T O   T H E   R E A D E R

We wrote the first version of this book in 1996. Fifteen years later, revisiting it to refresh it, we find our belief in it refreshed as well. We think it accomplishes its particular goals better than any other book we know.   These goals are to give its intended readers – mainly college students – a step-by-step introduction to English sentence structure from its basic elements to its most complex forms and to teach these readers how to use this knowledge to strengthen their writing. The book even accomplishes a goal we did not originally have for it; many students have told us that the course built around this book has strengthened their reading comprehension, too.

Almost anybody who has written in English knows that the language gives us different ways of phrasing things. Say that you are a zoology student writing a paper about the mating behavior of gorillas in the wild. Here are three ways of saying roughly the same thing:

- The male, demonstrating his interest, beats his chest. The female, indicating her acquiescence, remains motionless.

- The male beats his chest to demonstrate his interest, while the female remains motionless to indicate her acquiescence.

- The male's beating his chest demonstrates interest; the female's remaining motionless indicates acquiescence.

Practiced writers delight in such choices. They know that each choice results in a slightly different emphasis, rhythm, or effect; they also know that one sentence may fit better than another with the sentences that come before and after it in a paragraph. They are like painters who know that the primary colors on their palette can be combined into hundreds of different shades from which they can choose just the right ones for their purpose.

One powerful theory maintains that sentences, too, result from combinations -- performed by the incredible language computers we all have in our brains. Since you began to speak, your computer has produced an astonishing number of intricate word and sentence combinations. When you began to write, this number became even greater.

Most people who use real computers admit that they are acquainted with only a fraction of their computers' huge capabilities. Many of us learn just the basic operations we need for our purposes, feeling we lack the time or the competence to explore what a computer can do. Sometimes a person comes along who has studied computers a bit more and can show us some simple operation that, had we known about it earlier, could have helped us use the computer much more efficiently or effectively.

Linguists study the language we produce, trying to accurately describe how it works. Their descriptions include what we call the grammar of the language. For many people, the word

"grammar" evokes fear or revulsion. Such people may associate it with the conventions of correct language use, that is, social decisions about what is right and wrong. These conventions make it seem better to say *John isn't* instead of *John ain't*, *John likes* instead of *John like*, *themselves* instead of *theirselves,* and *my friend and I are going* instead of *me and my friend are going*. Almost everybody runs afoul of one of these conventions or another, and we are embarrassed to be caught in mistakes. This may explain why some people so dislike grammar. The focus of this book is not on these conventions; we point to them only in passing.

The grammar we are interested in is altogether more exciting as well as more helpful. Linguists don't make up the laws of this grammar; the laws are created by the language-structuring system in our brains, and because we don't yet fully understand this system, we must rely on deduction to figure out what is happening in a language. For that reason, not everyone agrees on all points of the description. You will notice that at various places in this book, we tell you that there is not complete agreement on how to describe something that happens in English.

The part of grammar that deals with how we structure sentences is called "syntax," and you will read more about it in the introduction to Part 1. Syntax uses terms that also evoke fear and revulsion in some people. In discussing the gorilla sentences above, for instance, grammarians would mention things like participles, gerunds, adverb clauses, and compound elements.

We hope to show you that these are names of sentence building blocks that are rather easy to learn and very useful to know. Most of these building blocks you use already. This book will give you more conscious understanding of how they are made, how they work, and when, how, and why to use them. It will give you lots of practice with them, none of it rote or fill-in-the-blanks. Consciously practicing them will make them more available in your menu of what you can do with writing.

So this is a book about what you can do, not what you can't do, in English. You will not find much in here about errors. Instead, you will find a lot about structures and strategies that can make your writing strong, clear, and effective. In the course of practicing these structures, you will both analyze and create scores of correct, well-formed sentences. We think this is a lot more useful than fixing incorrect sentences, and it certainly gives more pleasure. It is the kind of pleasure that successful writers enjoy as they explore the possibilities of our language, and we hope such pleasure will continue to be yours long after you are finished with this book.