

# Is Murphy's English Grammar In Use out of date?

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*English Grammar In Use* by Raymond Murphy is the most successful book of English Grammar ever produced. Aimed at intermediate level, it was first published in 1985, is currently in its fourth edition and has sold well over 15 million copies. It has been hugely influential, and has helped generations of students of English as a Foreign Language to improve their language. For English teachers such as myself, it has been a godsend. Many of us, all over the world, have relied on it heavily for years. I continue to recommend it, although with increasing reluctance.

This is because I have a number of specific objections to Murphy which I will discuss below. Nevertheless, my main objection to the book is that Murphy's analysis and the structure he gives to English Grammar comes out of an outdated model and that, through his popularity and influence, he helps to sustain it. Murphy's division of grammar into various categories is arbitrary. Other books of grammar can and do vary the categories, but they usually have the same faults as Murphy without his huge influence.

The result is that English teachers all over the world tend to look at English and English grammar with the model that we are familiar with. And, of course, we pass on that model to our students.

If your car was made in 1985 and you have

looked after it carefully and given it new bodywork three times since you bought it, it might still be a good car. However a car made in 2017 will have technical features that the makers of your car couldn't even have imagined. It might still need petrol and you will still need to drive it on roads. But it will be a lot more comfortable, efficient and easier to drive. And it is much less likely to break down. Isn't it time to change our car?

Now let's look at Murphy's *English Grammar In Use* in more detail.

The format in Murphy is one of its strengths. After a very brief introduction, there is a contents page listing unnumbered section headings. Each section contains some numbered units and all of them, without fail, consist of two pages.

The left-hand page in each unit illustrates and explains a particular grammar point. There might be a simple line drawing as an illustration, or a box in which the rule is shown. There are always a large number of examples of the grammar in use. The vocabulary in the examples are carefully controlled and do not cause difficulty to students, which is one of the great strengths of the book.

On the right-hand side of the page are numbered exercises with gaps for the student to supply the answers. Answers to

the exercises are given in a key at the back of the book.

Murphy makes it clear in his introduction that this is a reference book not a course book and that students should study only the material that they want or need to study.

..... *English Grammar In Use* has always insisted through every

edition that this is a “self-study and practice book”.

Through the different editions, essentially the same structure has been used. The box below indicates the structure used in the second (1994) edition with comments about any changes made in the fourth 2014 edition.

The Contents Structure of Murphy’s *English Grammar In Use* (Second Edition, 1994)

| SECTION HEADING               | UNITS (as numbered)                        | CHANGES by Fourth Edition (2014)                           | TYPE OF GRAMMAR                         |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Present and past              | 1 – 6                                      | no change  | verb tenses                             |
| Present perfect and past      | 7 - 18                                     | no change  | verb tenses                             |
| Future                        | 19 - 25                                    | no change  | problematic                             |
| Modals                        | 26 - 36                                    | one extra unit added                                       | type of verb                            |
| Conditionals and “wish”       | 37 - 40                                    | section heading changed to “If and wish” – no other change | clause level                            |
| Passive                       | 41 - 45                                    | no change  | verb patterns                           |
| Reported speech               | 46 - 47                                    | no change  | verb patterns                           |
| Questions and auxiliary verbs | 48 - 51                                    | no change  | verb patterns                           |
| -ing and the infinitive       | 52 - 67                                    | section heading changed to “-ing and to” – no other change | verb patterns                           |
| Articles and nouns            | 68 - 80                                    | no change  | two word classes                        |
| Pronouns and determiners      | 81 - 91                                    | no change  | two word classes                        |
| Relative clauses              | 91 - 96                                    | no change  | clause level?                           |
| Adjectives and adverbs        | 97 - 111                                   | no change  | two word classes                        |
| Conjunctions and prepositions | 112 - 119                                  | no change  | two word classes                        |
| Prepositions                  | 120 - 136                                  | no essential change (but see below)                        | the same word class as previous section |
| Phrasal verbs                 | 137-145 (does not exist in second edition) | in the fourth edition this entire section has been added   | not a grammatical category              |

As can be seen from the above, over a period of nearly 30 years this trusted and successful division of English grammar has hardly been touched. The first edition had essentially the same contents page but was weak in the area of the exercises and examples and the book was rewritten from this perspective. The only substantial change in the structure over the entire 30 year period is the addition of an extra section at the end.

As previously mentioned, there are less successful competitors to Murphy who have may have taken a slightly different approach in their sub-divisions of the categories of grammar. Many of them, however, can be criticized for the same reasons that I criticize Murphy below.

My objections to Murphy can be divided up into the following six inter-connected areas:

1. LOGIC
2. PRIORITY
3. SPOKEN/WRITTEN LANGUAGE
4. CONTEXT
5. WORD LEVEL/CLAUSE LEVEL
6. RULES NOT MEANING

### **1. LOGIC**

By this I mean that there seems to be no real logic to the way Murphy has organized English grammar. He doesn't begin by defining anything or explaining why he has divided up English grammar in the way he has. The first sections are about the basic tenses of the verb but he doesn't explain

what a verb is or if there are different types of verb. He doesn't even mention on the contents page that the first sections are about verbs and he doesn't say anywhere what modal auxiliary verbs are. Some sections focus on word classes such as nouns or adjectives, although, for some reason, Murphy likes to deal with two word classes at the same time. Others sections look at more complex structures which would best be understood at a clause level rather than at a word level.

We teachers are all so familiar with Murphy's divisions and categories that we have failed even to realize how arbitrary and illogical they are. Grammar is supposed to be a logical system of connecting ideas but where is the overview in Murphy? I would suggest that any good book of grammar or website about grammar must begin by stating what structure it proposes to use. What are the parts of speech in English? This is especially important in the case of English grammar because we don't all agree about exactly which categories to use or what to call them.

More specifically, to perpetuate the myth that the future in English can be compared with the present and the past is wrong causes terrible confusion. This continues to be a controversial point and will not be discussed here.

### **2. PRIORITY**

There is absolutely no sense of priority, of what matters, in Murphy. His book contains more than 130 Units but which ones are

REALLY important if you want to be good at English grammar? Surely some things are more important than other things? Or is every single Unit in Murphy just as important as any other? What about if you want to get a high grade in IELTS: which aspects of grammar should you be good at? A student asked me this question more than five years ago and I just can't forget the desperation in her voice. I realized that Murphy has absolutely nothing to offer in reply to this question. But a book of grammar should try to address it. Surely corpus linguistics has by now taught us something about which grammatical structures are most frequently used and in which contexts? Don't we owe it to our students to tell them which structures are most used, based on current knowledge?

### **3. SPOKEN/WRITTEN LANGUAGE**

Probably my strongest objection is that there is no distinction between spoken English and written English in Murphy. We are supposed to think of some unitary thing that exists of itself called "English" but this is a simplistic and out-of-date idea. Actually we use language to communicate in a variety of different ways and even the distinction between written and spoken language is simplistic. What about chatting on Facebook or telephone texting? What about when someone appears on television but they are reading out from a text prompter? Are these things spoken or written English? So even dividing English into two categories is not quite right – but surely there are differences even in grammar between a conversation with friends and an academic text? So what

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are they? If a book of English grammar in use doesn't deal with this, then, with respect, what use is it?

The triumph of what I call "the cocktail method" but which is usually called "the communicative method" made us realize that most people want to learn to SPEAK English rather than write it. One of the attractive things about Murphy is that his examples are mainly taken from spoken language. They are great examples of the kind of things that people actually say (at least in the UK). Although this is never made clear, most examples in Murphy obviously come from spoken language. But not all of them. Some – perhaps as many as 25% of the examples – are more likely to have come from written language.

The annoying thing for me is that this is not even touched upon. There is no reference anywhere in Murphy to the existence of spoken and written English much less that some types of grammar are more characteristic of one or of the other.

### **4. CONTEXT**

A very high percentage of Murphy's examples and exercises (although not all of them) hardly have any information about context. It is probably unfair to criticize Murphy in particular for this and the same can be said of all my other objections. All twentieth century grammar books tend to have the same faults. But we have moved on since then and understand language better today. Any language is used in a context. So to teach English successfully and in ways that students can relate to, a

context must be supplied for examples of usage as frequently as possible.

To not supply context relentlessly example after example causes many people to feel that there is something unreal about the whole thing (which is correct) and they might get discouraged.

#### **5. WORD LEVEL/CLAUSE LEVEL**

Even when describing the use of tenses or verb patterns, Murphy focuses on English at the word level – but meaning is expressed using phrases and sentences. Even a topic that apparently focuses on the clause level of meaning – relative clauses – is really just about the use of relative pronouns, which is, presumably, why Murphy places this section immediately after the one on pronouns.

The intention is to simplify down to basic rules that can be studied in isolation. But things in real life are more complicated than this. A grammar for the twenty-first century would supply authentic text (meaning material that was actually used) with an

indicated context and an analysis of how meaning is produced using multiple factors in combination.

#### **6. RULES NOT MEANING**

This is similar to the last point. Murphy focuses far too much on rules and not enough on meaning and the choices that a user of English has. This is an inevitable outcome when questions of context and the difference between spoken and written language are ignored.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In the coming years Murphy needs to be abandoned, for the reasons given above. However, I doubt that a new bestselling grammar book can replace it. What we probably need is a world-class website that presents a grammar for the twenty-first century in a way that efficiently and painlessly meets the needs of the modern student of English. While many websites are very good, none, to my knowledge, has become the acknowledged leader in the field as Murphy was, and, for the time being, still is.

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