

**PLAIN ENGLISH: A PRACTICAL WORK
ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, FOR USE
IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS,
ACADEMIES, COMMERCIAL COLLEGES,
AND FOR PRIVATE LEARNERS**

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Plain English: a practical work on the English language, for use in public and private schools, academies, commercial colleges, and for private learners by James H. Bryant

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JAMES H. BRYANT

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FOR USE IN

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Bryant

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DEDICATED
TO
THE BOYS AND GIRLS
WHO
"DON'T LIKE GRAMMAR."

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TABLE OF CONTENTS.

PART I.		PAGE.
THE SENTENCE: PARTS OF SPEECH DEVELOPED		1
ANALYSIS OF SIMPLE AND COMPOUND SENTENCES		13
WORD-MAKING		27
PARTS OF SPEECH SUB-DIVIDED		32
ANALYSIS OF COMPLEX SENTENCES		49
FORM-CHANGES ("INFLECTIONS")		53
VERB-PHRASES EXPRESSING TIME, ETC.		72
INFINITIVES AND PARTICIPLE-PHRASES		78
AUXILIARY VERBS		82
PECULIAR USES OF WORDS AND PHRASES		85
EXERCISES FOR ANALYSIS		96
PART II.		
NOUNS.—Facts concerning, and Errors in the use of		99
Miscellaneous Exercises to be Corrected		100
PRONOUNS.—Facts concerning, and Errors in the use of		100
Miscellaneous Errors and Exercises to be Corrected		103
ADJECTIVES. } Facts concerning, and Errors in the use of		105
ADVERBS. } Miscellaneous Errors and Exercises to be Corrected		108
VERBS.—Facts concerning, and Errors in the use of		112
Miscellaneous Errors and Exercises to be Corrected		116
PREPOSITIONS.—Facts Concerning, and Errors in the use of		121
Miscellaneous Errors and Exercises to be Corrected		122
CONJUNCTIONS.—Facts Concerning, and Errors in the use of		124
Miscellaneous Errors and Exercises to be Corrected		125
SUPERFLUOUS WORDS		127
POPULAR ABSURDITIES		128
"AWFUL" WORDS		131
MISUSED WORDS		132
BIG WORDS FOR LITTLE IDEAS		141
COUNTERFEIT WORDS		144
CLEARNESS AND FORCE		147
HINTS TO YOUNG WRITERS AND SPEAKERS		161
PUNCTUATION		163
CAPITAL LETTERS		177
APPROPRIATE PREPOSITIONS		179
APPENDIX.		
NOTES, QUOTATIONS, AND COMMENTS		191

UNIV OF
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INTRODUCTORY.

For many years, there has been an earnest and increasing demand for a practical text-book on the subject of language; a book that would present the essentials of English syntax unencumbered by the rubbish of which the average "grammar" has so largely consisted. With a view to meeting this demand, the present work has been prepared. We claim merit for it on two leading points: 1. What it contains; 2. What it does *not* contain. We believe that the latter, as much as the former, entitles it to consideration.

What the book contains.—Some things that are new; more that are not. The method of treating the subject and the order of arrangement are the principal features of originality. In both these respects, the work will be found thoroughly logical.

PART I covers the essential points in English syntax, including all that pertains to the seven parts of speech and the analysis of sentences. Set rules have purposely been omitted. Definitions have been admitted but sparingly, and in no case until the thing defined has been fully explained. The sentences for practice in analysis have been carefully graded so as to lead the student on in a well-lighted pathway. The parsing to be done is informal,—not of the "cold-blooded" sort which has so long been the bane of English grammar teaching. Apt illustrations and interesting exercises are introduced from time to time, and the colloquial style of presentation has been adhered to throughout. These features will enhance the value of the book in the hands of beginners, and furnish a helpful review for others. Some of the lessons may seem rather long, but they are natural rather

than arbitrary divisions of the work. Considering the very small part to be committed to memory, there are but few of the lessons that may not be taken by an average class at one recitation.

Some may be surprised to find in a work claiming to be practical, that time-honored exercise, *conjugation*; but a closer examination will reveal the fact that the conjugating is not of the "I love," "You love," "He loves" pattern. Only irregular verbs are given for practice, and of these, such troublesome ones as the oft-confused *lie* and *lay*, *sit* and *set*.

PART II is more general in character, covering a variety of subjects and large amount of material for practice, all of which will be found highly practical. The chapters on Clearness and Force, and Punctuation, and the list of Appropriate Prepositions will be found especially valuable features. Considerable space has been given to the study of misused words for the following reason: Once get a student interested in a critical study of words and current phrases, and he naturally becomes critical regarding other features of English. This makes of him a "reflective user of language,"—the essential thing for self-improvement.

The APPENDIX, consisting for the most part of quotations from the very best authors, constitutes in itself a valuable book of reference for teachers and advanced students. Many of the spicy paragraphs, particularly those from the pens of Gould, Mathews, and White, on misused words, will help to enliven the work and fix the points in the minds of students.

The system of references from one part of the book to another, by paragraph numbers, will be found of great value to both student and teacher. By means of these, all facts bearing upon a point may readily be found.

The general plan of the work is such as to enable a student to get a maximum of benefit with a minimum of labor and time. Advanced classes,—those composed of students who have acquired a fair knowledge of English syntax—may begin study at Part II, at the same time reviewing the essential points in Part I.

On reaching the Appendix, such classes may continue the review work by means of the references to all parts of the book.

What the book does not contain.—Upon this point, particularly, we base our claim of real merit. The aim has been to exclude all make-believe. Only the facts of our mother-tongue have been presented, and these have been stated in plain English. Mere technicalities are “conspicuous for their absence.”

Teachers have long been asking themselves and one another this question: “Why do we not get better results from our teaching of English grammar?” To this we venture to give the following answer: We have been attempting to teach so much that does not belong to the English language. A large part of our so-called “grammar” has been pure make-believe. In the words of Richard Grant White, we have been trying to “measure our English corn in Latin bushels.” Imported Latinisms, such as ‘voice’ and ‘gender,’ together with fictitious ‘cases,’ ‘moods,’ ‘tenses,’ etc., and equally fictitious *rules*, have consumed much valuable time that should have been given to studying the realities and beauties of our language. We have been teaching too much *grammar*, not enough *language*. Samuel Ramsey says:

“The weary hours and years spent by our youth in parsing English sentences according to forms borrowed from Greek and Latin are worse than wasted—useless for the avowed purpose of learning to speak and write, and leading to a misapprehension of what our language is.”

The small remnants of real grammar in our language (to be found in a few pronoun-forms, one ‘case’ of nouns, two adjectives, and, to a very limited extent, in verbs) form a very inconsiderable part of English syntax. There are worse errors in every-day speech than using the wrong pronoun-form, or failing to make the verb “agree with its subject.” The old farmer who declares that “them horses is matches,” commits a less offense against good English than his pretentious city cousin who announces that “those horses are pretty equally matched with each other.” In fact, as Mr. Ramsey says, ours is a language in which “the dictionary counts for everything, the grammar almost nothing.”

SUGGESTIONS TO TEACHERS AND PARENTS.

To Teachers: Read the preface and introduction to this book and ask your students to do the same.

Read carefully all foot-notes and notes to the teacher.

Require students to read all references. [It may be best, however, to have beginners confine their reference reading to Parts I and II, as some of the points in the Appendix might have a tendency to confuse them at the start.]

Get up enthusiasm in your classes. To do this, do not dwell on minor points; for instance, don't spend much time on the kinds of pronouns and adjectives in Lessons 13 and 14. All parsing should be informal and should never include facts beyond the point to which the student has advanced at the time.

Remember that the mere correcting of errors is, in itself, of little value; indeed, any work that does not lead a student to think for himself is a waste of time.

To Parents: Your work must precede, as well as accompany, that of the teacher; his work is supplementary to yours.

You can do very much by encouraging habits of promptness, neatness, and independent effort on the part of your children. Irregular attendance at school is fatal to genuine success.

Under the guise of "baby-talk," children are often allowed to form incorrect habits of speech that will stick to them through life. During the first six years of his life, a child can learn more that is wrong than he can possibly unlearn in the next dozen years.

Remember that, if your children "hear poor English and read poor English, they will pretty surely speak poor English and write poor English."

To both teachers and parents, the following, by Professor Whitney, contains most excellent advice: [*Italics are ours.*]

"It should be a pervading element in the whole school and home training of the young to make them use their own tongue with accuracy and force, and, along with any special drilling directed to this end, some of the rudimentary distinctions and rules of grammar are conveniently taught; but *that is not the study of grammar*, and it will not bear the intrusion of much formal grammar *without being spoiled for its own ends*. It is constant use and practice, under never-failing watch and correction, that makes good writers and speakers; the application of direct authority is the most efficient corrective. Grammar has its part to contribute, but rather in the higher than in the lower stages of the work. One must be a somewhat reflective user of language to amend even here and there a point by grammatical reasons; and *no one ever changed from a bad speaker to a good one by applying the rules of grammar to what he said.*"