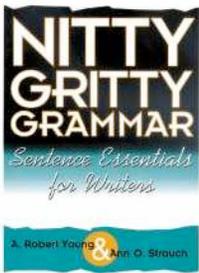


Nitty Gritty Grammar: Sentence Essentials for Writers, 2nd ed.

Author:	A. Robert Young & Ann O. Strauch (2006)		
Publisher:	Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press		
Pages	ISBN	Price	
Pp .xi +284	978-0-521-60654-3 (paper)	£12.50; \$29 USD	

Despite its rather unorthodox title, *Nitty Gritty Grammar* [1] is a very traditional grammar book. The secondary title goes a long way to clarifying its underlying rationale: *Sentence Essentials for Writers*. At first glance it is not clear just whom the book is for. According to the blurb, the book's intended audience is "developing writers" but it does not specify age or level. The kind of writing in question is envisaged as "academic" (e.g., p. ix), although this label is from a general perspective, not in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) sense. The points covered are fairly basic. While there is some treatment of style, for example contractions are discouraged [2], there is no discussion of other academic, i.e., formal considerations. Looking at the topics covered leads me to suggest that the book is aimed at 16+ LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students in community colleges. The community college itself is mentioned on various occasions (e.g., pp. 32, 44, 158, 211), and from a cultural perspective, passages often mention U.S. icons (Harriet Tubman, p. 4; Muhammed Ali, p. 43; Amelia Earhart, p. 110) or with topics which would resonate with North American immigrants (Quinceañera, p. 108; Korean attitudes to relationships, p. 127; Enrique in Mexico City for his sister's wedding, p. 218; my classmate Loc Nguyen, p. 237).

The book is organised into five sections and fifteen chapters. Each chapter is divided into parts focusing on different aspects within a broad theme. To illustrate, the first section deals with sentences:

- Chapter One discusses the nature of subjects and verbs and looks at basic punctuation
- Chapter Two examines simple, compound and complex sentences
- Chapter Three explores run-on sentences and sentence fragments--from a

proscriptive perspective, as "mistakes that people sometimes make in their writing" (p. 31).

The second, third and fourth sections deal with more typical grammar points: nouns and articles, tenses, modals and so on. The fifth section is a bit of a lucky dip: it opens with prepositions, goes on to word formation, and finishes with a selection of "Final Dos and Don'ts" featuring a selection of "common problems" that have not been treated elsewhere in the book, e.g., say and tell with direct and indirect objects; or special, specially and especially.

The design (two colour) and layout of the book are simple, and consistent and reader-friendly. Each chapter opens with an introduction to the focus, e.g., "The Future" or "*Hope and Wish*." If the feature links to points made previously in the book, there is a "Refreshing Your Memory" section which will encourage recall and recycling if the book is being used or taught sequentially, and cross-referencing if not; either way this is a useful device. Next comes one or more short texts designed to raise students' awareness of the feature. Employing a guided discovery approach the book gives readers a reflective task in conjunction with the text(s). The rest of the chapter is broken up into succinct grammar points: "Exploring the Grammar Point" presents another more narrowly focused discovery exercise, followed by "Understanding the Grammar Point," a concise explicit explanation. This is often accompanied by a "Nitty Gritty" box that contains the actual rule.

At this point it must be said that the explanation language is not so reader-friendly. There has been much debate over the use of linguistic metalanguage in a student grammar reference (e.g., see Berry, 2000; Mohammed, 1996). Generally speaking, the authors have kept the headings themselves simple although there are a few exceptions (e.g., "Missing Subjects in Dependent Adverbial Clauses" (p. 36) and at times the simplicity is perhaps counter-productive. Take "*The* with Natural Common Focus," (p. 74). 'Natural Common Focus' (which gets 0 hits on Google) is glossed as "[W]hen it's unique in the world or when it is common for most people in their everyday environment" (p. 75), which I'm afraid does little for Natural Common Understanding. My main qualms lie with the explanations themselves. At times I find them dense (e.g., "one or more modifiers may appear between a determiner and a singular noun" (p. 65); or "Use *the* before a singular noun that refers to a part of a noun that has already been mentioned, or to a closely related noun" (p. 71).

At other times I find the explanations ambiguous. Michael Lewis once said that grammatical explanations which include "sometimes" are not explanations at all (1986, p. 177). From that perspective, consider then the potential worth of the following: "Many dependent clauses begin with a subordinator" (p. 18); "Proper nouns are usually singular" (p. 65); "Plural proper nouns often take *the*" (p. 80); "Most regular verbs . . ." (p. 90); "In some contexts the choice of *hope* or *wish* depends on the writer's opinion about the possibility of an event" (p. 206).

At yet other times I find the explanations questionable, because they seem to go against what I 'know' and/or because they are overtly reductionist and end up not presenting a true picture. To illustrate, readers are told, "In negative sentences, contract *have* and *has* with *not*," which would imply that *'ve not* is not correct/possible, yet both the American English subcorpus (written) in Cobuild [3] and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) [4] contain

examples of 've not. When explaining *must* and *have to* for requirements, with reference to the model sentence "I *have to* do it this weekend," users are told, "You could also say: *I'm requiring myself to do it this weekend*": require as a reflexive verb? Readers are also told that "*will* is more formal than *going to*" (pp. 148-9), whereas surely the difference is functional. Or, "can/cannot expresses ability/inability in the present and future" (p. 165)--what about *be able to*?

At the beginning I said that this was a traditional book. It is traditional from various perspectives: in being sentence-based for example, which, as is inevitably the case, leads to questionable modelling: for example, "He hasn't been leaving the house," as an example of present perfect progressive (p. 132) or, "I could stop for only three days," as an example of past ability (p. 165). These sentences need context; otherwise they simply do not ring true. On another occasion the sentence "My sister is in the tenth grade and she went to Sea World last year" (p. 22) is proposed to exemplify illogical connection, yet in various contexts the two facts would be perfectly logical in juxtaposition. As a boast, for example, or as a correction, or preceding the sentence, She had a great time but . . . A little bit of context goes a long way.

The authors' attitude towards practise is also very traditional. Exercises are generally very tightly controlled, often no more than substitution drills, and at times students are encouraged to produce full sentences in practise exercises even when to do so is communicatively redundant. As a final point about the traditionalism of this textbook, it is also highly prescriptive: for example, "If I was . . ." : "this is a common misuseage in both written and spoken English" (p. 185). I would hazard to suggest that it's so common it can no longer be considered 'misusage'. In this case I believe a comment about formality would have been more appropriate.

At the end of each section there is a "Review" containing extra practice. All these review sections contain editing exercises. Many of them are introduced as examples of student compositions to which "mistakes have been added for practice." The mistakes in question always focus on a grammar point dealt with in the preceding chapters. I cannot help wondering what criteria were used in 'adding' these mistakes. Are they based on 'real' data such as statistically frequent student errors? At times it seems *almost* possible to identify the first language of the writer: the text with the missing articles 'sounds like' an Asian writer, the text with the missing personal pronouns 'sounds like' a Spanish or Portuguese speaker. Perhaps I am too keen on attributing the texts to certain categories of English learners, but it does strike me as a wasted opportunity for a little awareness-raising. If there is ever a third edition, I would encourage the authors to exploit these typical mistakes by highlighting which are typical of speakers of certain languages or language families.

Notes

[1] I am surprised by the title. In 2002 the then UK Home Officer Minister John Denham was criticised for using the expression in a public speech, as it was said to be an old slavery term and thus decidedly un-PC.

[2] Although the book often uses them.

[3] <http://www.collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx>

[4] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase>

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