

## Basic Grammar and Usage for Biomedical Communicators



A Core Curriculum Workshop of the  
American Medical Writers Association



Flo Witte, MA, ELS

BASIC GRAMMAR AND USAGE FOR BIOMEDICAL COMMUNICATORS. FLO WITTE. DUBUQUE, IA: KENDALL/HUNT PUBLISHING; 2003. XI + 169 PAGES [PLUS TEAROUT, MAIL-IN EXAMINATION]. SOFTCOVER. \$155.00 (AMWA MEMBERS); \$250.00 (AMWA NON-MEMBERS). ISBN 0-7575-0287-3.

Grammar sessions were an annoyance in school. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and even adverbs were easy enough, but I'd learn just enough of participial phrases and predicate pronouns (anything that started with a "p") to pass the requisite tests and then promptly forget most of it. So I initially viewed reading this grammar book as a tedious chore. But I found the book surprisingly nonthreatening and without the pedantry inherent in style manuals and the oh-so-formidable *Hodges' Harbrace College Handbook* writer's guide.

In *Basic Grammar and Usage for Biomedical Communicators*, the first in a series of distance-learning American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) workshops, Flo Witte encourages readers to become more than adequate—indeed, excellent—biomedical communicators by learning (or relearning) the basic rules of the English language. Although designed primarily for persons whose first language is not English, this workshop on syntax, grammar, and usage will also help fluent English-speakers learn how to identify and correct errors in their own and others' work. Even experienced communicators will find this workshop a fairly quick but good refresher.

*Basic Grammar* is set up in four sections (parts of speech, sentences and sentence elements, basic rules of grammar, and usage) that comprise 11 chapters, each of which is followed by relevant multiple-choice exercises. Answers to the exercises, with explanations of why the correct responses are correct and usually why the other options are wrong, are provided. The explanations can be rather long and may be too involved for less experienced grammarians. A useful glossary of grammar terms and an index are provided. A final examination comes with this workshop and may be submitted to AMWA for Core Curriculum credit.

Witte writes conversationally and wisely limits the amount of material presented by sticking with the absolute basics of grammar plus some comments on usage. And rather than just systematically listing rules, she takes the trouble to explain why the

parts of speech and sentences are what they are. The result is a grammar book that does not overwhelm the reader with length or pedantry.

Authors of many grammar books barrel from one chapter to the next and assume that readers will understand each lesson as they go along. But most chapters build on the previous lessons, and a reader who misses the point of an early lesson is doomed and the self-improvement enterprise often abandoned. Because *Basic Grammar* was explicitly developed for independent study, however, Witte is careful to provide suitable examples to illustrate the topic at hand and takes the time to explain the subject in several ways—sometimes to the point of unnecessary redundancy; but for persons whose first language is not English, this repetition is likely helpful. In addition, Witte provides examples that might reasonably be encountered by biomedical communicators. Users will feel that this book is directly relevant to their work.

As an editor, I appreciated the discussion of oft-encountered problems with participles ("based on", "using", and "compared to" or "compared with") in biomedical writing. I would like to have seen a discussion of the erroneous use of "with" as a conjunction (for example, "Twenty patients were diagnosed with cancer, with five of them diagnosed by clinical examination alone"); this problem is not peculiar to medical writing but, like the other three examples, is all too commonly seen in our field. Experienced writers and editors will find other things to quibble about (topics that were not included and exceptions to the presented rules), but such cavils do not subtract from the value of this workshop. Biomedical communicators ranging from novice to experienced will gain something useful from *Basic Grammar*.

Lizzie Hess

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## Booknotes

THE BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE WRITING 2003. EDITED BY OLIVER SACKS; SERIES EDITOR JESSE COHEN. NEW YORK: ECCO PRESS (HARPERCOLLINS); 2003. XI + 272 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$27.50, SOFTCOVER \$13.95. ISBN 0-06-621163-8 (HARDCOVER), 0-06-093651-7 (SOFTCOVER).

How does one choose the “best” in a field in which there is no clear “first place”?

Oliver Sacks, author of *Awakenings*, which inspired the Oscar-winning movie of the same name, takes over the editorial reins for *The Best American Science Writing 2003*. Sacks follows his own rule to answer the question: “The best science writing . . . cannot be completely ‘objective’ . . . but it is never self-indulgently subjective either.”

Twenty-five articles—from sources ranging from high-profile publications, such as *The New York Times*, to more modest ones, such as *Southwestern Review*—are collected in this, the fourth volume in the series.

Highlights of this collection include Atul Gawande’s revealing glimpse of surgical training in “The Learning Curve”. Often, the “professionals” performing life-saving, or life-ending, procedures are simply residents-in-training. A surgeon himself, Gawande has experienced the pressure of practicing on a living human. He has also felt the indecision of whether to allow a resident to perform surgery (that is, practice) on a family member. “We want perfection without practice”, he writes. “Yet everyone is harmed if no one is trained for the future.” Thus, allowing residents to learn by doing is a necessary evil, one that continues even after residency as medical technology continues to change.

Another engaging piece in the book is the article by Brendan Koerner, “Disorders Made to Order”, about the marketing techniques used by pharmaceutical companies. Rather than develop new medicines, the companies seek new indications for preexisting drugs. After receiving a new indication, the company’s public-relations firm revs into high gear to produce ads that promote not the drug itself, but the disorder it has been approved to treat. More of a testament to mass-media influence on society than a “hard” science report, Koerner’s

writing grips the reader with astonishment at the depths to which a company will stoop in pursuit of a dollar.

The final article, by Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins, “Stephen Jay Gould: What Does It Mean to Be a Radical?” is an homage to the late scientist to whom this volume is dedicated. Lewontin and Levins point out that the root of the word radical is *radix*, the Latin word for “root”. They assert that Gould always went back to the root of evolutionary biology in his work and by doing so made enormous contributions to the advancement of the science. Lewontin and Levins also tell the reader that in explaining his work to the public, Gould “combined a truthful and subtle explication of scientific findings and problems, with a technique of exposition that neither condescended to his readers nor oversimplified the science”.

Other interesting pieces in this collection include Trevor Corson’s look at political interference in lobster fishing, “Stalking the American Lobster”; Gunjan Sinha’s explanation of research seeking the reason that some cheat on their spouses, “You Dirty Vole”; and “The Mosquito’s Buzz”, by Thomas Eisner, an account of one role of insect acoustics, discovered by Hiram Maxim, inventor of the machine gun.

**Joshua Harris**

JOSHUA HARRIS prepared this book note while a Science Editor intern.

MEDICAL MEANINGS: A GLOSSARY OF WORD ORIGINS. WILLIAM S HAUBRICH. PHILADELPHIA: AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS; 2003. XI + 267 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$33.00. ISBN 1-930513-49-6.

For medical editors who are also word-lovers, this second edition of Haubrich’s book is a reliable delight. Checking 15 random entries, I found that *Medical Meanings* consistently agreed with the other sources (Latin and ancient Greek dictionaries and another word-origin book). Almost 300 new words have been added in this edition, including the recently coined SARS.

Humor distinguishes this book from other etymologic tomes; the reader can share the author's pleasure in word play. For example, under chiasma, the author couldn't resist including his favorite example of literary chiasma: "Don't let a fool kiss you or a kiss fool you"!

Still, the reader learns much from *Medical Meanings*. For example, I would have said that the name for the paralytic agent curare was derived from the Latin curare ("to care for"). But it is not so—instead, the word comes from the language of the Mucasi tribe, which called the plant urare-yi. And how interesting it is to find out that cubicle actually means "sleeping chamber" (office designers, please note).

A wonderful stroll through medical etymology, *Medical Meanings* is a recommended gift book for any medical word-lover's bookshelf!

**Elizabeth Whalen**

ELIZABETH WHALEN is a freelance medical writer in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

**THE ASJA GUIDE TO FREELANCE WRITING: A PROFESSIONAL GUIDE TO THE BUSINESS, FOR NONFICTION WRITERS OF ALL EXPERIENCE LEVELS. EDITED BY TIMOTHY HARPER. NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN; 2003. XIX + 314 PAGES. SOFTCOVER \$15.95. ISBN 0-312-31852-9.**

This practical, readable book—a project

of the American Society of Journalists and Authors—is intended for freelance writers but may aid or interest many editors as well. Several of the 26 chapters—such as those on planning a business, setting up an office, networking, employing an assistant, dealing with taxes and deductions, and moving to full-time freelancing—seem nearly as applicable to freelance editing as to freelance writing. Some chapters offer advice on skills, such as generating article ideas and finding experts, that can be as important for some publication editors as for writers. Other chapters engagingly explore topics—such as publishing op-ed pieces and personal essays, collaborating with a subject-matter expert on a book, reselling one's work or recasting it for new markets, and taking effective photos—likely to appeal to those with broad editorial interests. And the book includes writers' perspectives on interacting with editors. "Probably the best piece of advice is to remember that editors are human too", a magazine editor turned freelance writer concludes in her chapter, "Writer-Editor Relations". "Treat them as you would want to be treated." Both directly and indirectly, this guide for authors may benefit editors too.

**Barbara Gastel**

BARBARA GASTEL, a faculty member at Texas A&M University, is editor of *Science Editor*.