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Introduction

Writing matters. You probably agree with this sentiment or might be persuaded to, given that you have picked up this extravagantly titled book and have read its first thirty words.

What am I striving for in this slim volume? I want to guide you toward what I'm calling *stellar English*—an out-of-this-world-effective grammar and usage, something that ChatGPT might only dimly imagine but never replicate in its lifeless, electronic siliconsciousness. You, though, as a living, conscious, sentient entity who recognizes that writing matters—you can attain it.

In order to get you toward stellar English, toward grammatical exactitude and stylistic assurance, this book will present some essentials of formal English: namely, the terms commonly used to describe various parts and aspects of the language, the typical ways that sentences are constructed and punctuated, a small sample of words easily confused, and some cautionary guidelines about major pitfalls to avoid.

I'm not going to claim *Stellar English* will solve your every writing problem. It won't help you navigate the quirks of Microsoft Word, nor will it proofread your writing or protect you from the dreaded "autocorrect." It won't help you

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meet deadlines. But what it will do, I hope, is increase your mastery of formal English grammar and usage—and simultaneously enhance your credibility and persuasiveness. Now this launch into stellar English won't physically remove you from earth, but language used well can enable your thoughts to soar. A lofty goal? Perhaps. But what's a heaven for?

The Importance of Audience

Here is the key to effective writing. At every stage, from your conception of the initial idea, through fingers-on-keyboard drafting, to the final revision—you always need to keep the following question in mind: Who is your audience? Writing sometimes will veer off like a wild horse that's suddenly decided to bolt crazily ahead; your job is to rein it back in, get it going at the right speed and gait and in the right direction. In your writing, controlling that wild gallop of words involves, to a large extent, figuring out their intended destination. Where are they headed? You have to continually keep this question in mind and adjust your writing accordingly.

Sometimes your audience will be only one reader, which simplifies things. Keeping one person in mind, putting yourself in that reader's place, and seeing your writing through their eyes while focusing on the issue you're writing about is a challenging but manageable task.[1]

[1] Note that even though I am talking about only one reader here, I use the plural possessive pronoun "their" [in "their eyes"]. Is that wrong? Some people say it is. I disagree. The "singular they" was once the accepted format (used as early as 1375 [Baron]), then fell into disfavor. It is now the new normal. I will discuss this in greater detail in part 2, pages 94–96.

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On the other hand, addressing an audience of more than one poses a greater challenge. Some large or diverse group of people might read your writing—a professional committee or panel, your Facebook friends, subscribers to your blogpost—and they might have varying perspectives and levels of interest in you or in the subject of your writing. In the case of large audiences, it's often helpful to narrow your intended audience and decide which specific subset of readers you're directly addressing. Some will be an appreciative choir to whom you preach, while others will be uncertain, skeptical, or sleepy. Still others could be stark opponents or even downright hostile.

A wildly varied audience is especially difficult. Recently I had some problems with such an audience when it emerged that one of my Facebook "friends" rejected everything I posted and mocked me and my ideas. Marmaduke (let's call him) was just generally hostile toward anything posted by a teacher or educator, all of whom he viewed as loafers and parasites. He often mentioned that we had summers off, and for the half of the year during which we actually worked, we only worked a few hours a day. His message was simple: Since we're getting a "free ride" by society, we had best shut our virtual mouths. "If I make a mistake," he wrote, "thousands of dollars are lost, schedules get totally messed up, and people go ballistic. If you make a mistake, little Xinyi doesn't know how to use apostrophes or something. Who cares?" (I have eliminated Marmaduke's abusive vulgar slang.)

What to do? It made no sense to resort to name calling or vulgarities in return. I needed to shift my attention to carefully responding to Marmaduke's ideas. I tried to imagine his perspective (which, I recognize, is shared by many), I pointed

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out where his reasoning was flawed or his facts were incorrect, and in short methodically attempted to present a different interpretation of my profession and its value.

I'm not sure if my strategy worked. Social media can be an impersonal and precarious minefield, both dangerous and tough to navigate. You need to keep your cool. My view is that if you can get an opponent to pause even a moment before rejecting your ideas, you've essentially won. Maybe I did. Though it was only a small victory, in certain situations that's all one can hope for.

Whom Am I Writing For? (Or, For Whom Am I Writing?)

I would like this book to be useful and interesting to a wide range of readers. I want to cast a large net here. First off, this book is for the general public, for anyone interested in improving their language, in getting their expression more exact, more polished, and more in accord with formal written English. It also might serve as a text in any number of college or high school classes on English language writing, or as a supplement for any class where writing is important and a brief, basic introduction to formal grammar and usage is necessary.

You might think that you will rarely or never have to write formal English. Perhaps not. But consider this: it's quite possible that you will find yourself having to generate reports, proposals, letters of recommendation, appeals, or articles. You might have to write an account of the car accident you were involved in. You might have to write a letter of complaint. You might feel compelled to write a letter to the editor of a

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newspaper or magazine. You might want to compose an article that you'll submit for publication. You will almost certainly need to write job application letters.

Alternatively, you might be writing a novel or short story—which is certainly admirable, but if that's the case, you still need to be scrupulous about your English: both publishers and literary agents strongly insist on excellent punctuation and grammar, even in fiction, where rules can be stretched, and where poetic license might permit experimentation. The takeaway? *You can stretch or break the rules but you need to know them before you do.* All of the writing situations I've mentioned—as well as countless others—require a solid command of formal written English.

My hope is that both native speakers and nonnative speakers will find this book useful. While I've aimed some sections, such as part 4 (on determiners), more at nonnative than at native speakers of English, I'm hoping that native speakers, too, might benefit from reading that section.

Stellar English can also be read purely for enjoyment: there is a story here, told through the example sentences, in which two near-future journalists, Arpita and Puneet Tagore, attempt to parse and write about the complexities of an alien invasion of the planet—an invasion by entities who neither communicate nor do any deliberate harm, yet whose presence completely disrupts life on earth.

What Is Grammar?

Grammar—the description of how a language works, how its words make up sentences and what sequences and patterns they typically follow—is not some fixed set of rules or

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principles. In fact, a significant portion of what professionals see as being acceptable today would certainly not have been acceptable to grammarians of the past. English grammar grows and develops year by year, even month by month. Even as I write, the language around us mutates and evolves in new ways.

As you might expect, there are multiple grammars for languages and their dialects. English speech has a grammar, Spanglish has a grammar, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has a grammar, text-messaging has a grammar.[2] Each version of English employs a variety of complex conventions that allow users to put together clear and comprehensible messages for a specific audience.

The subdialect of English I present here, formal written English, sometimes called "standard written English" (or SWE), is the version of English that most teachers and professors expect their students to have mastered. It's the version typically used in mainstream published nonfiction, the language of legal documents, and what you're tested on in standardized tests at school. It cuts across nations and social classes, across age groups and proficiency levels, across occupations and professions. Unsurprisingly, this is the grammar that thousands of grammar handbooks seek to convey, and the one that many people long to fully grasp—and often feel bad about never having mastered.

In general, grammar books tend to "prescribe" and "proscribe." They *prescribe* a correct grammar, just as they finger-waggingly *proscribe* certain usages: Don't end a sentence with

[2] In fact, the *Oxford Dictionary of African American English* is available or will be available soon. This work codifies the formal features of AAVE.

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a preposition.[3] Don't split infinitives.[4] Don't start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction.[5] And here is a particularly astonishing one that I recently heard: Never use more than a single *and* in a sentence. Some people think that memorizing these prohibitions is the key to good writing. It's not. All of these prohibitions can safely be ignored with no harm to your writing style.

I am not a linguist, and my intended audience is not language specialists but, rather, people who want to write communicatively and clearly and present themselves credibly through their writing—people like you yourself. The motivating idea is that when you understand sentence-level fundamentals, you will have a solid foundation for creating paragraphs, and then it's just one more step (though not necessarily a short or simple one) into combining those paragraphs into a longer essay, report, post, or paper. Again, it's a long step, but it's one worth taking.

Formal Written English and Its Value

Let's return to Marmaduke's comment about poor Xinyi. What real-world consequences might result from her misunderstanding of apostrophe use? Marmaduke sees the issue as trivial. Xinyi might not do well in her English classes in high

[3] These are words such as *for*, *as*, *about*, *to*, *from*, *against*, and the like. There are about 150 of them in English. I discuss these in more detail on pages 58–59 and 119–21.

[4] Infinitives are sometimes called the "base form" of verbs: *to go*, *to fix*, *to smile*. In English they typically have a "to" preceding the word of action or of existence, but sometimes this is omitted. An infinitive cannot function as a verb in a sentence. I discuss their splitting (for example, "to *expertly* fix") on pages 84–85.

[5] The words *and*, *but*, *so*, *or*, *for*, *nor*, *yet*. Sometimes *else* is included, though its use without *or* is archaic. The coordinating conjunctions and their use are examined more closely in chapter 2.

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school or college. She might not score above the 10th or 20th percentile on standardized tests. Or she might be limited to going into a field that does not require any writing. Alternatively, if she has to produce written material, she might need to get someone else to edit her writing so that it's free from problems with (for example) poor apostrophe use. We all have workarounds.

But I would argue that Xinyi's lack of understanding—even of something as apparently minor as apostrophe use—actively handicaps her. It might cause her problems that she should not have to face. It might diminish her job and career prospects. It might lessen the impact or credibility of her writing, at least for some audiences. Her sloppiness with apostrophe use might make readers wary of accepting other aspects of her writing, reasoning, or presentation. It might even be the tip of a gigantic English-usage-issue iceberg. In short, her writing problems might not be as unimportant as Marmaduke suggests. She might in fact need a whole lot of help with many additional aspects of formal written English.

But not to worry. She only needs to recognize and address the problem and simply work on her formal written English fundamentals. Many courses and books are available. Admittedly, she will have to be motivated to improve her English, she'll have to work on it, and it won't be easy—you can't just read a book (like this one) and magically start to write perfect prose—but improving one's English is neither overwhelming nor impossible.

"Why bother?" you might ask. My position is that formal written English will usually stand you in good stead whenever you have to address an audience whose makeup might

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be diverse, wide-ranging, or unknown to you, as well as in formal situations where grammatical accuracy matters, where you need to get every single word and every mark of punctuation just right. It's a subdialect of English that has an admirable exactitude, that works well as a safe and practical default, and that is widely recognized, understood, and accepted.

Just the same, let me offer a disclaimer. People who use formal English are not necessarily smarter, more creative, or better than people who do not. This type of English doesn't have any moral, ethical, or intellectual superiority to the kind of language that, for example, you and I use every day, or the kind of language that we hear on the streets, in shops, gyms, restaurants, or TV commercials. Instead, it's a version of English that is often appropriate and effective—even necessary—to employ in certain situations. To be able to switch into it when you need to is a valuable skill.

There are two main reasons that having command over this variant of English is important, at times even crucial. First off, if you're not careful, sometimes you simply won't be understood. You need to use a language that successfully communicates your ideas. Often, written English will be unclear or will require the reader to struggle to figure out the message. Readers usually don't want to struggle to understand. Second, your English usage should reflect well on you as a thinker—that is, as a conveyor of information or knowledge. When your language, grammar, and punctuation are conventional and clear, free from obvious errors, you reinforce the idea that you're someone worth listening to.

By contrast, if you're not careful, your language will not just confuse your reader but also turn you into something

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of a laughingstock because your words invoke what I call an "absurd universe." To use an oft-cited example, "Let's eat, Grandma," differs quite a lot from "Let's eat Grandma." And the sentence, "I want to thank my parents, Jesus and the Virgin Mary," means something quite different from the sentence, "I want to thank my parents, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary," even though the only change in each is the addition of a comma.[6] Most people will ultimately understand your intended message, but there might be a slight pause in their understanding, maybe a chuckle, and in that short interval, sometimes you'll lose them—lose their attention, lose their confidence, lose their belief that you have something valuable to say.

Avoid Inadvertently Conjuring Up an Absurd Universe. In an earlier book, *One Day in the Life of the English Language*, I use the term *absurd universe* to describe what is invoked by many faulty sentences in English. This is a universe where a sentence describes something that is totally wacky and improbable, in fact so much so that the reader realizes that's not what's actually being described. Many times the absurd universe emerges when modification or punctuation is unclear. And while your actual message does ultimately get through, I'd argue, it's slightly marred or distorted by the fact that your reader or listener was momentarily sidetracked (possibly even amused or startled) by the absurd universe your words called up.

[6] I discuss this issue of the "Oxford comma" (the comma prior to the *and*) in chapter 10.

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In short, this book lays out the essentials that are necessary to be first, communicative, and second, trustworthy as an observer, analyst, or reporter of events.

How to Use This Book

This book is really three books in one. At its core, it's a grammar handbook that presents the fundamentals of English grammar. But at the same time it's a book that argues for the value of knowing the grammar of the subdialect, formal written English. The third book you'll find here is the one in which the example sentences tell a story.

Stellar English can thus be read in several different ways. First off, it can be used as a reference work. The material covered, including common sentence-level errors, parts of speech, punctuation, word choice, and the like, forms the essential core of a formal English grammar. The second book, implicit throughout, is the one in which I assert and argue for this grammar's utility. Sometimes this message will be explicit, but I'll try not to preach too much. The third book is the story told by its example sentences. I'm hoping that the narrative might allure you into reading the book in a way that most grammar books rarely get read: straight through, cover to cover.

Be forewarned, though, that this third book, comprising the example sentences and some short connective sections, does not constitute a typical novel. Its science-fiction world only gradually assembles itself as you read, with each passing sentence adding *some* information and moving along the narrative to an extent. As a reader of this sporadically presented story, you will have to fill in a lot of the details. Its sentences are used as examples, so a few will illustrate grammatical

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errors, some will be repetitious, and many will describe or invoke things/situations/people/ideas that in a traditional novel would require a lot of explanation. But the grammatical discussion and the narrative mix and intermingle in an attempt to provide a new kind of reading experience. If you want, you can simply read the narrative, ignoring the surrounding explanations. Taking in the book this way will give you more than just a story, too: you'll also be observing grammatical issues "in action" along the way.

Overview of the Book

This book is divided into seven short parts, each of which, I hope, will help you create writing that effectively communicates your ideas. These seven elements, ones you should strive for in your written English—make up what might be called the "Seven C's":

1. **Credibility**: Does your writing convey that you are trustworthy and believable?
2. **Communicativeness**: Are you successfully getting your intended message across?
3. **Complexity**: Does your language acknowledge/mirror the intricacy of the issue or problem you're addressing?
4. **Confidence**: Will your reader have certainty that you've mastered the idiom and language?
5. **Clarity**: Does your punctuation help you clearly and precisely express your ideas?
6. **Comprehensibility**: Are you employing the right words in unambiguous ways?

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7. **Consequentiality**: Will what you write make some impact and have some importance?

All of these virtues of written English overlap, as you might expect, so in some sense each part is about all seven. Credibility will come with clarity and communicativeness. Consequentiality will emerge when the previous six are all put together. I separate out these individual qualities since in a way they represent bright conceptual stars around which issues of English grammar and usage revolve.

I will use some technical terminology, though I hope not too much. The idea is that familiarizing you with these various terms will be useful insofar as knowing the names of things helps us better understand, classify, and control them. When I use a technical term, I will provide a boxed explanation of it, similar to the one that you encountered a few pages back (page 10), in which I define "absurd universe." Using a vocabulary of only about "ten hundred" words,[7] these twenty-five boxes serve to explain various technical terms.

Overall, this book will offer suggestions about how to write clear and expressive English sentences. I know that these suggestions might occasionally seem to be matters of style or taste, the blustering of a diehard traditionalist, but bear with me. I'm hoping that this book will lead you toward employing

[7] I take this idea from Randall Munroe who, in *Thing Explainer: Complicated Stuff in Simple Words*, uses only a thousand-word vocabulary to explain all kinds of things, from how the blood circulates in the human body to how washing machines work. Although Munroe does not cite him, C. K. Ogden is the progenitor and best-known proponent of using a very simple vocabulary. His "Basic English" program, which he laid out in the 1930s, consisted of 1,000 words. It was intended to help nonnative speakers learn English.

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an English that's precise enough to clearly express what you mean, forceful enough to inspire others to action, and accurate enough so that it projects a positive, credible, and authoritative image of you, the person behind the words. In short, I want to enable you to create writing that might make a difference—writing that matters.

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