Understanding linguistics does no more to improve writing performance than understanding the internal combustion engine does to improve driving. Composition teachers have known this truth for decades, if not centuries, and yet we continue to write and read books that offer grammar or linguistics as a remedy for writing problems. Hairston and Ruskiewicz writing for Scott, Foresman, and Connors and Lunsford for St. Martin’s Press have built into their handbooks for college writers separate analyses of the most damaging (Hairston and Ruskiewicz) or the most frequent (Connors and Lunsford) errors student writers commit. The handbooks are organized to highlight the grammar students need to correct their performance. The National Council of Teachers of English has provided two relatively recent studies, by Constance Weaver in 1979 and by Rei R. Noguchi in 1991, explaining what English teachers need to know about linguistics—even as they review the literature establishing there is little point to the knowledge.

Despite formidable evidence that it can’t be done, we keep hoping someone will discover the philosopher’s stone that will transform leaden linguistics into golden prose. Colleen Donnelly’s *Linguistics for Writers* joins a file of ambitious studies by sincere and distinguished experts, lined up to persuade us that understanding the science of language will help our students compose and revise their writing. Donnelly’s study departs from many others by expanding the domain it covers to include not only straight linguistics, from the *Course Generale* of de Saussure to the case grammar of Charles Fillmore, but also such recent developments in language study as speech act theory, Christensen’s “new rhetoric,” and sociolinguistics.

The expansion of what might be useful to writers makes Donnelly’s title misleading. An early chapter on processing information has more to do with memory and reading theory than it does with linguistics. Under the rubric of analyzing and improving coherence, Donnelly samples the insights of Francis Christensen, whose analysis most would call a branch of rhetoric. In a separate chapter she covers the speech act theory of John L. Austin and John Searle, whose work most would categorize as philosophy of language. And she builds in the maxims of Paul Grice’s cooperation principle, identifying these maxims with pragmatics, or language in use. Only three chapters out of nine, the introduction and chapters on
transformational grammar (drawn from Noam Chomsky) and case grammar (from Charles Fillmore) touch on topics most experts would identify as linguistics.

What we call things is less important than how we study them or use them. The unfortunate limitation of this study is that it covers too much and is therefore superficial. The treatment of transformational grammar, for example, is a chapter of twelve pages that does not reach beyond Chomsky’s Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, published in 1965. Case grammar is presented in a chapter of 24 pages, but the treatment never explains the grammatical concept of case. The effect of this survey of grammars is to dismiss grammar as a controlling element in composing or editing. As a writing teacher, I applaud Donnelly for implicitly accepting the wisdom of most writing experts, that an academic knowledge of grammar doesn’t help writers produce good prose. Still I wonder about the title of the book.

The chief audience for Donnelly’s book, as I read the work, is student writers hoping to compose practical prose for a course in business, technical, or professional writing. For this audience the book offers sound principles and helpful exercises. Particularly in the middle section of the book, chapters 5-7, Donnelly presents the given-new contract as a tool for analysis of paragraphs and applies Christensen’s treatment of levels of generality to the task of revision. Accepting that writers do not compose with theoretical precepts foremost in their minds, Donnelly urges her students to use these tools at the revision stage. With the good sense that derives from practical experience, Donnelly says,

> When you are writing, most importantly, get your ideas down on paper. Let the ideas flow freely onto the page. Don’t worry about getting the text perfect the first time; when you revise you can come back to the text and work on order and development. (136)

From time to time, Donnelly offers exercises to help students master the principles she has explained. Listed as applications, these exercises provide practice in rewriting. The exercises embody the practical approach that the principles of structure constitute a diagnostic protocol rather than a composing strategy. Answers to the exercises—solutions to the problems—are provided at the end of the book. One whole chapter, “Analyzing Macrostructures,” is an extended exercise in exploring audience and purpose for the sake of preparing an abstract of a newspaper article. Such exercises make this book a teaching text that would be valuable in a course on writing.
The editing of *Linguistics for Writers* is occasionally clumsy. Simple typographical errors mar the text: “To study parole, the linguist looks at individual’s actual utterances” (12). The editors have failed to correct the author when she uses *verbal* for oral or spoken (115) or when she spells a television reporter’s name *Duma* on one page, *Dumas* on the next (152, 153). On one page, the formatting is confused and the print drops half a space in the middle of a line (144). The author struggles conspicuously to avoid exclusive language. Early in the text, she carefully alternates between male and female examples so that she can use *he* or *she* correctly and naturally. By the end of the book the author’s or the editor’s attention has flagged, and the examples are exclusively male, the pronouns masculine.

Despite these superficial flaws, this book is a useful resource for a teacher of writing. It concentrates a writer’s attention on strategies to assess structural coherence, emphasizing subordination and superordination in the arrangement of ideas. It focuses as well on surface cohesion, offering tips for using reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction. Along the way, Donnelly introduces other elements of discourse analysis that teachers will be happy to be reminded of. We can profit from attention to all aspects of language, whether linguistic or rhetorical, whether scientific or practical.

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### Announcement

The Fall 1995 issue of *Composition Studies/Freshman English News* will include a special forum devoted to rhetoric and composition pedagogy at the doctoral level. The coordinators invite submission of detailed abstracts or outlines of courses intended as your institution’s first (introductory) or only graduate course in/about rhetoric, writing, composition. Potential contributors should first request a detailed project statement from Beth Burmester, Writing Center, DePaul University, 802 W. Belden Ave, Chicago, IL, 60614, or by E-mail at brenton.faber@mcc.utah.edu