



the  
little  
green  
grammar  
book

MARK TREDINNICK

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## THE LITTLE GREEN GRAMMAR BOOK

MARK TREDINNICK is a poet, essayist and writing teacher. He lives in Burradoo, in the highlands southwest of Sydney. His books include *The Little Red Writing Book* (published in the United States and the United Kingdom as *Writing Well: The Essential Guide*), *The Land's Wild Music* and *A Place on Earth*. His memoir, *The Blue Plateau*, will appear in 2009. Mark is at work on a collection of poems, a book on the consolations of reading in a frantic age, and (with Geoff Whyte) *The Little Black Book of Business Writing* (UNSW Press 2009).

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*But even paradise must have rules. I do not know  
whether or not these rules were engendered in  
the beginning by divine deftness or by chance. I  
rather think chance was the origin ... for the rules  
are neither nice nor neat; simply workable, and  
therefore, in the quest for life rather than no-life,  
sublime. Every vitality must have a mechanism that  
recommends it to existence.*

—Mary Oliver, 'Flow'

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BOOK

Mark Tredinnick

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For Daniel,  
who forgets some of the rules  
and makes up the rest

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PROLOGUE

THE  
RULES  
FOR  
PARADISE



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# WHAT GRAMMAR IS AND WHY YOU NEED IT AND HOW YOU MASTER IT

## I

This is a writer's grammar. It's a grammar book *by* a writer *for* writers.

I don't want to put anyone off, but I'm neither a grammarian nor linguist; I'm just a writer who's thought a fair bit about grammar—and taught a fair bit of it, too. This book describes most of the grammar that's taught me how to write. I've written it down in case it helps you, too.

No matter what you write or hope to—novels, poems, papers, reports, articles, emails, blogs, letters to the council, policy, legislation, speeches, brochures, instructions, procedures manuals, wine labels or Christmas cards—you're going to need some grammar. This is a book of grammar for the writer in everyone. And I'm writing it because grammar counts. Grammar counts because it makes meaning possible, and meaning is what writers are trying to make. Or should be. Straight or circuitous; useful or artistic *meaning*. Grammar helps a writer make fast and economical—sometimes beautiful, sometimes shocking—sense.

So, in this book—responding to a need I rediscover on the news every night and in the paper every morning, not to mention in the letters from the council and the travel brochures and the strategic plans I'm asked to edit—I describe grammar the way I've come to understand

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it, the way I talk about it in class. This is how I make sense, for my own purposes, of the inner life of sentences; this is what helps me, now and then, write with grace, which is a thing grammar's good for.

By describing the way the language works and how it wants its sentences composed—the many templates, the few strict rules, the many irregularities and variations—I hope to help writers, from poets to policy wonks, move more sure-footedly through their sentences and paragraphs, their phrases and clauses and fragments. I hope to help them make the right choices by understanding better the beautiful, sometimes perverse, but mostly orderly and always generous system of the language—English—in which we conduct, many of us, our lives, and in which most of us, to some extent, make our livelihoods.

Grammar is the logic of the language. Grammar is the body of knowledge that allows you to master sentences and, making them more deftly and unambiguously, to say what you mean, neatly and memorably. For grammar starts and finishes, pretty much, with the sentence, that beautiful and robust tool for the manufacture of meaning. At very least, a good and meaningful sentence plays by the rules and therefore stands; it is a sentence—not something *resembling* a sentence. Unless it is a sentence, it cannot sing; it cannot make its unique semantic music. It cannot make great art and it cannot make much sense.

So, in this book, I'll be dealing with what really goes on inside a sentence.

- I'll define a sentence, in a way that should help you work out if you've got one there in front of you or not, and I'll talk about the many moods, modes, purposes and structures of sentence the language has conceived.
- I'll name the roles (the *dramatis personae*) on offer in a sentence (the subject, verb, object and modifier), whatever its shape.
- I'll catalogue the parts of speech (noun, verb, pronoun, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, article and a few hybrids), and I'll explain their morphologies (how and why we spell them differ-

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ently according to the use we put them to—in what tense, in what number, as agents or recipients of action, for instance).

- I'll describe the many species of phrase and clause a writer gets to trade with; I'll work through the uses of the fourteen (or is it fifteen?) marks of punctuation for which standard contemporary English has found a use (the way we score a piece of writing to make it sound the way we heard it in our head).
- I'll troubleshoot some common confusions, gaffes and debated or tricky usages.

## II

There are schools of grammar, and I belong to none of them. Among the schools are traditional grammar, modern grammar and what is sometimes called *transformational-generative* grammar, the scientific-sounding grammar linguistics students learn these days. Rodney Huddleston of the University of Queensland is an undisputed leader in the field of contemporary linguistic grammar. I'm uneasy with the diction of this (dominant) school of grammar—it's hard going for a writer on deadline—and I'm uncomfortable with its claim to 'correct' the 'errors' of 'older traditional grammar'. But I can't fault its science, and throughout this book I refer often to Huddleston's book *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar*. No one interested in the ways and means of sentences can ignore it.

I'm more comfortable with the commonsense and plain-spokenness of modern grammar, whose queen is Pam Peters. Like her, I look at what the postmodern grammarians have to say, and I look back to the ancients, and I look in the middle, where Peters usually sits, in order to acknowledge disagreements and developments, to discuss differences of view, and in the end to come as close as I can to a clear and useful description of everything important. The larger part of grammar, I should say, isn't especially mysterious or contentious. But there are controversies, and

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there are areas where even now the scholars are trying to agree how best to make sense of usages that have been in the language since Chaucer's April showers. (How do we properly understand the infinite phrase, for instance, in *I'd love you to love me*? How should we characterise *to her* in *I gave my book to her*? And is it really apt to describe this sentence—*Take care of yourself*—as a clause in the imperative mood?)

The fact that grammarians still contend about the names and natures of such everyday usages shows how much like the rest of creation a sentence is, and how like a science grammar is (never finished looking for the best way to understand and articulate the world, in this case, of the sentence) and how language itself will always transcend our neatest conceptions of it. For grammar doesn't construct language; it describes the way it goes. Grammar tries to explain how language works, so that we might use language, especially on paper, with some insight and consistency, and in doing so keep it strong.

But I'm not a grammarian; I'm not a scientist of the language. I am, like you, a writer. And I've written this book so that I, like you, can spend more time writing and less time worrying about compliance. Over the years I've learned a few things about grammar. But you'd be surprised how many books I have open here on my desk as I write; you'd be surprised how often, in writing this book, I discovered how much more there was to understand than I had thought. The challenge isn't to know all the answers; it is to ask enough of the right questions.

### III

Because grammar scares some of us witless, even though we practise it most of the moments of our waking lives, talking or writing; and because there's a school of thought that looks on grammar as a kind of tyranny imposed on our creativity by a cardigan-wearing cadre of joyless pedants, I offer you this metaphor for grammar. Grammar is the rules of democracy, which regulate and perpetuate this imperfect paradise of

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ours. It's the bundle of shared values, etiquettes, codified or inherited rights and obligations, along with a certain amount of governance infrastructure, all of which helps keep us in the freedom (of speech) to which we are accustomed. Grammar is, I suppose, that cluster of virtuous meaning-making habits. It is also the constitution that describes and proclaims them.

Now, as someone has said—with the activities of the CIA in mind—democracy can be overdone, and so can grammar. But we need some rules if we want what democracy allows us, if we want to prevent anarchy and tyranny. And we want some rules and we need to practise them if we want meaning to abound.

The rules of grammar are the rules for paradise.

The institutions and articles of democracy manufacture and conserve freedom. The rules of grammar manufacture and conserve language, with its power to make and share meaning. Grammar is the system inside the language; it is the constitution of the tongue. And if we want a community of sense—if we want to continue the vigorous and sometimes absurd and sometimes glorious conversation about ourselves and our world that we carry on in literature and government and everyday speech—then we'll need to know and observe our language's bill of rights: we'll need to learn and practise our grammar.

Now, I don't care for undue formality, the kind that pedantic insistence on grammar can foster. Grammar, like democracy, can be overdone. I like intelligent *informality*. We need a diversity of styles; each of us needs to find our unique voice and native syntax. That's the kind of democracy I'd fight for. I'm drawn, in particular, to the beauty of authentic vernacular, and some of that disobeys grammar. If you're writing, though, you'll need to obey more rules. Readers demand it; if they're to follow you without your waving arms and your twinkling eyes and the acts that accompany speech, readers need you to take more care with the words and how you lay them down. But you don't have to sound pompous. Good writers sound like good talkers—but a little tidier.



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My point is this: getting your grammar down shouldn't make you sound like the Queen of England. Correctness doesn't entail formality. Sound sentences needn't sound stilted. Indeed, such writing will fail. It's a lapse of taste, a want of cool, no matter how correct it is.

So, relax your diction, but straighten your syntax. Stay cool; write like you speak, only better. The 'better' is where the grammar comes in.

#### IV

This book describes the system that is often called *standard* English. It looks at the structures of how we speak and write—and it describes and commends habits that have tended to help most writers and speakers make the most elegant and economical sense, nine times out of ten. It doesn't prescribe, or not too often; it describes, and it recommends, where a choice is open. Where I prescribe, I do it, I'd like to think, not for personal or pedantic reasons, but to defend the integrity and intelligence of the system—and the soundness of sentences generally. I do it to encourage writing that sounds like the best kind of talking—as vivid and humble, but more impeccably designed. I do it to help writers avoid embarrassment. I do it, if this doesn't sound too worthy, for the sake of the history and the future of the language.

I don't rail (too much) against breaches and abominations. And I don't speak against writing that stretches the rules—inventively, playfully, intelligently pushing sentences almost to breaking or pulling them austere back. In fact, one wants such prose; we need as much of it as we can get. Let's all aim higher and take more risks and manufacture more beauty in our sentences. But anyone who wants to break the rules had better know what they are first. Ignorance of the law, they say, is no excuse for breaking it, and it won't keep you out of gaol (or is that 'jail' these days?).

'Learn the rules', wrote the zen poet Basho; 'and forget the rules'. Just don't ignore them. They'll set your writing free.

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PART ONE

A NATURAL  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
SENTENCE



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# SENTENCE GRAMMAR, PARTS OF SPEECH, PHRASES, CLAUSES AND SENTENCE TYPES

## I

### **The inner life of sentences**

Many grammar books start with the parts; this one starts with the whole. We can come back for the pieces (the parts of speech, their names and behaviours) when we know what they're part of. When we know just what it is we fabricate with them.

What is a sentence; what does it do; how does its system work; what core relationships sustain it? This is where I begin. I start with deep structure—the thing a writer must master.

Every piece of writing, no matter how flat and useful, is a crowd of stories, and each of them is a sentence. Every sentence tells a tale: it names someone (or something) and tells you something about them—what they did; what they are; or what happened to them. What a sentence names is the subject; what the rest of the sentence tells you (about the subject) is its predicate.

Sentence by sentence, your reader looks for that short story. Good, sound sentences tell that story, and tell it clearly, no matter what else they do.

The other things good sentences do include linking themselves to

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other sentences forward and aft of them, illustrating their idea, complicating their initial simplicity, qualifying their points, and building rapport with their readers. But before any of that they must do their core business, which is to name that person or thing and tell you something sensible about them.

Stylish sentences, no matter how simple, no matter how complex, are strung on sound syntax. They make it clear who does what (and sometimes to whom); that is the through-line of any sentence; it's what the lawyers call the *sine qua non*—the thing we cannot do without.

Here are some:

- 1 Rain fell.
- 2 The river flooded.
- 3 Every sentence tells a tale.
- 4 My mother died on a fine Saturday morning in the month of August, in the year 2000.
- 5 I have a vision of an eloquent Australia.
- 6 She is a poet with an MBA; there aren't too many of those.
- 7 Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.
- 8 This chapter defines tax expenditures and describes their magnitude and scope.
- 9 We live in circumstances that are not of our own making.
- 10 An explosive document was tabled last night in Council.

Every good sentence contains a subject and a predicate. And within that predicate is a verb that's finite, a verb that's fixed in time. So, had I written

Every good sentence *containing* a subject and a predicate

I would not have made a sound sentence. You notice it doesn't *sound* like one? It sounds like a nonfinite clause waiting for an independent clause to hang from. It's not fixed in time; *containing* is a present participle that just keeps going on and on. *Containing* would also be called a *verbal*. Verbals are incomplete and nonfinite verbs, which serve as either nouns

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(*writing, jumping, losing*) or modifiers (*broken finger, dripping tap, falling market*). A finite verb—which every predicate needs; which the central story requires—has *tense*, in other words. *Contains*, in the sentence I wrote, is expressed in the simple present tense, a tense that describes action that is happening now and tends always to happen. (For *containing* to be fixed in time, it would need the help of the verb *to be*, thus: *is containing* or *was containing* or *will be containing*. Which doesn't sound quite right because it implies that that action is located at, and proceeds from, a more specific moment than is the case. (I talk more about tenses in Part Two.)

In addition, a sound sentence must be *independent*. Every good sentence is complete; it wants nothing, grammatically speaking; and it has nothing added to it that strips it of its self-reliance. So, if I alter a couple of the sentences I gave you in the list of examples earlier, thus

*When* the river flooded.

*After* my mother died ...

neither would be independent anymore; the little words (prepositions) I've inserted at the head make them depend upon—make them subordinate to—another clause that never comes. They have become, by the addition of subordinating words (subordinating conjunctions), subordinate or dependent clauses. Each is now something less than a sentence. On its own, each would be called a sentence fragment, not a sentence.

Finally, the words in a sentence must follow conventional word order. English is fairly loose and generous about this, but clearly some word patterns produce a scrambled sentence, not merely an awkward one—if you get the words way out of recognisable patterns, you have not made a sentence:

The never trust artist. Tale trust the.

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(I say a little more about conventional word order shortly.)

Let's look more closely at each of my sentences, pointing to the subject and predicate, and explaining anything else that arises.

- 1 *Rain fell.* *Rain* is the thing this sentence names; *rain* is its subject. And what does the sentence say about the rain? That it *fell*. The predicate here is a finite verb, and that's all.
- 2 *The river flooded.* It's the same story with the river and its flooding, except that *river* has *the* in front of it. *The* and *a* are called *articles* or *determiners*. More on them later. *The* is adjectival, or modifying; it helps signal which river.
- 3 *Every sentence tells a story.* *Sentence* is your subject here; *every* modifies it (you'd call it a determiner too). All the other words are the predicate; among them, *tells* is the verb (in the present tense); *story*, the thing that gets told, the noun that receives the verb, is the *object* of the verb and of the sentence. Notice that it has the indefinite *article* (*a*) in front of it.
- 4 The opening sentence of Donald Antrim's 2003 essay, 'I Bought a Bed'—*My mother died on a fine Saturday morning in the month of August, in the year 2000*—contains this simple sentence (an independent clause): *My mother died.* *Mother*—plus the possessive form of the first person personal pronoun (*my*)—is the subject of that core sentence; *died* is the heart of the predicate, a finite verb (an intransitive verb that does not require (as *fell* and *flooded* did not, either) an object). One just dies; one doesn't die anyone or anything, though sometimes one dies adverbially—*beautifully* or *badly*, *painfully* or *quickly*. The rest of the sentence—the rest of the predicate, if you like—is four word clusters (phrases), one beginning with the preposition *in*, one beginning with the preposition *on*, one beginning with *of* and the last beginning with *in*. Each of these prepositional phrases tells one a little more about the main event—different aspects of *when* it happened.
- 5 *I have a vision of an eloquent Australia.* Subject: *I* (first person personal

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pronoun). Predicate: *have a vision* and perhaps also the prepositional phrase that follows (*of an eloquent Australia*). *Of an eloquent Australia* characterises (modifies or describes) the nature of that vision. Within the predicate, the finite verb is *have*, and its object is the noun *vision*.

- 6 *She is a poet with an MBA; there aren't too many of those.* I've married two sentences with a semicolon, here. Let's take them one at a time. *She* is the subject of the first; the rest of the words compose the predicate; within them, the finite verb is *is*, and *a poet* is the subject complement. This is the first example so far of the structure of sentence that names something/someone and then tells you what she/it *is*. The verb *to be* (*is*, here; present tense and singular, because *she* is the subject) does not describe action performed by a subject and passing to an object. (*She loves a poet* uses a normal kind of verb, where the loving is performed, as it were, by the subject *she* upon the object *a poet*. *She is a poet* identifies the subject of the sentence and the noun that follows the verb. *What is she? A poet.*) *With an MBA* is a word cluster, specifically a prepositional phrase, and it tells us what kind of poet she is. You'd call this phrase a modifier. *There aren't too many of those* has the same structure. The subject is *there*; it's called *the existential there*. The verb is *are*, made negative by the addition of *not*; *too many* is the subject complement; *of those* is a modifying prepositional phrase.
- 7 Each of the sentences so far has been a declarative sentence. It tells you what something *does* or someone *is*. I was always told that each such sentence, like each sentence so far, was in the indicative mood. To call it a declarative sentence is to say the same thing, I've learned in more recent years. More on this later. I mention all this because D H Lawrence's epigram—*Never trust the artist. Trust the tale*—gives you two sentences in the imperative mood. Neither contains its subject; its subject is, if you are reading the sentence, *you*; that is, the reader. Although a legitimate sentence is meant to contain a subject, sentences like these, in the imperative mood, are regarded



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