Grammar for a FULL LIFE

How the Ways We Shape a Sentence Can Limit or Enlarge Us

Lawrence Weinstein

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To tell how near a soul has come to being fully realized, the sign is speech.

— *Nachman of Bratzlav*

Contents

To Diane's memory . . . and the live Suzanne.

Introduction

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

When my devoted wife, Diane Weinstein, was still living—and avidly contributing her input on the first version of this book—I had a cockeyed dream one night in which she played a crucial part.

In that dream, dinner guests of ours were going for their coats and readying to leave when Diane suddenly came out of the kitchen holding an oversized pot by two handles and chiding me, saying, "You forgot to serve the alphabet soup."

At these words, I turned red, sensing the enormity of my omission. I dutifully corralled a few bewildered guests back to our dinner table.

Those few sat right down, picked up spoons, and stared for a moment at what lay in front of them: an engrossing mix of letters and punctuation marks circulating freely in their bowls. They used their spoons to have some wary sips of the dish.

Then, in no time whatsoever, two or three of them pronounced this soup "good for a person," "more life-giving than we'd imagined," etcetera.

As soon as I woke from my dream, I knew that it was actually about this book. The dream had been a ploy by my unconscious to reassure me of the book's potential worth to future readers.

The boost to my morale could not have been timed better. I'd been getting skittish about going public with this work of mine, so dear to me. In a real sense, I felt *tempted* just to let it cool and be forgotten in our kitchen—and Diane seemed to know that.

A grammar book for enhancing human spirit? As any skeptic worth his salt would say, give me a break. In the minds of a majority of people, that word *grammar* is about as vibrant with promise of a better life as the words *dry pedantry*.

How many readers could there be who'd entertain the claim that someone can become a fuller person by such means as cutting back on exclamation marks?

Here then, briefly, is the story of how this collection of essays—this alphabet soup of mine—came into existence.

During my own early years of teaching writing, I, too, would have thought it laughable to pen a book suggesting that humanity's short list of practices for hastening personal growth be expanded beyond meditation, yoga, and the martial arts to include achieving more variety in sentence length. Like my colleagues at both Harvard University and Bentley University, I viewed grammar strictly in the light of its well-established basic function: clear communication.

A randomly sequenced row of words like "hand rake me you that would" is gibberish—whereas the grammatical, punctuated sentence "Would you hand me that rake?" gets the job done.

That was grammar's quite substantial gift to us—but its *only* gift, insofar as I could tell.

With time's passage in the classroom, though, I took note of something curious: Each of my hundreds of students had a unique grammatical profile. In fact, the variation was striking.

One class member never used a question mark—or even just a hedging phrase or clause—but would use italics and intensifiers (like *very*, *without doubt*) freely. Another stood out for inserting the occasional parenthesis or dash as a chatty, conversational touch. A third wrote sentences so long they gave one the impression that she simply couldn't bear to *part* with her wide-ranging trains of thought, while a fourth wrote timid sentences of fewer than a dozen words.

What is more, these students' different grammar choices seemed to correspond to their diverse personalities, their distinct ways of understanding and dealing with life.

Then, I stumbled on the writings of linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf was looking at the differences between whole languages—such as between English as a whole and Hopi as a whole—not between my students' *types* of English prose, but I began to wonder if his central insight about whole (that is, national or standard) languages applied to all those private "languages," as well.

According to Whorf, any language will do more than enable its speakers to convey their thinking to each other: It

will also somewhat *mold* their thinking. Whorf argued that, by making certain thoughts easier to express than others, a language helps determine what one thinks and feels in the first place. In English, for example, we have tenses that separate the present from the past—that put the past behind us, in effect, implying it will never come again—and most of us who *think* in English therefore try not to "waste" time; we move frenziedly. By comparison, the Hopi Indians Whorf studied, whose management of tense implied that "everything that ever happened still is," had less anxiety than most of us do and led more measured lives. A language, Whorf believed, can contribute either to neuroses (his term) or to more expansive, adaptive ways of thinking and being.

I asked myself, Could the same be said of each of the distinctive tongues I had been hearing *within* English? Could the variations from one English speaker to the next be linked to different ways of thinking and living, not all of which are equally likely to foster well-being? If so, that seemed to be worth knowing, since making some few tweaks to one's persistent set of grammar practices might, then, alter one's time spent on Earth in consequential ways.

It was at that point in my thinking, though, when my train-of-thought temporarily derailed—and a good thing, too. I soon learned that Whorf had many detractors in the field of linguistics. More importantly, I soon had to concede that their critiques were largely valid ones, based on evidence. In particular, I saw that most of the effects Whorf attributed to vocabulary and/or grammar can't, in fact, be produced through language *per se*, language not reinforced by cultural or other factors.

When that came home to me, my mind turned to one specific "other factor": intention. I could not help wondering if certain grammatical moves might have real, transformative value to a speaker/writer who adopts them *with volition, wishing* to be influenced by them. For example, if I started handling tenses in a new fashion, that move in itself might have no or little helpful (Hopi-like) effect on me. If, however, I infused my new management of tenses with purpose—with the *wish* for some positive effect on myself—what then?

Well supplied with purpose of that kind, I self-consciously began to note effects of my grammatical choices on my own quality of life. Which of those choices left me feeling "off" or constrained? Which provided me a taste of being whole and capable? To pursue the matter, I at times even took my own vital signs, in a manner of speaking.

Respiratory rate? I felt I didn't breathe as freely when I avoided use of the first-person pronoun as when I employed it.

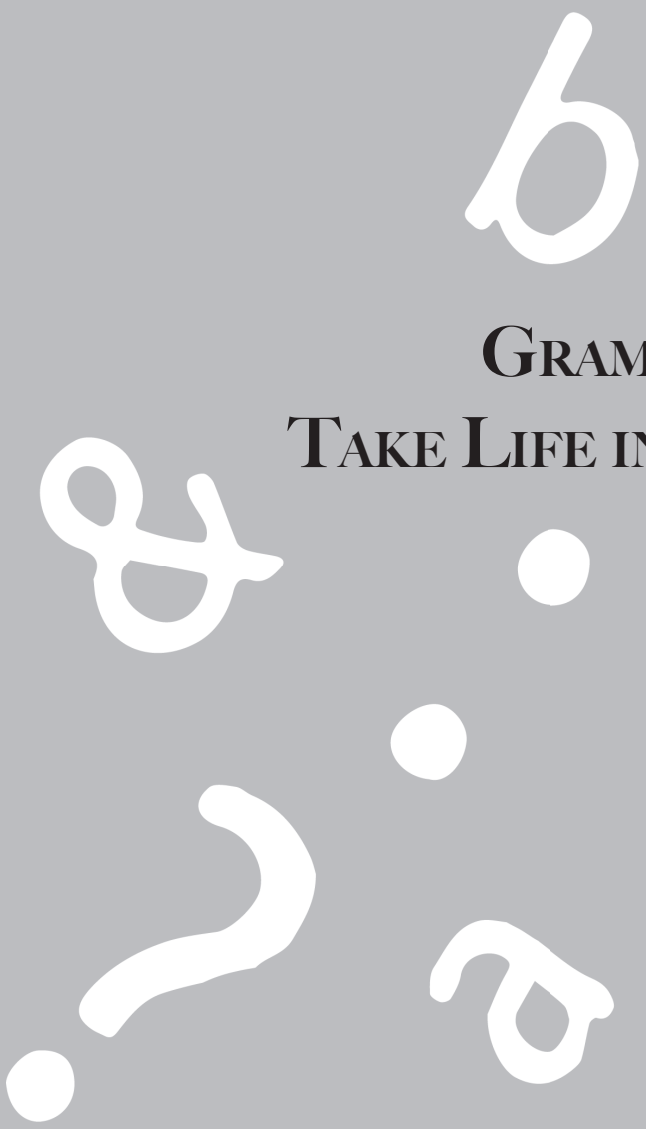
Energy? Paradoxically, mine was maximized not by speaking solely in the energetic active voice ("I sold twenty cars this week," "Now you've hit the nail on the head," and so forth), but by fusing active voice with passive. (Yes, the active voice alone yielded more results in this world than the passive by itself, but neither was a match for all the creativity unleashed by a hybrid of the two—a potent combination I'll be discussing in this book.)

Temperature? An ellipsis—the deliberate omission of information known already to both me and my reader—warmed up my relations with that person by tacitly acknowledging a history we shared, and I *felt* warmer.

In the fifteen years since I first launched my introspective inquiry, my list of ways to use grammar for well-being has grown long. What is more, they've withstood the test of time. It still *makes a difference* to my morale whether I relate bad news about myself before the coordinating conjunction *but* or after it. It still *heightens* my appreciation for the world when I override my impulse to affix possessive terms like *my*, *his*, and *their* to everything which I lay eyes on . . . .

You, my reader, will, of course, have to judge these matters for yourself as you begin to turn the pages of this book. For me at least, there now seem to be no qualities we long to bring out in ourselves and embody—from decisiveness at urgent moments to a steady consciousness of life's mysteries—that can't be further realized by replacing certain verbal habits with new ones, if we make those changes with intentionality.

In any case, most of my readers to date have claimed to be grateful I decided not to leave my findings on a burner in the kitchen. You, too, are most welcome to a helping of them.



Grammar to Take Life in Hand

All the chapters in this book started out as freestanding essays. Each one drew a connection between grammar and successfully obtaining something we human beings require in order to live fully—such as the affectionate touch of another person or independent judgment. I spent hours staring at my pile of these disparate pieces of writing, mulling how best to sequence them for this book.

In the end, I chose to hand the problem over to Mahatma Gandhi, who once said, "Even God dare not approach a hungry man except in the form of bread." Like the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, Gandhi deemed certain needs, such as those for food and shelter, more basic than others. For most of us, Gandhi would say, those needs must be met before the more exalted ones can be satisfied.

Accordingly, in this book, I take up our first needs first; only then do I move on to ones that go beyond the basic tier—like our needs for creativity and mindfulness.

To my understanding, human beings' first need of all—even more fundamental than Gandhi's bread—is agency, the animating sense we have (but have in greatly varying amounts, one person to the next) that we are capable of taking action that would yield us good results. That self-belief precedes even our great need of food, since it is what permits us

to do all *things,* including *to obtain the means of survival. A person's sense of agency is his or her foremost enabler.*

The first section of this book, then, concerns agency. I devote each chapter in it to one of the grammatical practices that increase an individual's readiness to "take life in hand." For example, I turn to all the many people who have yet to summon confidence enough to claim their rightful share of attention *in this world, and I urge them to start doing so by using more colons.*

Getting Noticed

Colons

If I am not for myself, who will be?

— Hillel

To get what I require for survival and a good, full life, I must often turn the ears of others in my direction. I can't normally afford to wait on the sidelines for unbidden champions to do my advocacy *for* me. Who would have incentive to? No one's stake in my well-being is as great as my own: I'm the person who will pay most dearly if I can't sleep again because of an all-night party next door, and so I'm the one who needs to say as much to the party's host.

Even someone painfully shy has to take a break from anonymity long enough to get attention when she's been laid off and her claim for unemployment compensation is wrongfully denied . . . or when she is displaying what could be the symptoms of a stroke or life-threatening disease.

Doesn't evolution itself bear out the importance of getting oneself noticed in this world? How can we explain all babies'

thoughtless wailing except to surmise that, in our species' long past, infants whose DNA predisposed them to endure pain and hunger in silence didn't generally survive long enough to pass their mutant, quiet gene along to offspring of their own?

Unfortunately, though, my simply making noise—or uttering full sentences, as an adult—doesn't always do the trick of winning others' ears. In settings where it doesn't, I feel as if I'm talking to the wall, and my confidence sometimes deserts me, leaving me to doubt I have as much a right to speak as others present do.

Which brings me to the colon.

The biologist/essayist Lewis Thomas found colons—those two vertically arranged dots that say, "Listen up, please. Here's what you should know"—"a lot less attractive" than semicolons. "Firstly," he writes, "they give you the feeling of . . . having your nose pointed in a direction you might not be inclined to take if left to yourself."

On the other hand, Strunk and White, the renowned authors of *The Elements of Style*, don't seem to have shared Thomas's aversion. In their own book, sometimes they employ a colon to oblige us to study and absorb a model of correctness, as in

> Punctuate as follows: Wednesday, August 14, 1929.

Elsewhere, they use the colon to compel us to observe what can happen when a writer *disregards* one of their famous rules, an example being the colon at the end of

Sentences violating Rule 7 are often ludicrous**:**

Those two vertically arranged dots of a colon have much the same riveting effect as the two loud clinks on a piece of glassware that announce a wedding toast—or the two decisive taps of a baton that call an orchestra to order. (Or think back to the teacher you had in elementary school who, to get your boisterous class's attention, sometimes flicked the classroom lights off and on.)

As E. B. White (the White of "Strunk and White") tells it, William Strunk "felt it was worse to be irresolute than to be wrong." He had been White's teacher in college, and one day in class he had "leaned far forward, in . . . the pose of a man about to impart a secret—and croaked, 'If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud!'" Strunk's use of colons—like so much else in *The Elements of Style*—bares the unapologetic self at the top of its form. It says, "I have standing in this place, so heed me."

Which way to punctuate, then: that of the quietly respectful Lewis Thomas, or that of the assertive Strunk? Even if we somewhat prefer Thomas as a personality, can we always do without recourse to Strunk's in-your-face grammatical maneuvers?

I am here addressing people who would just as soon colonize a foreign nation as "colon-ize" a sentence. To them (and are you one of them?), that two-pointed mark is a double-barreled shotgun; they keep it locked away. They might stand across the counter from the most unhelpful clerk at a hotel, waiting overlong to check in with him and get their keys in time to make their niece's graduation, and still not feel at liberty to capture

his attention with the filler sound and speech inflection that correspond to a written colon, as in,

> Uhh, hello there, sir. I have a complaint to lodge with you**:** For twenty minutes now . . . .

It's the spoken colon after "you" that lays claim to all the airtime needed to express the rest.

Back at home, my father used to say, "Don't let people walk all over you." In his business correspondence—with which, as a boy, I used to help him, since he was an immigrant who never fully mastered English usage—he would insert colons frequently. Each pair of dots was typographical fair warning to the reader (the customer who'd sent him three bouncing checks in a row, the boss who had spoiled some of his sales through ill-advised pricing decisions, etc.) that he'd better not ignore my father's next few words.

On a much larger stage, we have the example of a colon—or momentous, colon-like pause—which arrested the nation's attention at a march on Washington in August, 1963. The speaker, a 34-year-old black minister from Alabama, said, "I still have a dream" and boldly then deployed a remarkable colon (of the spoken kind) before spelling his dream out. It was his way of requesting that an audience of millions tune out everything but him for a moment; his forthcoming words were that important.

> I still have a dream**:**
>
> . . . I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true

> meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

Would he have succeeded in winning others' ears—and in being memorable—if he *hadn't* first, by pausing, implicitly announced his right to full attention? Let my reader be the judge. A colon-less alternative might have read as follows:

> I still have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed . . . .

Though I am not as bold a soul as Martin Luther King, I retain the colon in my verbal repertoire, and I suggest that other meek or mild types do so, too. We must learn to insist that we have rights to airtime. Our increased use of that punctuation mark—written or spoken—is one fine way to begin.

The following excerpt is a chapter from the section of the book titled **Grammar for Creative Passivity**.

Getting Out of One's Own Way

Passive Voice

A relative of William James once tried to explain passive voice to a small girl. (Please note my italics in the next paragraph.)

"Suppose that *you* . . . kill *me*," said the grown-up. "You who *do* the killing are in the active voice, and I, who *have been killed*, am in the passive voice."

That smart girl wasn't satisfied, however.

How, she retorted, could a person even speak to *say*, in passive voice, "I've been killed," if, in fact, he *had* been killed?

"Well," said the faltering adult, "you must suppose I'm not quite dead yet."

The very next day, according to James, the child was put on the spot in class to explain the passive voice and said, "It's the kind of voice you speak in when you're not quite dead."

The theme of most commentary on the passive voice in our times appears to be its sad unfitness for use by writers who are not yet on their deathbeds.

Strunk and White lead the way. In *The Elements of Style* they proclaim—simply but resoundingly, as their Rule Number 10—"Use the active voice," and they press the case for "direct," "forcible" language. They don't favor the elimination of all passives; they themselves use the passive construction "can be made lively" on the same page. But their thrust is clear: to promote more writing like their own, which in general *has* straightforward thrust. (My earlier essay on the active voice, "Tapping Inborn Energy," also encourages this direct style of writing, when the occasion demands.)

Among the many strenuous opponents of the passive voice, a majority—taking their cue from George Orwell, in his essay "Politics and the English Language"—stress how easily that voice can be used to conceal accountability, since it doesn't call for the person or entity that performs the action of the verb to be named. The passive sentence "The dog hasn't been walked yet" stops well short of implicating any member of the household as the negligent appointed walker.

One can spot such concealment of responsibility—or, in the lesser case, downplaying of responsibility—in much of the language issued by government offices. It sounds like this:

> A secret shipment of arms to the insurgents was requested on March 19, approved on March 20, and carried out on March 21. [*That's at least three different people who owe their anonymity to the passive voice.*]

> Undeniably, mistakes were made. [*Yes, but who made them?*]

In the world of medicine, concealment of agency can sound like the following excerpt from a note a surgeon composed in 1961 at the request of comedian Lenny Bruce, for use in the event the heroin needle marks on his arms were noticed by police.

> Mr. Bruce suffers from episodes of severe depression and lethargy . . . . He has therefore been instructed in the proper use of intravenous injections of methedrine. [*Who instructed Bruce? No one in particular, it seems.*]

By contrast to the stance of Strunk and White and Orwell, the grammarian Otto Jespersen takes a downright expansive view of the passive voice and manages to come up with five situations that justify one's speaking in it. Often, for example, the doer of the deed described in a sentence can't be identified, and recourse to the passive eliminates the syntactical need to *say* who it was. In the passive, we can make do with "He was killed in the Boer War."

Even the broad-minded Jespersen, however, does not see—or, perhaps, sees but does not cite—psychotherapeutic grounds for use of the passive voice. Please bear with me as I blaze a path into that realm.

Consider these two sentences:

active voice
I won the Oscar for Best Actress.

passive voice
I was awarded the Oscar for Best Actress.

Think of all the factors besides talent that influence the members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences when they cast ballots for the year's best actress. A partial list:

- the actor pool they have to select from (Most films produced in a given year get little exposure, even to members of the Academy, and actors in those films are therefore effectively out of the running at Oscar time.)
- likeability or friendship
- envy
- sympathy (especially for older actors who've been bypassed for awards)
- box office receipts.

Which of the two formulations, active or passive, reflects more understanding of the whole context in which awards are made? The phrase "I won" seems to reduce a vast, complicated array of factors to just one factor (albeit a big one): talent—or perhaps talent coupled with will and hard work. It seems to say, "This was essentially my doing." Does the woman who says "I won"—even if her success indeed rests largely on her own talent—grasp her true bearings in relation to the world?

She does not, I think. The woman with true bearings is the second of the two, who, consciously or unconsciously, allows for the support and interplay of all the other elements that contributed to her success and says, "I was awarded."

But there is even more to say for passivity. In fact, I'm just finally coming to the heart of this chapter: Not only does it take a somewhat passive mindset to see the many things at work on one's behalf in life *besides* one's inborn gifts, but *those inborn gifts themselves can't be tapped without one's learning to be largely passive in relation to them.*

Artists, in particular, have led the way in giving expression to this insight, although it applies to all pursuits I know of.

At a post-performance Q and A session, I once heard puppeteer Eric Bass compellingly describe how, when performing, he "took his lead from" his puppet. And, in fact, his consummate performance *had* left me wondering who was in charge onstage, Bass himself or his loquacious wooden handful. "Art well concealed," you may say, but there was more—a profoundly deferential state of mind, an attitude embedded in the phrase "took my lead from."

Artists of all kinds are hesitant to say that they "produce" their creations. When they don't call on the passive voice to describe their work—as in such commonplaces as "I was inspired to . . . " or "gripped by . . . " or "flooded with . . . "—they resort to other ways to minimize their part in the process: phraseology like "I took my lead from" and "I felt I was channeling a source I couldn't name."

Sculptors who carve marble might be thought to be unlikely advocates of passivity in art. Isn't hacking into

any solid piece of stone—to transform its shape forever—blatantly a case of imposing one's will on it? As a class, however, sculptors of marble aren't an exception to the rule.

Michelangelo, in fact, claimed that, in sculpting, he was merely *finding* forms concealed within his slabs. And Michelangelo's admirer Auguste Rodin talked of his own sculpture in the same, unmistakably passive spirit:

> The work of art is already in the marble. I just chop off the material that isn't needed.

What these artists have discovered is of crucial importance in all our endeavors, from beautifying women's hair . . . and selecting jurors for a trial who would view one's client sympathetically . . . to chicken-sexing (the job of sorting newborn chicks by sex, when the telling organs in question aren't yet displayed—a task at which the best practitioners can't say why they are succeeding).

Much of the time, even fighter pilots must rely on unconscious muscle memory, rather than on effortful (and time-consuming) calculation, when flying.

Does my reader still need assurance that the unconscious can play vital roles in life? Here, then, is more evidence to mull: We never learned consciously—learned, that is, by articulated rules—how to recognize a face or to throw both arms in front of ourselves to break a fall. These skills came to us with being human.

Or, try deciphering this passage:

> . . . I cdnuolt blveiee taht I cluod aulaclty uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg. Aoccdrnig to a rscheeachr at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae.

I am guessing you succeeded, but how did you do it? You don't know. In all likelihood, little intellectual exertion was involved. The correct words came to you by a mechanism beyond consciousness—that same one briefly alluded to in the last sentence of the oddly spelled block quote itself.

And consider what goes into stringing adjectives together like this:

> eighty self-important state representatives

or like this:

> their big, well-written 2020 travel guide.

You could not have said,

> eighty state self-important representatives

or

> their well-written big travel 2020 guide

or, worse yet,

> big travel 2020 well-written their guide.

Linguists and grammarians have teased out the extremely complicated rules for sequencing adjectives in a series, but you and I and those grammarians themselves mastered those rules without ever being taught them or having them formulated for us. We absorbed them from all the conversations that we heard around us, and the process bypassed consciousness completely. Now, as we talk or poke away at keyboards, they have their way through us.

One reason many of us don't build much passivity into our activity is that we don't give the dark unconscious—what Michael Polanyi calls "the tacit dimension"—its full due. In compulsively standing guard against unreason (of course, to some extent we have to be on guard in that direction, since consequential bad decisions periodically descend on us from those same creviced hills in the brain), we deny ourselves access to the region where—alongside unappreciated mundane skills like sequencing adjectives and breaking a fall—many of our best, most valuable resources for creative life reside: instincts and dim memories, unpredictable associations . . . . Too forcible a feeling of "being in charge" somehow drives these into hiding.

In my own case, this discovery occurred in conditions I'd never have predicted for it: I was on a plane flight of about six hours, from Boston to L.A., at an altitude of more than thirty thousand feet. Until that flight, I had little inkling of what my unconscious abilities were. The echoing words of my elementary school principal, "Larry makes up in effort what he lacks in intelligence," had actually helped convince me at age ten never to trust my spontaneous instincts. I would compensate

for meager brains by doing what I knew already how to do quite well: making plans and sticking to them. This itself was a comprehensive plan for life—a plan to go on planning—and its grip on me persisted far too long. I lived too single-mindedly, deliberately, with little "give," well into my twenties.

Then came those six hours on a jet. I had been trying my hand as a playwright at the time but producing hardly any material that felt stageworthy to me. Then, to my astonishment, in my half-a-dozen airborne hours I turned out more text worth keeping than I had in all the several prior months of work on my project. What conditions had produced such a breakthrough? Once in California, I took walks along the ocean to process my experience. I came to believe two things:

- Being on a moving plane had, strangely enough, relieved me of my constant, proactive wish to be "getting somewhere." That, by definition, is what I was doing on a plane in motion. I could then relax and, relinquishing control of things in general, take a flight-within-a-flight, as well, aboard my unconscious.
- Means might well exist at ground level, too, for eliciting the state of mind that I enjoyed in flight.

That's when I began to make a point of saying, in my new, passive voice, "I *am being visited* by some ideas today, at my desk here," and "I've become *absorbed* by what a tragic fix my characters are getting into this morning," and the like.

In my own case—maybe yours, as well, so give it a try—what it mostly takes to tap into the stream of subliminal

content is to replace active voice utterance with passive voice at certain moments. For me, that straightforward grammatical move brings generativity.

Also, for good measure, I keep a homemade sign on my desk that (only half-jokingly) reads, "You are being *paid* to be passive. Get used to it."

The following excerpt is a chapter from the section of the book titled **Grammar for Belonging**.

Wondrous Touch

Elements of Audibility

I never had a reason to doubt that my mother adored me until she started writing letters to me at college.

Mistakenly believing that quotation marks can be used for emphasis, she would close each letter with the line, "You know how much we 'love' you."

She thought she was making me feel loved, but the whole thing put me in mind of the B. B. King song "Nobody Loves Me but My Mother, and She Could Be Jivin', Too."

At the same time, although Mom was somewhat off in her *selection* of a piece of grammar that would touch me, she wasn't wrong at all in her belief that "touching" one's reader is a demonstrable feat in grammar's bag of tricks.

The fact that grammar has that capability is an important boon to us, in light of our enduring need for tactile company. That need is prehistoric in its origins—physiological, in fact. If, as infants, we don't get an ample dose of what transactional psychologists call stroking—if, that is, we're deprived of nurturing contact with members of our own species (picture chimps diligently grooming each other)—we are

unlikely to thrive in life. That's how we've been wired, say the neurobiologists.

As we leave our infancy and head on up the road toward adulthood, we begin acquiring means to satisfy the need for stroking besides literal, physical contact. In particular, *words* stroke us—almost any words, even commonplaces uttered by strangers at a Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks, like "Excuse me, but is that used newspaper yours?"—if they're addressed to us in person. Such words represent our human world attending to us; we feel slightly caressed by them.

Amazingly—and here comes grammar's part—often we feel stroked even by the *written* words of people. We feel stroked by the intimate effect created on a page when its absent author works traces of her own *voice* into the language—say, the dismissive finality of certain grammatical fragments, like "No way!" and "Over my dead body!" or the confidential tone of a parenthesis, like that in "He's a Pisces (need I say more?)." John Trimble, author of *Writing with Style*, calls this voice effect "warm, imaginative touch."

That's what my mother had been wanting to transmit to me with her misguided quote marks.

Nor is such fictitious body heat felt only by one's readers. Having done my share of "voicing" on paper and online over the years, I can attest to its salutary effect on me myself, the writer, too. By use of voice, I, in a sense, reenter the space that my readers and I have shared physically—or that I imagine we share—anticipating their stopped breath or nods or appreciative laughter. I feel that I am doing more

than imparting my ideas: I am paying an enjoyable visit. I'm keeping up the sociable side of myself.

It takes practice to vocalize in writing. As the late Prof. Walker Gibson, who wrote extensively about tone and persona, explained,

> Someone walks in the door and we throw a greeting at him—or her. We can say HELLo, meaning I'm a bored and irascible fellow, or I'm kiddingly pretending to be, and O golly, you again! We can say hello, cheerfully, meaning you and I are friendly enough but not really intimate. Or we can say hellooo, which defines, of course, quite a different speaker and quite a different relation.

In speech, these "hellos" are made distinct from one another through specific uses of the voice box and face, which linguists have dubbed *kinesics*. "The trouble with the written word," says Gibson, "is that it comes to us without kinesics—no voice box, no eyebrows." According to him, "The writer's task is to so surround his words with other words on the page that his reader may infer the quality of the desired speaking voice."

Making up in writing for writing's inaudibility is largely a matter of word choice—replacing "I would be delighted to" with "Sure, anytime," or (moving in the opposite direction, toward *more* formality) replacing "party" with "upcoming social event." However, punctuation and syntax play their

parts, as well. In fact, the modern system of punctuation introduced by the Italian printer Aldus Manutius (1450–1515) was largely an attempt to invest writing with speech effects like pauses and relative emphasis.

Without knowing it, an anonymous fan of the TV soap opera *Guiding Light* proved herself a more-than-worthy heir of Manutius and his fellow printer/innovators when, in 1982, she wrote to the show's producers. She put quotation marks around a word to make herself sound bemused, employed an exclamation mark to make herself sound surprised, worked in a two-word interrupter set off by commas ("you know") for a scolding touch, and even willfully misspelled a word (the word "please") to ensure that it got heard as she would have said it.

> Gentlemen:
>
> Here I am actually "hooked" on a program, to the extent of not even accepting an invitation if it means not being able to see my program! . . .
>
> The little lady that plays Nola Reardon is a darling, beautiful child—and certainly should go places. While she plays a difficult part, she actually makes you live the story with her.
>
> Puhlease—don't let her do any more damage. Tell your writers to let her mend her ways.

> Bad girls do, you know, and find happy solutions in their lives . . . .

I would bet that by the time the producers of *Guiding Light* finished reading this anonymous fan's letter, she'd become as vivid to them as some members of their families; they had had the pleasure of her company.

Fittingly, we also hear a live voice—a tongue-in-cheek, importuning voice, in this case—in the sentence that opens an article by college English instructor John Dawkins, whose very subject is the rhetoric of punctuation. He is taking note of the fact that his reader could have chosen to read articles on far sexier topics.

> Punctuation—just one of the "mechanics" of writing, after all—is perhaps not the first thing you turn to after checking [a magazine's] table of contents, but you are here now, so let me try to keep you here by announcing, quickly, the not unimportant claims to be made.

Strange as it may seem, Dawkins's article provided me with something in addition to the information I was seeking when I looked it up. It presented me with Dawkins himself. It was addressing a desire as basic to the rationale for communal life as the need for information: the longing for companionship.

In order to bring out my own voice when I write, I try to imagine I'm writing a *letter* to my reader, even when it's really a report or a book that I'm writing. Private missives

occupy a curious niche on the continuum from casual speech to formal prose. Yes, they are produced through fingers rather than through lips, but because they're meant for people we know, they naturally call into play our habits of conversation. I sometimes actually begin a draft *as* a letter to a friend. "Paul," I might begin, "you ask where all my reading about violence on TV leads me. Well, . . . " I try to "talk it to him" on the page. There will be time enough later for lopping off my salutation and the other telltale signs that my first draft had been a piece of correspondence.

Woman in Blue Reading a Letter, by Johannes Vermeer

Is writing with voice always professionally wise? No. For audiences who (sometimes with good reason, sometimes not) persist in seeking a cold objectivity free of human bias, voice is suspect. Writers needing a fair hearing from these audiences would be well advised to strive for the dispassionate tone of machines. But relatively few such bands of readers exist in this world, so writers are usually safe to be themselves. Even in a scientific article I'm looking at today, a physicist's paper titled "Radiative Corrections as the Origin of Spontaneous Symmetry Breaking," the author's unique voice gets play—for example, in his use of the quirky, highly unscientific adverb "hideously" in the phrase "hideously infrared divergent."

If you care about fostering a sense of community between us—a sense of shared presence—don't just *write* to me. In your writing, *be* that person who you are in the flesh.

The remaining two excerpts aren't individual chapters; they're prefaces to two whole sections of the book. The first is the preface to the group of chapters titled **Grammar for Freedom.**

Grammar for Freedom

I have known the eyes already,
known them all—

The eyes that fix you in a
formulated phrase,

And when I am formulated,
sprawling on a pin,

When I am pinned and
wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends
of my days and ways?

— from "The Love Song
of J. Alfred Prufrock,"
by T. S. Eliot

The downside to being known by others is the likelihood of soon becoming a known quantity. T. S. Eliot's stanza on the spiritual cost of life in a community was the first snatch of modern poetry to surprise me with its resonance.

At the time, I was chafing at the ways I was being labeled by high school peers. As I grew older, those classmates were replaced by co-workers, bosses, students of my own, political constituents, and countless other specialists in sizing one up. To people who knew of my leadership in creating a school desegregation

plan, I was a champion of racial harmony. To hundreds who attended a meeting at which I opposed the appointment of a certain person of color to be the next principal of one of our city's schools, I was a racist.

All too often, we take others' portrayals of ourselves—even others' gross distortions of us—and internalize them, add them to the stock of lines we use against ourselves inside our soundproof minds, where, unheard, their effects cannot be checked by our best friends. In so doing, we become, to an extent, walking caricatures: the eternal Boy Scout, sycophant, martinet, housewife, whore. (What is the psychology of this acceptance of demeaning roles? Is it revenge, a way of giving one's disparagers yet more of what, apparently, they find so distasteful? Is it partly fear, as in, "This role I've been cast in, however ugly, I know I can play, having been seen playing it; other roles are possibly beyond me"? Pure self-hatred? I am guessing all of these destructive factors can be involved.)

And possibly, in this age of social media, the tendency to know oneself only by reflection in the eyes of others is, if anything, only getting worse. I think of the emphasis now placed on being "friended" online.

Since language plays a major part in self-definition—and since grammar shapes language—grammar has a role to play in overriding

and undoing the negative perceptions of us that arise communally, then begin to take up lodging deep inside ourselves, where they have the power to do damage in our lives.

Man Being Strangled by a Giant Paragraph,
by George Grosz (courtesy, the Estate of George Grosz)

The final excerpt here is the preface to the long group of chapters titled **Grammar for Mindfulness.**

Grammar for Mindfulness

The most sacred utterance in Jewish liturgy is Deuteronomy 6:4, the Shema. It begins,

> Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

It's primarily a call upon the people to listen, to open their ears wide to all that surrounds them and discover the unifying wonder of it all—discover, in religious terms, that a force beyond our reckoning animates the whole of creation.

Did the speaker, Moses, truly think that his enormous crowd at Sinai would be able, at his words, to attune itself to humankind's real situation?

That would have been hard for them. Even in the relatively uniform landscape of a desert, there had to be distractions on all sides, making an experience of "oneness" with reality unlikely. As Moses spoke, there had to be at least a dozen babies crying, a nearly deaf old man loudly asking someone else what Moses was saying, a desert wind that made the tent flaps snap . . . . And those were just the fleeting, small barriers to "hearing."

Sundry larger barriers have always stood between ourselves and a mindful life, a life attuned to hints of our true situation in this

world. If I'm right that any fully realized man or woman is so attuned, we need somehow to get past those obstructions.

What elements of grammar have a role to play in fostering "attunement"?

Quite a few, I'd say. Certain prior chapters in this book—like the one on passive voice and the one on disclosers ("actually," etc.)—have already dealt with aspects of a mindful life. The chapters in this section of the book take up aspects I have left unmentioned till now because they don't fit neatly under any of my other section headings. Each takes up a different obstacle to mindfulness.

When not using grammar wisely, we

- *overlay reality with a gauze of "spin"—either on the upside with excited hype or on the downside with unfounded fear*
- *buy into the false perception that the world can be owned*
- *forget how ignorant we are, ultimately*
- *shut ourselves off from what transpires around us until we've implemented plans we have.*