the study of language arts. The work you might have done in grade school or high school may have been avoided. The subject may have never been systematically presented, or if it was, it may not have been aggressively or appropriately taught. In any event, this volume calls you to embrace the subject now.

As an older, more mature learner you will absorb and retain the challenging content more easily. The rewards of your study will be tangible, visible things, such as improved writing, precise speech, and persuasive communication. Your investment of time and study will pay dividends that younger students do not recognize and cannot appreciate – better grades, better jobs, and expanding career opportunities. These are sweeping claims, but language study has the temerity to

make them, and a long, bold history that proves they can be attained by those who are resolved.

This volume is not a complete study of language art. It is admittedly sprinkled with the shortcomings of its author. Nevertheless, it will present the materials necessary for the conscientious student to secure a solid foundation for improving both academic and work-place writing. It will not presume too much student knowledge, but will presume some. Lengthy, repetitive drills and exercises have been replaced by specialized writing prompts that offer students opportunities to frame their developing skills. These prompts will showcase short, excerpted portions of selected exemplary writing samples from a broad range of academic sources. Students will be asked to use their skill to read, analyze, and finally interpret in their own words their understanding of the excerpt. In the author's humble opinion, focused, idea-driven writing exercises trump repetitive sentence-correcting writing drills every time.

One final point is worth special notice. Students may struggle with some of the vocabulary in this volume. The author does not apologize for selecting fancy challenging words. They are the words that well-read, college level students should either be familiar with or be exposed to without further delay. In many cases, the context of the sentence will help readers divine the meanings of these words. In any case, an author's glossary is provided at the end of the book as a quick, relatively painless reference guide.

Mastery of rules and sharpened memory remain cornerstones of language proficiency. This book is no "genie's lamp." A strenuous rub of the cover will summon forth nothing. It is a book

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of complex, interwoven rules. Unraveling and digesting them demands a patient and careful application of the mind. Anything less will not yield a satisfactory result. And now that the book's groundwork has been laid and the argument for conscientious study is made, we can launch into the studies themselves.

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## Chapter One Nutshell

Human language is composed of multiple layers of speech, thought, and tactile skill. Learning to write well demands a significant investment of time. There are many “short-cuts” available to writing students. Unfortunately none of them work. Read much and write often.

## Chapter One Exercise

Carefully re-read the quotation from Thomas Hobbes’ philosophical treatise, *The Leviathan* provided in this chapter. Hobbes shares his thoughts with us about three elements of language, namely, printing, speech, and writing. In a paragraph of not more than 100 words, explain precisely what Hobbes is saying about those three elements. If his meaning is not clear to you, re-read the excerpt slowly and aloud several times. Do not use any direct quotation or paraphrase from any source.



## CHAPTER TWO

# PARTS OF SPEECH

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## Introduction

The study of human language is filled with irony. In a relatively short time after we are born, we learn how to use the sounds of

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words to our advantage and also learn how to listen and decipher the intentions behind the sounds of words used by others. All this learning happens of its own accord. We do not study language to become accomplished in those early years. A child's communication skills are unlearned and untutored. A bit later, school begins. We memorize our alphabet, along with the sounds of our native vowels and consonants, and begin a journey into the science of language. It is not too long after this – perhaps on the eve of an impending English test – that we are struck by the irony. A voice in us says stubbornly, “I know how to talk and I understand when others talk to me, so what is all this fuss about spelling, writing and these dreadful parts of speech?”

As the years pass we grudgingly realize that talking and listening are not enough. It is a simple matter of memory. There are just too many things we think, say, and hear to keep track of. If we don't record them somehow they'll be lost and we will have to think them or say them or hear them all over again. We know each of the ten items we need to buy at the store, but by the time our mind move further toward the end of the list, we may not recall the items at the beginning. Using a stylus to make marks or symbols that represent the sounds of the items we want to buy is a great help. It keeps us from having to stop in the store aisle and bring to mind every item we want from memory. Somewhere far back in our ancestral past, our forbearers realized that making marks that bring to mind the sounds we learned as children, made remembering easier. Writing was born, and language art began. Parts of speech represent the first of many doors in the sprawling mansion of language art. They begin the atomistic deconstruction of this mammoth creature that Hobbes refers to as “Letters” and

that we call language. The “door” and “creature” metaphors are poetic, but they may not shed sufficient light. Perhaps another will do. If language is science, as in many aspects it is, then the parts of speech are a shortened version of the periodic table of elements. From them and from the combinations of them, language emerges. The intricacies of the sounds and the symbols we use to understand ourselves, others, and the world, become sensible through studying and knowing the parts of speech. If we dismiss them, what we write, what we say, and what we understand from what we read, will remain forever elementary.

The name we have given them is misleading. Calling them “parts of speech” is an insult to the much broader functions they serve. They are as much parts of writing, listening, and reading, as parts of speaking. Human language is a beautifully intricate and complex system. One of the many purposes language serves is communication – itself a rich, varied and distinctly human undertaking. It has been claimed that certain animal species can send and receive very limited, very basic message units to each other. However, to suggest that such non-human messaging is akin to human language is little more than anthropomorphic reverie. It is hardly a high commendation of the animal kingdom and it is a particularly resounding insult to the infinitely complex elements of human language. Parts of speech are the opening lessons of virtually every language arts textbooks, and with good reason. They specify what function particular sounds accomplish when several sounds are strung together to complete a thought (a sentence).

Even without using the names of the parts of speech, we know and can appreciate the function that particular words serve in a