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Acknowledgements

This book is a product of my life-long interest in the study and use of language. More specifically, it was motivated by my teaching of an English writing course for research in the social sciences for twenty years, which spanned nearly the second half of my academic career from 1971 to 2015 at The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

About 300 students, from 1995 to 2015, took my “Research Writing” course. I thank them all for giving me first-hand experience of seeing their problems in English writing. As the course was designed for a small class of not more than a dozen students, I was able to examine their writing closely to identify and understand their weaknesses in grammar, usage, and sentence construction. I corrected all the errors that I found and, where needed, offered better constructions in their prose. At my request, they revised their work with the help of my corrections and various changes. They learned more this way. In the process, I became increasingly involved in the art of expression through words.

I owe unmeasurable gratitude to my wife Meliza, a professional librarian, who has always been supportive and encouraging throughout the past three years of this book’s preparation. She has sustained me in my task often with her good advice and inspiration. At her suggestion, I have included Chinese translations of “What you can learn in this chapter” at the beginning of all chapters and the instructions of all exercises (Chapters 4 to 22). This arrangement should be helpful to a larger readership whose first language is Chinese.

I am most grateful to Professor Ambrose Yeo-chi King, Emeritus Professor of Sociology of The Chinese University of Hong Kong and formerly Vice-Chancellor of the University, for his moral support and recommendation of my work to the present publisher. He has also kindly graced this book with an inspiring foreword, in which he eloquently points out that “deficiency in basic language skills and hence in writing is . . . tantamount to impotence in communication at the educated level”. He also reminds us that “since we use writing as *the* means of expressing our ideas and feelings, our writing is associated closely with our identity”.

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Pedro Pak-tao Ng
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Foreword

We live in an “information age” characterized by exponential growth in audio-visual images giving priority to sensory experience. The pursuit of such experience seems to have much greater appeal, especially for the younger generation, than the study of language and its use in writing. The modern world is also marked by explosive expansion in different forms of digital communication in which the use of words often need not conform to traditional standards.

When young people are increasingly inseparable from vivid images and digital communication, it is not surprising that the decline in the general capacity to write among them has persisted. Nevertheless, it remains true that they need to have the skills of effective writing if they aspire to work in large firms, business corporations, government bodies or academic institutions. Not only do they use writing for communication in the work world, but writing is also their framework of conceptualization, analysis, elaboration, and, above all, thinking as an educated person.

Despite the importance of writing as a communication tool and as a framework of thinking, the foundational learning of English for many students is far from satisfactory. In this context, I am pleased to know that Professor Pedro Ng, my long-time colleague at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, has written this book specifically addressing the issue of acquiring adequate English skills for better writing. Its central message, it seems to me, is that learners and users of English should treat the skills of using the language seriously and apply such skills to write with a sharpened language awareness. Such awareness is not to be taken for granted but is to be acquired earnestly and systematically. I agree with his concern that learners of English need to realize that “in a global world of multifaceted communications across all fields and occupations, good English skills matter enormously.” Deficiency in basic language skills and hence in writing is thus tantamount to impotence in communication at the educated level.

But to write effectively should be more than an instrumental goal. Since we use writing as *the* means of expressing our ideas and feelings, our writing is associated closely with our identity. When we read a person’s writing, we see more than words and the meanings they represent; we see the quality of the person. If handwriting is one’s costume, as an old Chinese saying puts it, then writing amounts to a disclosure of one’s inner self. To the extent that this occurs, individuals who write well are not just competent communicators; they are also likely to become respected colleagues in their work with credibility and leadership potential, as Pedro also observes in his preface.

In this connection, Foucault’s notion of “writing the self” reminds us of the significance of writing as a kind of ethical and mental exercise to reflect on the self for self-care and self-cultivation. Writing is seen as a process of creation of the self (as may be happening in today’s personal blogs written in the first person), which is compatible with the Confucian emphasis on moral perfection of

the individual. This, however, is often not what modern individuals are expecting to gain from writing. Viewed sociologically, therefore, the issue of writing is all the more important as it impinges upon the possibility of cultivating a truly autonomous and mature person, which is the ultimate ideal of liberal education.

Specifically, the contribution of Pedro's *English Skills for Better Writing* lies in its sensitivity to the peculiar linguistic need of students and other users of English. Before his retirement in 2015, he had taught the course "Research Writing" in the Chinese University of Hong Kong for 20 years since 1995. Over the years, he had accumulated considerable experience in handling students' problems in the learning of English in general and writing skills in particular.

This book addresses directly the linguistic competence of learners and users of English by first examining the obstacles to writing well and explaining what good written English ought to be. It then focuses on teaching the fundamental skills of understanding and applying the principles of how English works, supported with well-designed exercises. It also contains a rich compendium of the proper use of hundreds of troublesome words. Moreover, Pedro begins each chapter with a bilingual (English-Chinese) brief description of the chapter's content, a user-friendly feature to suit a wider readership.

Although books on the learning of English and writing guides are not lacking in the book market, Professor Pedro Ng adopts an approach that makes his work comprehensive in scope, enlightening to read, and practical for reference. True to what its title suggests, this book is intended to help students and other readers to solve their language problems as a prerequisite for improving their capacity to write. To this end I think Professor Pedro Ng has indeed offered a very good service to the community.

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Why I wrote this book

Learning English is a common experience among students, but not many have learned it well enough to be able to use English competently and confidently. Errors of grammar and usage keep appearing in the writing of students at both secondary and tertiary levels. Deficiencies in English skills follow them as they enter the work world and could well hold them back in their career development. In a global world of multifaceted communications across all fields and occupations, good English skills matter enormously. The sooner learners of English realize this and the more actively they strengthen their English ability, the more likely they are to gain in confidence, self-esteem, and social recognition, and thus the greater their chances of doing better in life, whatever jobs they may hold.

I believe firmly that if one is willing and determined to put one's mind to learning the basic elements of how English words are organized into meaningful sentences and is ready to cultivate language-use habits that serve to sharpen language awareness, there is no reason why one cannot gradually master the language to express ideas properly and effectively. It is with this conviction that I have written this book, which, I hope, should help committed learners of English to attain their goal.

How this book came about

During my teaching career (in sociology) at The Chinese University of Hong Kong from 1971 to 2015, I often paid special attention to students' grammatical errors and various other deficiencies (e.g., incoherence, wordiness, inadequate vocabulary) in their English written work. In 1994, my Department recognized the need for offering a specially designed course to enhance students' English writing ability and asked me to fill this role. I gladly accepted and designed a new course, called initially "Writing for Sociology" and later "Research Writing". I started teaching it in 1995 until 2015 when I retired. The course covered the whole academic writing process, with considerable attention given to matters of grammar, proper usage, and effective sentences.

After teaching the writing course for about seven years, I wrote a text-cum-reference book titled *Effective Writing: A Guide for Social Science Students*, published by The Chinese University Press in 2003. The course, with *Effective Writing* as textbook, was warmly received by students every year. That rewarding experience inspired me to work on the present book soon after I retired. This new volume differs from *Effective Writing* in that it focuses on a much broader range of grammatical and usage topics. Familiarity with them surely helps to develop the ability to write well. This new work will offer help to students and non-students alike who want to improve their English writing competence.

What I have seen over the past four decades or so in the English writing of tertiary students shows there is clearly a burning need for improvement. Chinese-speaking learners of English have a variety of characteristic difficulties with English to cope with (e.g., the number attribute of nouns,

verb tenses, use of articles and prepositions, choice and use of words, idiomatic combinations of words, sentence structure). Unless they make a conscious effort to overcome these difficulties, they will keep making the same kinds of errors that prevent their writing from being clear and effective. Teachers of English in schools also need to induce their students to pay much greater attention to the basic facts of grammar and usage simply because these matters can make a big difference between poor and good writing. This book is written with such a purpose in mind.

What does this book cover?

The content of this book is divided into three main parts:

Part 1 Getting oriented. Two important questions must be clarified to set you going in the right direction: First, what hinders you from writing good English? Second, what counts as good written English? They are discussed in the first two chapters. I hope and expect that you will read them carefully to (a) have a clear idea of what good written English is, and (b) be aware of what it is that you have not done enough and what kind of attitude you need to adopt to improve your ability to write well in English.

Part 2 Learning the skills. These skills are essential for writing good English. I have selected those skills that, in my opinion, play a significant role in writing sentences that are not only grammatically correct but also effective in expressing ideas clearly and idiomatically. Naturally, these skills cover a wide range of requirements that a careful writer should always bear in mind and strive to meet. I believe every learner of English should make a special effort to understand them well. Ideally, given sufficient attention and carefulness in writing practice, these skills should become habitual and even instinctive.

Exercises are given at the end of all the chapters (4 to 22) in this part of the book. I strongly encourage you to do them to reinforce your understanding of the material.

Part 3 Guide to using words properly. This is a convenient guide to about 300 troublesome words and phrases that are often misused because of insufficient or inadequate knowledge. By studying the given explanations and example sentences, you will soon learn to use these words and phrases properly. The words and phrases that I have included are based on a large amount of student writing I have read over several decades.

Who will benefit from this book?

All learners and users of English who wish to improve their command of English should benefit from this book, especially when it contains over 2,000 example sentences. I have purposely written this book in English so that readers have more of an opportunity to accustom themselves to reading and understanding English. *Learning English through English can be immensely effective.* To

maximize your English competence, it is necessary to see the language in action. As you become more competent, you will be thinking *in English* too.

You may be (a) a senior secondary, undergraduate, or postgraduate student, (b) a schoolteacher of English, or (c) a holder of a job in which written English is much used. You can use the book on your own and delve into any topic that interests you after reading the first three chapters.

Students. Students preparing for public examinations or tests such as the HKDSE and IELTS will find the book helpful. Undergraduates and postgraduates can also learn much from the book to write better papers and theses.

The language used in the book is, as far as possible, plain, and clear, although you may sometimes need to consult a good dictionary (with English explanations and example sentences to illustrate correct usage). *Looking up a dictionary is an important habit and a vital part of the effort needed to upgrade your English.* A good dictionary should be your constant companion. Pay close attention to how words and expressions are used in the context of sentences and try to become familiar with various sentence patterns, which can serve as models for your learning.

Teachers. Not only students but schoolteachers of English will also find this book useful. Teachers can use this book to strengthen their understanding of how good grammar and proper usage of words can facilitate effective expression of ideas. Teachers can also use material in this book as reference in selecting those aspects of English grammar and usage that they wish to teach their students.

At the same time, they can raise their students' awareness of the errors they commonly make and show them how such errors may be avoided. If little or no effort is made to recognize and correct language errors, they will tend to reappear and become ever harder to be got rid of. Writing infested with errors will remain poor in quality, becoming an obstacle to effective expression and communication.

Working adults. Adults working in jobs requiring much written communication in English can use this volume as a handbook to refresh and expand their knowledge of grammar and usage and to look up words whose use they are not sure of. This book can help them write better memos, announcements, business letters, minutes of meetings, project proposals, and reports of various kinds. A better writer can become a better colleague, team member, or manager because a better communicator earns more credibility and respect.

All set to go!

Now you are prepared to make the best use of this book to improve your English. Study it diligently and use it often to acquire a good grasp of how English works so that you will have a firm

foundation upon which to develop your writing ability. Provided you work steadily and persistently through the book and do the exercises conscientiously (without looking at the answers first) and try to apply what you learn in anything you write, you will be surprised to see how much your written English will improve.

I hope you will find reading this book rewarding.

PART 1 Getting Oriented

Chapter 1 What Hinders You From Writing Good English?

What you will learn in this chapter

To write better English, you must first understand what has been keeping you from writing well. Hindering factors include (1) not serious about English, (2) not enough reading, (3) not enough knowledge of English grammar and usage, (4) inadequate ability to recognize errors, and (5) weak vocabulary. You should take concrete remedial action to become more competent and confident in using English to write better.

要改善你的英語寫作能力，首先你要明白有什麼障礙需要克服。障礙主要有五個：(1) 對英語態度不夠認真，(2) 閱讀不充分，(3) 對英語語法和使用的認識不夠，(4) 缺乏辨錯能力，(5) 詞彙不足。你必須採取具體的補救行動提升你的英語能力，從而更有自信地用英語寫作。

1.1 Five hindering factors

1.2 A casual attitude towards the English language

1.3 Insufficient reading experience

1.4 Insufficient understanding of grammar and usage

1.5 Inadequate ability to recognize errors

1.6 Weak vocabulary

1.7 Vicious circle of avoidance of English

1.8 Conclusion: the strategy you need

1.1 Five hindering factors

Many learners and users of English want to do something to improve their English writing ability. As one of them, your first task is to examine what has been hindering you from writing well in English. In this chapter, let us have an overview of five possible factors. They may not exhaust all possibilities, but they are among the most common characteristics of those for whom writing well in English is difficult. The five factors are:

- (1) a casual attitude towards the English language,
- (2) insufficient reading experience,
- (3) insufficient understanding of grammar and usage,
- (4) inadequate ability to recognize errors, and
- (5) a weak vocabulary.

1.2 A casual attitude towards the English language

Take a moment to think about the place of the English language in your life. How have you looked at English as it relates to you? How much does it matter to you?

Let us be a little more specific. Do you attach great importance to English in your studies (if you are a student), your work, or your career advancement? Have you ever thought of English as your window to a wider world that extends beyond any boundary you can imagine? Do you feel the urge to know more about how English works as a language? Are you aware of your weakness in using English to write? Have you made an effort—a genuinely sustaining effort—to find out how to overcome that weakness? If you think you are generally satisfied with your English proficiency, do you want to improve and upgrade it?

If the answers to these questions are all or mostly “yes”, then you have a rather serious attitude towards English. That is very good. You are on firm ground to strive for improvement. On the other hand, if your answers are mostly “unsure” or not clearly positive, then your attitude is largely casual. A casual attitude towards English as a language would not give you a strong enough driving force to strengthen your skills in using the language. It does not give you enough confidence; neither does it help you to set a goal to work towards. In short, it really hinders you from writing good English.

1.3 Insufficient reading experience

Reading offers an immensely valuable experience of becoming familiar with the use of words and phrases in sentences. If you have a habit of reading English material in newspapers, magazines and books, you are exposed to a great variety of sentence patterns that can demonstrate how standard written English looks like. Of course, you will also notice how ideas are connected through the sentences that make up paragraphs.

At the same time, you can also pick up many new or not-so-familiar words and colloquial expressions. In the process, you may even discover how familiar words are used in ways unfamiliar to you. For example, you may already know the meanings of **pay** and **handsome** but may have difficulty understanding the sentence **His rigorous training will probably pay off handsomely in the swimming**

gala. As a result, you can steadily expand and enrich your vocabulary, which means that you will get to know more words (a quantitative matter) and more about the words you know (a qualitative attainment).

So much can be learned and acquired from reading regularly that you will, in due course, cultivate an almost intuitive sense of what good standard written English is and looks like. Try reading an editorial from a local English newspaper and see how you take it. If you have no difficulty understanding its theme and main points laid out in some comprehensible structure, you probably have a *regular* reading habit over some years, which has expanded your vocabulary and given you the facility for recognizing and interpreting good written English.

I want to stress the word **regular** because, for reading to make a significant and positive impact on your language ability, it must be done regularly and consistently, such as if you set aside some time each day to read something, not while you are occupied by other thoughts and concerns but attentively and single-mindedly. It does require *self-discipline*.

By contrast, the lack of quality reading experience puts you in a very disadvantageous position, as far as language competence is concerned. You would not be familiar with good sentence forms; your vocabulary lacks healthy growth; and you would have inadequate knowledge of the idiomatic use of words and phrases.

1.4 Insufficient understanding of grammar and usage

Grammar is, simply put, the body of principles and rules about the structure of the language and the formation of sentences in that language. Usage, closely related to grammar, is how grammatical structures and words are used in ways that are both correct and idiomatic or natural.

1.4.1 Subject-verb agreement

To form a sentence properly, for example, the verb must agree with its subject. That is, a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb, as in the following three sentences:

	Remarks
<i>Our new project starts in June.</i>	Singular subject, our new project , and singular verb present tense, starts
<i>We appreciate your understanding.</i>	Plural subject, we , and plural verb, appreciate
<i>What the doctor said makes a lot of sense.</i>	What the doctor said , noun clause as singular subject, and singular verb present tense, makes

1.4.2 Word order and word form

Good (or correct) grammar requires us to pay attention to many points concerning word order or the use of different forms of a certain word, as the following two constructions show:

Incorrect	Correct
<i>I don't know what is this?</i>	<i>I don't know what this is.</i> (correct word order in an indirect question)
<i>Keep this between you and I.</i>	<i>Keep this between you and me.</i> (correct use of object form of pronoun)
<i>They are working hardly on this project.</i>	<i>They are working hard on this project.</i> (Hard is both adjective and adverb. Here, it is an adverb modifying <i>working</i> .)

1.4.3 Questions of usage

Of course, grammar and usage cover a lot of ground. Usage is about how words and phrases are used correctly and naturally (idiomatically) according to their grammatical function and precisely to show a particular meaning. Questions of usage are often also questions of grammar when grammatical forms or rules need to be considered. Thus, for example, the word **plan** may be used as a verb (e.g., **to plan a trip**) or as a noun (e.g., **a detailed vacation plan**). If you use **plan** as a verb, it refers to acting in preparation for something or making arrangements for something. That “something” is shown in the noun phrase **a trip**, serving as the object of the verb **plan**. But if you use **plan** as a noun, it is the description of the preparation or arrangement, which may be specified by another noun such as **vacation** and pre-modified by an adjective such as **detailed**.

1.4.4 Choosing the right word

Sometimes, the focus of usage can be primarily on choosing the right word or phrase to convey a particular meaning. Choosing the right word to express a meaning precisely or accurately is often an important task in writing. For instance, should a certain business proposal be described as **practical** or **practicable**? (**Practical** = worth doing; **practicable** = can be done.) When we write about what goes on between individuals, do we speak of their **relation** or **relationship**? (**Relation** = connection; **relationship** = quality of connection) Choosing the wrong word can distort your meaning and confuse your readers.

1.4.5 Usage is more than correct grammar.

At times, we may come across situations where the use of one word rather than another can make a big difference in the meaning of a sentence. Examine the following two sentences, both being grammatical in construction but different in meaning:

	Remarks
1. <i>Young people, who have many interests, find it difficult to identify what they really want to do.</i>	The clause, who have many interests , set off by two commas, is non-restrictive.
2. <i>Young people who have many interests find it difficult to identify what they really want to do.</i>	The clause, who have many interests , NOT set off by two commas, is restrictive.

In the first sentence, the **who**-clause (**who have many interests**, a relative clause) is “non-restrictive” (also called “non-defining”) in that it does not restrict the reference of the subject **young people** to any particular individuals. That is, it applies to *all* young people. The content of the **who**-clause is not