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The Student's Guide to Writing

Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling

John Peck and Martin Coyle

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Contents

About this book	vi
Part One: Writing Correctly	1
1 Writing a sentence	3
2 Punctuation	20
3 Spelling	37
Part Two: Writing Confidently	51
4 The well-crafted sentence	53
5 Polished punctuation	67
6 Spelling and usage	81
Part Three: Writing with Style	95
7 Writing an essay	97
8 Punctuation and presentation	110
9 The right word	123
A note on grammar	137
Twenty to remember	141

About this Book

This book tackles the problem of writing – how to do it, how to get things right and how to avoid the kind of simple errors that can lose marks in an essay or examination. The audience we are primarily writing for is students: we are concerned with the question of how each and every student, and especially the university student, can become a better writer. The advice the book contains, however, should prove useful to anyone who has to write on a regular basis, be it at school, in college, at work or merely on a social basis. We are concerned to help all students to communicate better and to gain confidence in their writing abilities.

Our experience is that most books about how to write don't actually help that much. Where most of them go wrong is that they offer a comprehensive guide to grammar, usually overwhelming the reader with information. They don't really confront the problem that the difficulty most people have is how to write effective and coherent sentences; they don't really consider that points about grammar or punctuation only make sense in the context of the need to write. The principle we have adopted in this book, therefore, is that knowing the definition of grammatical terms is far less important than being able to write clearly. The book does contain points about grammar, but these are secondary to the stress we put on the importance of learning how to write.

We have, consequently, deliberately limited the advice we offer to three key areas: how to write a sentence, how to punctuate and how to use words correctly (an area that includes spelling). It may be that you are particularly concerned about just one of these areas and will want to focus on the chapters dealing with that; for example, you may want to concentrate specifically on the chapters on sentences and essay-writing (chapters 1, 4 and 7), or on punctuation (chapters 2, 5 and 8), or on spelling (chapters 3, 6 and 9). It is, however, important to see how these three aspects of writing go together and complement one another: you cannot expect to write well if you neglect spelling or punctuation. For this reason we decided against dividing the book into three separate writing, punctuation and spelling

sections, and have instead put the emphasis on how to move from writing correctly to how to write with confidence, and then how to write with style. Inevitably along the way there are things to be learnt – we have included lists of commonly misspelt words and words frequently confused – but we have tried to put these into a context where they will be seen as necessary skills.

If you can master the basic skills of how to write a sentence, punctuate it and present it accurately, there is no limit to how good a writer you can become. But you must make sure that you are in total command of these basic – and essential – skills. There is, however, as we have suggested above, a further dimension to writing. Basic correctness is vital, but most of us also want to sound intelligent, mature, sophisticated, even witty, when we write. We deal with such matters as the book progresses. Everything starts, though, with your ability to write a grammatical sentence, which is where the first chapter starts.

We ought to admit that there are limitations to this book that we are aware of. Neither of us pretends to be expert on modern linguistics or anything other than very basic grammar. If you are interested in these topics, then you need to consult other books recommended by your teachers. The field of language studies is constantly changing just as language itself is constantly being changed by speakers and writers. Some of the advice we offer, therefore, may strike a number of people as old-fashioned or illiberal, but we take the view that what students need to know is how to employ and make sense of the established conventions of formal writing. Once they know these, they have access to those areas of life where the written word is extremely powerful, areas such as the law, publishing and government. They can also then choose whether or not to break the traditional ‘rules’; for example, by starting sentences with ‘And’ or ‘But’. Not to know the conventions, however prescriptive these may seem, leaves students in the dark.

We are, then, interested in helping students to gain access to the shared conventions of formal, standard English. Although we talk about what is ‘correct’ or ‘right’, our intention is to show students how to reproduce those conventions which matter because they lead both to education and employment. They matter, that is, precisely because they are the conventions of those who make decisions and influence the lives of the rest of us. They are, in a sense, as basic as knowing not to turn up to an interview with dirty shoes and torn clothes. They are not absolute conventions given by God. They are, however, different from the conventions that operate in speech or in creative writing or in many other forms of communication.

They are different, but not better. We are not seeking in this book to denigrate other forms of writing or speech or dialects or accents. Our concern is with what is appropriate to formal writing.

Our own style is deliberately informal, often breaking some of the 'rules' we mention. Part of the reason for this lies in the problem of how to make a book about spelling, punctuation and grammar both relevant and interesting. We have tried to direct the book towards the problems we have come across and to recommend solutions which we think have helped our students. We do not expect everyone to agree with the advice we offer, and, indeed, we are extremely grateful to those readers of the draft of the book who challenged and chastised us about some of the points we make. There are, we know, still areas of the text that they will not approve of, but the real test of the book will be whether students find it useful in solving their writing problems. In this context, we are extremely grateful to the following students at Cardiff University who read and commented upon the typescript of this book: Abigail Ash, Amanda Corbett, Rachel Douglass, Rhiannon Leyshon, Sophie Morrison, Kesner Ridge, Johanna Taylor and Julie Theivendran.

As we have indicated above, the structure of the book is unusual in that we deal with a limited number of topics and then circle back to them to add a little more detail. In some cases we repeat a point from an earlier chapter in order to ensure it is not forgotten. We hope that this structure enables readers to feel they are making progress and that chapters do not add too much in the way of another layer of new information or points to be grasped. We have, for the most part, excluded exercises and activities in the book: reading the book is itself a kind of exercise, where we ask you to recall a point or to move forward having absorbed previous chapters. We have, though, included at the end a note on grammar and a brief summary of twenty key points. Our primary aim, however, is to encourage you to take a fresh and considered look at how you write.

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