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## Foreword

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*Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.*

—RUDYARD KIPLING IN A SPEECH QUOTED IN THE *LONDON TIMES*

If you're like me, you learned the basics of the English language from a well-intentioned adult. Someone like Mrs. White, my fifth-grade Language Arts teacher. Mrs. White knew her stuff. And she made sure her students did too. She used various memorization tools to ingrain spelling, grammar, and linguistics rules in our minds: *I before e except after c* and *Never end a sentence with a preposition*. Every day, as soon as the morning bell rang, she ran her students through a cavalcade of memorization exercises. Flash cards, chanting, rhyming, singing—nothing was off limits. Each student had to be able to recall, on demand, the rules of our mother tongue. No exceptions. Rules were rules.

Mrs. White's approach to teaching Language Arts worked (as far as she and other teachers like her were concerned). Her students mastered the rules. Our test scores proved it: her approach had succeeded.

Or had it? I can't speak for my classmates, but I had a difficult time turning this rote learning into effective writing.

By the time I reached university, the value placed on diagramming sentences and mastering semicolon usage had diminished. College professors emphasized critical thinking, problem solving, and communication. All that grammar, spelling, and linguistics stuff was pushed aside. Gone were the days when Mrs. White would award a gold star for stellar punctuation performances. The new rules we had to memorize in post-secondary education involved little of what Mrs. White and her ilk had drummed into us.

After college I took a job as a technical writer at an information-technology firm. My job involved writing, lots of it. I created e-mail newsletters, reports, proposals, presentations, manuals, configuration guides, online help, and training materials. Before they were published and delivered to customers, they had to pass muster with the editors. It was a strange world in which Mrs. White's rules resurfaced, colliding with the rules I had learned in college. Certain editors—well-intentioned but inconsistent rule enforcers—used their knowledge, our company style manual, and grammar rules from Mrs. White's era to impose their will. That approach to editing provided little value to those of us who wanted to grow as writers. We continued to make the same mistakes. Editors continued to correct them.

That was nearly twenty years ago. The teaching of writing has changed. Today, most schools in the United States are no longer required to teach cursive writing.<sup>1</sup> Education authorities in New Zealand have considered allowing students to use texting abbreviations in examinations.<sup>2</sup> *U mean i can rite liKe this IN a x-zam? KeWL. Way 2 go dude.*

As shocking as those developments may seem to those of us raised a generation or more ago, we can take heart in some of the changes in the way language skills are taught. Some teachers are de-emphasizing the memorization techniques that Mrs. White and others have used to present rules out of context—the drill-and-kill method—in favor of integrating grammar lessons into a broader study of reading and writing.<sup>3</sup> These teachers realize that their students, like all of us, have a better chance of becoming strong writers when rules are presented in a context of strong writing.

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1. Scott Elliott, "New Standards Don't Require Students to Learn Cursive Writing," *Indianapolis Star*, July 9, 2011, <http://www.indystar.com/article/20110710/NEWS04/107100364/New-standards-don-t-require-students-learn-cursive-writing>.

2. NZPA and Mandy Smith, "Principals Oppose Text Language in Exams," *NZ Herald*, November 9, 2006, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10409902](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10409902).

3. Matthew Tunge, "Grammar Is a Subject from Which Reading and Writing Should Not Be Removed," *Kentucky Teacher*, July 10, 2012, <http://www.kentuckyteacher.org/features/2012/07/grammar-is-a-subject-from-which-reading-and-writing-should-not-be-removed>.

That's why the book you're holding is so important. If you're like me (and I'm wagering you are), you're a good writer who wants to follow the rules, but every now and again you run into language situations that make you question whether your recollection of the rules is serving you well.

You're not alone.

Marcia Riefer Johnston's collection, *Word Up! How to Write Powerful Sentences and Paragraphs (And Everything You Build from Them)*, is loaded with practical advice for improving your writing by making good use of rules that matter. It does more than preach grammar. It helps you take command of words.

Each well-written lesson provides you with easy-to-remember tips for improving your prose. Johnston reveals interesting and peculiar facts about our language, including some that will delight you. She uses well-placed humor to demystify some often confused rules. She helps you decide when to abide by rules and when to break them. She looks at both sides of certain rules that even experts disagree on. You may be surprised to find that some rules aren't rules at all; they're guidelines that were intended to steer us in the right direction but may have done the opposite.

*Word Up!* is packed with assumption-obliterating advice that would likely earn praise from Shakespeare himself. It's a buffet of grammar and style snacks. Something for everyone. Take what you want. Leave the rest for the next reader.

If Mrs. White were still teaching today, I'm certain she'd use this book. She knew the power of words. Despite my inability to master all the rules, she would be glad to know that she instilled in me a desire to better understand our language and to wield it with authority and confidence. She'd see this book, whether used in the classroom or beyond, as a means of achieving those goals.

Now, what are you waiting for? Turn the page. Let's get started.

—SCOTT ABEL, THE CONTENT WRANGLER