

How Grammar Works

A Self-Teaching Guide

Second Edition

Patricia Osborn



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Introduction to Revised Edition

This book is dedicated to helping you attain a firm grasp of the fundamental system of grammar that powers the English language. With such an understanding, you'll find it easier to make the right choices when you speak and write because you'll know what is considered correct and, most important of all, you'll know why.

Grammar is much more than a collection of rules. It's a complete system that functions as a whole and on many levels. *How Grammar Works* takes you through it step by step. It's based on the belief that the subject of grammar should not be rule-bound, humorless business, but approached for what it is: a natural and necessary means toward the goal of using language more advantageously.

In this new edition, you'll find more practice exercises to give you more opportunity to check your understanding of the essential elements of grammar and usage as you go along.

Although grammar is basically a description of how a language works, a person's manner of speaking and writing does matter. Fair or not, you're often judged not only by what you know and do, but by how well you express yourself. Because this is so, this latest edition includes a helpful new chapter, "Making the Right Choices," that explains how to make grammar work for you.

How Grammar Works also highlights the connection of grammar to both writing and reading. It lets you get a feel of good writing and grammar in action, via excerpts from works by world-famous authors from Mark Twain to Toni Morrison. It also stresses how a knowledge of grammar can help you become a better reader.

It's hard to fix something unless you know how it works, and this edition of *How Grammar Works*, like the first, is written to give you the tools that you need speak, write, and read more effectively.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to guide you step by step through the basics of English grammar. Part I will help you learn to strip a sentence down to its essentials to discover the underlying principles of its grammar. As you work with examples, you will become familiar with the important relationship among the words at work in every sentence that we speak and write.

The opening chapters of Part I progress from the simple to the complex, yet they present fundamentals of grammar that should become even clearer if you review them after finishing the entire section.

Part II takes the concepts that you have mastered and builds from this groundwork. As you work in these chapters, maintain the habit of identifying the key elements of every sentence, a basic skill that gains in importance as sentences become more involved and complex.

You will find three types of exercises in this guide. One is a clear, direct reinforcement of the concept just presented and lets you check your mastery of it. Space is provided for your responses, and correct answers follow so that you can quickly check your work. If you have trouble with one of these exercises, reread the section that precedes it and try again.

The second type of exercise includes excerpts from works of literary merit, chosen to give you practice working with selections from novels, short stories, and nonfiction. You should not expect 100 percent accuracy from yourself with these. Their purpose is to help you become more aware of grammar and the value of its application to material encountered outside of a textbook setting.

The third type of exercise is the self-test that ends most chapters. If you have difficulty with a self-test, reread the points that are unclear, and try again. Don't continue until you have a firm grasp of a chapter's

contents, because each new chapter builds on the information in previous ones.

In working with this guide, concentrate on the work that words actually do in sentences, not on grammatical terms and definitions. Grammar goes beyond rules and definitions. It is the study of the system that powers one of our most useful and often-used inventions—language. Understanding grammar can put you more in control of your language and enable you to speak, write, and even read more effectively.

The second half of *How Grammar Works* reveals how the various parts of an English sentence—words, phrases, and clauses—combine and relate in an infinite number of ways. As you go through the exercises, keep in mind the basic concepts learned in the beginning chapters. This understanding will help you use the system of grammar to its best advantage.

Part II also contains a section on usage that will serve as a guideline to making the right choice between words that are often confused and misused. After you have completed the exercises, you will know the answers to questions about correct usage and ways to handle your language more confidently.

This book has been written in the belief that studying grammar will prove both helpful and interesting as you gain increased awareness of the endless possibilities of the English language and the superbly direct system of word order generating its power.

The goal is to make you feel comfortable with grammar and the way words work. It is hoped that *How Grammar Works* will provide the foundation you need to put grammar successfully to work for you.

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PART

I

THE ESSENTIALS OF LANGUAGE

1

What Is Grammar, Anyway?

Early people invented language, just as human beings have had to invent all of our other tools, from the simple stone axe to the latest technology. Almost all inventions are attempts to improve our quality of life, and language is no different. As the world becomes more complex, the tool of language adapts and changes with it.

No one questions the importance of language. It's very different with grammar.

Grammar is not merely a set of rules to memorize and follow so that you can speak correctly and write better. Grammar is really an analysis of language. Like a technical manual, a guide to English grammar goes beyond the surface to show you the essential parts of our language, how they relate to one another, and how they fit together into sentences. Just as knowledge about the operation of one combustion engine illustrates the principle behind all combustion engines, so a study of grammar teaches you the basic construction of all sentences. Even as they grow more complicated, they still operate on the same principle.

Using language is like driving a car. When you drive, you think about the road, the traffic, and your destination. As you drive along, you don't have to remind your hands to steer or your foot to press the proper pedal. If you did, you'd freeze at the steering wheel. There is too much going on at once.

To a driver, operating a car becomes automatic. It is much the same with language. When you talk, you don't think in terms of grammar. You think about ideas, about what you want to say. Your mind is not on the process but on the goal you want to reach with your words.

You can be a good driver without being able to name the parts of an engine and explain how they work, but knowledge of a car's mechanical system helps you judge its performance and anticipate its response. An engineer can diagram the mechanical system of an automobile to show its parts and their relationship to one another. (See Figure 1-1.)

FIGURE 1-1

FIGURE 1-2

In the same way, a grammatical diagram shows the parts of a sentence and their relationship to each other. (See Figure 1-2.) Both diagrams serve a similar purpose. When you check the diagram of a sentence, you discover the relationship of its parts, and their function becomes clearer.

Understanding the system that makes English work—its grammar—can help you spot and label problems in your speech and writing, then learn to eliminate them.

A study of grammar provides an inside understanding of language. You learn what the parts of speech are designed to do and why. This discovery enables you to cut through to the core words of a sentence and thus become a more effective reader.

In this way, knowledge of grammar gives you greater control of your language when you read, speak, and write.