

**WRITING
MADE
EASY:
JUST
THE
BASICS**

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DEUS EX MACHINA
CHICAGO
2021

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PREFACE



THE GOOD INFORMATION ABOUT WRITING should be easy to find in one book. It should not be hard to find in several different books, or on several different websites, or in 800-page *English 101* textbooks. It should be easy to read and easy to understand as well. It should not be complicated or technical or burdensome or discouraging.

Writing Made Easy: Just the Basics endeavors to be this book. It contains only four chapters: *The Writing Basics*, *The Descriptive Essay*, *The Argumentative Essay*, and *The Research Paper*. These are the four ways that we use writing the most. Using words, sentences, paragraphs, and punctuation marks correctly are explained in the first chapter: *The Writing Basics*. Describing things well is explained in the second chapter: *The Descriptive Essay*. Arguing well with words and logic is explained in the third chapter: *The Argumentative Essay*. And presenting research findings professionally is explained in the fourth chapter: *The Research Paper*.

Over the past 15 years of teaching English 101 and English 102 classes in college, I have collected the best information about writing that I could find and I have consolidated this information in the form of handouts and documents for my students in class. I am happy to present the best of the best of this information now in *Writing Made Easy: Just the Basics*. I have eliminated the complicated and technical information about writing that people do not need to know and I have included only the basic information about writing that people *do* need to know. In fact, *Writing Made Easy: Just the Basics* can be used as a reference book for writing by people for many years to come.

Writing Made Easy: Just the Basics hopes to be a tool that allows people to invest in their own writing by having access to the writing basics and being freed up from the complicated and technical information about writing that gets in the way. It hopes to help people write better, communicate ideas better, and have more success in life as a result. It hopes to show people how easy writing can be.

T. S. Chicago, Illinois 2021

INTRODUCTION



“SIMPLIFY! SIMPLIFY! SIMPLIFY!” IS WHAT I ALWAYS told my students about their writing in my English 101 and English 102 classes in college. I told my students to follow the wisdom of the KISS acronym (as in *Keep It Simple, Stupid*). I told my students to follow the “Less is more” philosophy of Mies van der Rohe because *less* is more effective than *more*. Less information can communicate a message more effectively than more information.

Google, I pointed out to my students as well, created a search engine that uses a simple search field in the center of a website surrounded by confident white space and nothing more. It gives people less buttons to push, not more, when searching for information. It creates a more effective user-experience this way. Yahoo’s search engine, by contrast, provides extra information, with extra links and extra ads – and people can decide for themselves which search engine is easier to use. 80% of technology consumers use only 20% of

a product's features, as some experts in the technology industry have explained. Consumers do not like complication. They like simplification.

Travel signs in airports and train stations around the world, in the same way, have been simplified and made easy to read in order to facilitate more effective communication. They have been abstracted (reduced to their essential ingredients), designed consistently, and are now used almost universally. Subway maps in big cities like Chicago have been simplified as well to allow customers to read them quickly and to understand them easily. Chicago's entire subway map has been simplified so much that it can fit on only one sheet of paper. A lot of serious people in the world have taken a lot of time to simplify complicated information in society for our benefit, and we may have not even noticed.

Writing should be simplified in the same way, I believe. It should be easy to read and easy to understand. The writer's job, as a result, is to make the reader's job easy. It is to communicate a message effectively so that other people can understand it quickly and not find it difficult.

Good writing, as we all know, is easy to read. It is easy to understand. Bad writing, on the other hand, is hard to read. It is hard to understand. Compare the following two sentences: "What time is it?" and "What time is it." The first sentence has a question mark at the end which makes it easy to understand. It is perfectly sensible. It is a question that asks what time it is. The second sentence has a period at the end which makes it hard to understand. It is very confusing. It is bewildering and bemusing, in fact. Even some-

thing as small as a punctuation mark can make a big difference in communicating a message effectively in writing.

As a matter of fact, simplicity plays a big role in writing already, and we may have not even noticed this either. An essay has one main idea (or one main thesis); it does not have two or three. A paragraph has one main idea; it does not have two or three. An essay's topic must be narrowed down to a manageable size so that it will not become buried in complexity. An essay's outline is designed to help a reader keep track of its different ideas easily. Good writing is short and sweet; it is never long or complicated. Short sentences work very well whereas longer sentences tend to lose their value. Paragraphs are indented to stand out as individual ideas so that a reader can keep track of them, one by one. Bullet points on a résumé are designed to simplify a worker's skills in an easy-to-read list as opposed to in a thick block of text. The 750,000 words in the English language have been categorized into only 8 different kinds of words in grammar – that's all.¹ Even the rhetorical technique of parallel construction combines three or more ideas into one phrase to help unify the three ideas into a single group. There is a lot of evidence that simplicity plays a big role in writing, and there is a lot of evidence that complication detracts from writing. Complication interferes with our understanding.

There are easy ways to explain the technical terms of writing as well – such as a *conjugated verb*, a *gerund*, or a *split infinitive*. I use a *noun* and a *verb* to explain the necessary ingredients in a sentence instead of a *subject* and a *predicate* because nobody really knows what a *subject* or a *predicate* are. I use

agreement tips to explain how *past participles* work (including number shifts and pronoun shifts) because nobody really knows what a *participle* is. Who could? This word is impossible! I use the person *receiving* the action in a sentence to explain how *whom* is used correctly instead of as an *object of a preposition* because, again, nobody really knows what an *object of a preposition* is. I emphasize how writing should be easy to read and easy to understand. It should never be complicated or technical or burdensome or discouraging.

Only 20% – perhaps only 10% – of the rules of English need to be known by people in order to be able to write effectively. These rules are what I call *the basics of writing* (or *the basic “rules” of writing*). They are explained in Chapter I of this book: *The Writing Basics*. The complicated rules of English, for the most part, can be ignored. They can be avoided. (They can be looked-up later on, if necessary.) In the same way that people do not need to know the 750,000 words in the English language to be able to speak effectively – the average person uses about 5,000 words, novelists use about 9,000 words, and William Shakespeare used about 20,000 words – people do not need to know all the rules of English in order to be able to write effectively.²

Writing Made Easy: Just the Basics, in this spirit, then, presents just the basics of writing and nothing more. It avoids the complicated and technical information about writing that people do not need to know and it presents only the basic information about writing that people *do* need to know. It simplifies the learning process by using plain and simple terms and it hopes to make the process of writing easy and fun, which is what it should be, naturally. It

hopes to make writing pleasurable and satisfying for everyone. It hopes to make writing something that can provide people with more success in life in general.

WRITING BASICS



Chapter One

COMPONENTS OF COMPOSITION

The word *composition* – as in an *English Composition* class in college – means arrangement. It means the arrangement of the components of English in an essay or in any other form of writing. It refers to the ingredients a writer arranges to compose an essay or any other form of writing with. While a painter arranges colors on a canvas, and a composer arranges notes in a symphony, a writer arranges words, sentences, paragraphs, and ideas on a page in order to be able to communicate a message effectively.

There are 10 basic components of composition for a writer to arrange in an essay or in any other form of writing (starting from the simplest to the most complex):

1. Grammar (using the right word in the right place)
2. Diction (word choice)

3. Usage (using different versions of words correctly, such as *there*, *their*, and *they're*, *to*, *too*, and *two*, or *either* and *neither*, *etc.*)
4. Mechanics (abbreviations, spelling, and capitalized words)
5. Punctuation Marks (. , ; ! ? - — [] () “ ”)
6. Sentences
7. Paragraphs
8. Organization
9. Style (poetical, lyrical, figural, literal, concise, staccato, *etc.*)
10. Kinds (descriptive essay, argumentative essay, narrative essay, persuasive essay, comparison and contrast essay, biography, autobiography, history, romance, tragedy, comedy, fiction, non-fiction, *etc.*)

An analogy of the components of composition used in writing can be found in the field of graphic design in the arts. The smallest unit of design in graphic design is the dot (or pixel). When a dot is dragged across a page it creates a line (a line is composed of several dots put together). Several lines put together create a shape (a square is composed of four lines put together). Several shapes put together create a 3D form (a cube is composed of six squares put together). In the same way, words can be thought of as the smallest unit of composition in writing. When combined together words create sentences. Sentences create paragraphs. And paragraphs create essays.

Perhaps the best way to improve your writing skills is to study the different components of composition individually.

Master your punctuation marks and sentences, for example, and work on using the right word in the right place in a sentence. Do not try to learn everything at once.

The 10 components of composition listed above provide an overview, or a road map, of the different ingredients involved in writing, and understanding them individually can help make the study of writing easier.

GRAMMAR

Grammar involves using the right word in the right place in a sentence. There are approximately 750,000 words in the English language, and of these 750,000 words, scholars have distinguished 8 different kinds of words or 8 different parts of speech.³ Grammar includes the following 8 different kinds of words:

1. Noun (a person, place, animal or thing, such as Bob, Chicago, zebra, or computer)
2. Verb (an action or a state of being, such as “Bob yelled” [action] or “Bob is sad” [state of being])
3. Pronoun (takes the place of a noun; *e.g.*, I, me, he, him, she, her, they, them, *etc.*)
4. Adjective (describes a noun; *e.g.*, “He is a *tall* man.”)
5. Adverb (describes a verb; *e.g.*, “He drove *carefully*.”)
6. Preposition (a word *pre-positioned* before a noun or a pronoun; *e.g.*, to, of, for, by, with, at, *etc.*)
7. Conjunction (a connecting word, such as and, but, or so, *etc.*)

8. Interjection (a word inserted between other words; e.g., “*Well*, I told you so.” “*Hi* Bob.” “*Hey*, Bob.” “*Oh*, I see.”)

One common mistake in grammar in American usage especially involves using an adjective in a sentence where an adverb should go. For example, when Cheryl arrives at work in the morning, her boss might ask: “How are you doing, Cheryl?” And to this, Cheryl would reply, typically: “I’m good.” But this is an example of using the wrong word in the wrong place in a sentence. It is an example of using bad grammar. *Good* is an adjective describing a noun (as in “Cheryl is a *good* worker”). *Well* is an adverb describing a verb or a state of being (as in “Cheryl is doing *well*”). Therefore, Cheryl should correctly reply to her boss in the morning: “I’m well” (as in “I am doing well”). This way, Cheryl would describe her state of being (a *verb*) with an *adverb* instead of describing herself (a *noun*) with an *adjective*.

SYNTAX

Syntax involves using the correct *order* of words in a sentence. The location of words in a sentence (*i.e.*, the words and their interactions with each other) determines the meaning of a sentence. A sentence’s meaning can be completely altered by a word moved from the beginning of a sentence to the middle or to the end, because that word is now next to different words. It is read in a different context. For example, “The person who was *badly* hurt needed help” refers to the *person* being badly hurt. “The person who was

hurt needed help *badly*” refers to the person’s *help* needed badly. They are different.

Examine the following 3 sentences below. The words are identical in each sentence but their meanings are altered by the different locations of the word *just*.

- He said that he *just* dented the fender (a minute ago).
- He said that *just* he dented the fender (and no one else).
- He said that he dented *just* the fender (and not the bumper or the side door).

The solution to the problem of syntax used incorrectly in a sentence (in the wrong *order*) is simple: place all descriptive words next to the words they describe. Do not place them next to words that they do not describe.

“The waiter brought a steak to the businessman covered with mushrooms” is a perfect example of a sentence with bad syntax. It seems as if the businessman is covered with mushrooms instead of the steak. It can be corrected by simply moving the descriptive words *covered with mushrooms* next to the words they describe, the steak. This sentence should be correctly written “The waiter brought a steak *covered with mushrooms* to the businessman.”

SPELLING

The spelling tips you learned in grade school or high school might be helpful to use in your writing some of the time, but not all of the time. Placing *i* before *e* except after *c*,

for example, works well in words like *conceive* or *deceive* but not in words like *either* or *neither*.

Studies have shown that people learn how to spell visually, mainly, by remembering how a word looks when typed or printed.

The spell checker in Microsoft Word or in Apple Pages, today, is the main way that we spell correctly, so use the spell checker in your word processing program every time you write. It flags misspelled words and it can correct misspelled words automatically, but not always. It misses words that are spelled correctly but are used in the wrong way in a sentence.

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is so bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe.⁴

CAPITALIZED WORDS

Capitalize all major words (and the first words) of *titles*, but do not capitalize the small words. For example, *The Wizard of Oz*, *A Farewell to Arms*, or *From Here to Eternity*. Capitalize a person's job title when it is used together with a person's name, but not when it is used alone. For example, "President Obama was our president." "Professor Smith is a professor of Biology." "Doctor Harris is our doctor."

Capitalize all *names* of people (like John or Greg or Malcolm and Susan), but not common nouns like mom or dad.

Writing *Dear Mom* or *Dear Dad*, however, in an email or a letter is different. It is not like writing “My *mom* is the greatest” or “My *dad* is a doctor.” Using the common noun of Mom or Dad as a person’s name makes it special and therefore not common. So capitalize Mom or Dad in *Dear Mom* or *Dear Dad* in an email or a letter. Capitalize the names of places (like Texas, Europe, China, and Brazil). Capitalize the names of organizations (like the CIA, the IRS, and The Teamster’s Union). Capitalize the brand names of products (like Kleenex, Charmin, and Tide) but not the actual names of products (like facial tissue, toilet paper, or laundry detergent).⁵ Capitalize the names of courses taught in college (like Biology, English, and Psychology). And capitalize the names of different languages (like Chinese, Russian, and Swahili).

Capitalize all *days* (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday), *months* (June, July, August, and September), and *holidays* (Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and Memorial Day), but not seasons (like fall, winter, spring, or summer).

Capitalize all *locations* but not directions. For example: “She is from the North.” “We drove north to meet her.” “The South is known for its hospitality.” “We are heading south.”

ABBREVIATIONS

Below are some of the most common abbreviations used in college essays and in college research papers:

- AD (*L anno domini*) stands for *in the year of the lord*

- A.K.A. stands for *also known as*
- AM (L *anti meridiem*) stands for *before noon*
- ASAP stands for *as soon as possible*
- *as per* means *according to*
- BC stands for *Before Christ*
- BCE stands for *Before Common Era*
- c. (L *circum*) stands for *around*
- ca. (L *circa*) stands for *approximately*
- cf. (L *confer*) stands for *compare with*
- c/o stands for *courtesy of*
- e.g., (L *exempli gratia*) stands for *for example*
- et al (L *et al*) means *and other people*
- etc. (L *et cetera*) means *and other things*
- i.e., (L *id est*) stands for *that is*
- m. o. (L *modus operandus*) stands for *mode of operation*
- PM (L *post meridiem*) stands for *after noon*
- PS (L *post script*) stands for *writing after* or *writing addendum*
- qtd. in stands for *quoted in*
- re (L *re*) means *with regard to*
- RSVP (F *repondez s'il vous plait*) stands for *please respond*
- [sic] (L *sic*) means *so written*
- v (or v.) stands for *versus*
- vis-a-vis (F *vis-a-vis*) means *as compared with*

The most important abbreviations writers use in college essays and in college research papers are *e.g.* and *i.e.* Please familiarize yourself with *e.g.*, and *i.e.*, especially, and use these two abbreviations frequently. The abbreviation *e.g.* stands for *exempli gratia* in Latin and it means *for example* in English; *i.e.*

stands for *id est* in Latin and it means *that is* in English. Always type *e.g.*, and *i.e.*, with a period after each letter (as in *e.g.*, and *i.e.*, and never type them as *eg* or *ie* or *e.g.* or *i.e.* without the comma). All foreign words (as well as abbreviations) should be italicized (such as *e.g.*, *i.e.*, *et al*, *sic*, *etc.*).

Use BCE (Before Common Era) instead of BC with dates from the ancient world (such as 500 BC) so people from other religions such as Islam or Buddhism, for example, do not feel marginalized by the Western tradition of Christianity.

Use *c.* (the abbreviation of *circum* in Latin, meaning *around* in English) before a date in history that is more general than specific, such as “The Renaissance in Europe occurred in *c.*1500.” Use *c.*1500 for ballpark figures when a specific date for a period in history (such as The Renaissance) is not precisely known.

CONFUSING WORDS

Some words in English can be used as both verbs and nouns, which can be extremely confusing. For example: “The soldier *wound* the bandage around the *wound*.” “The insurance form was *invalid* for the *invalid*.” “When approached, the *dove dove* into the bushes.” “A good time to *present* your *present* is at Christmas.” “The farmer was eager to *produce* his *produce* for his customers.” “If the general wants to *lead* he must first get the *lead* out.”⁶ You can derive the meaning of these verbs used as nouns and nouns used as verbs from the context of the surrounding words in the sentence.

Another way to help remember how to use words correctly, and avoid being confused by them, is with a mnemonic device. A mnemonic device is a personal device that can help a person memorize words in a private way. *Stationery*, for example, can be remembered as a word that is spelled with the letter *e* instead of the letter *a* because both *stationery* and the word *letter* have the letter *e* in them. *Stationary*, on the other hand, meaning something that is not moving, does not have the letter *e*.

A Dictionary of Modern English Usage by H. W. Fowler is one of the classic texts on the problems of usage in the English language.⁷ It contains a plethora of helpful tips on almost every confusing word imaginable. It can be easily purchased from almost any book store online.

Below are some examples of the most commonly misused words in English (and how to correct them):

A – use *a* before words with consonant sounds (*A History of Classical Architecture*. “A Federal Bureau of Investigation agent is investigating the crime.”)

AN – use *an* before words with vowel sounds (“An honest thief is an oxymoron.” “An FBI agent is investigating the crime.”)

ALOT – is not a word; don’t use it

A LOT – is two words (“We got *a lot* of work done today.”)

AFFECT – is a verb meaning to influence. Substitute the word *affect* with the word *influence* to understand how to use *affect* correctly. For example, “His bad attitude negatively *affected* [*influenced*] his sales.” “Wars *af*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TIMOTHY SHARKEY HAS A MASTER OF LIBERAL Arts degree in *English & American Literature & Language* from Harvard University. He wrote his master's thesis on irony in Shakespeare's tragic plays, titled *Moral & Aesthetic Explanations of Irony's Function in Tragedy*. He later developed his master's thesis into a larger book titled *The Art of Tragedy & the Battle Against It*. It is on sale at Amazon as an eBook and a paperback and at Apple's Book Store as an eBook.⁸ He has a Master of Fine Arts degree in *Cinema* as well from the School of Cinematic Arts at DePaul University in Chicago. He has taught English I01 and English I02 classes at The City Colleges of Chicago and at several other colleges for over 15 years.

COLOPHON



WRITING MADE EASY:
JUST THE BASICS

WAS SET IN THE CENTAUR TYPE-
FACE OF BRUCE ROGERS. IT USED
FLEURONS FROM BODONI AND
GERSOPPAFONT. IT WAS LAYED
OUT USING APPLE'S PAGES SOFT-
WARE ON AN IMAC BY TIMOTHY
SHARKEY AT DEUS EX MACHINA

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ENDNOTES

¹ “How Many Words are in the English Language.” *Lexicon*, <https://www.lexico.com/explore/how-many-words-are-there-in-the-english-language>. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

² “Shakespeare’s Words.” *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*, <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-words/>. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

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⁷ <https://www.amazon.com/Dictionary-Modern-English-Usage/dp/0198691157>.

⁸ https://www.amazon.com/Art-Tragedy-Battle-Against/dp/I479378712/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=the+art+of+tragedy+timothy+sharkey&qid=I629204617&sr=8-1.