A disturbing trend has emerged in our American culture, and law firms are just beginning to feel its effects. In 1994, the National Council of Teachers of English made a precipitous change when it declined to include the study of correct English usage as an objective of the subject. The unfortunate policy was embraced at all levels of education, and in public and private schools alike. It began being implemented in 1995; this means that law school graduates from 2009 and after who matriculated without a gap have virtually no traditional training in correct English usage through middle school, high school, or college. Although few Americans were aware of the NCTE’s shift in policy and fewer still had any idea what changes it would bring, the effects are becoming ever so obvious as I write this book in 2010. Lawyers who were educated with traditional English objectives are frustrated with emerging lawyers’ lack of understanding of basic, fundamental grammar and writing skills. Employers become incensed when they discover that the $150,000 per year associate they’ve just hired does not know “irregardless” is not a word! My passion is teaching new lawyers the skills they need to be successful in legal practice, and this is the reason I decided to write this book. I’d like to explain some of the other specific objectives I’ve sought to accomplish in writing it.

1. **Bridge Building.** If language is like a river, the first thing a writer must decide is where to jump in. Should I begin with language standards as they existed in the early twentieth century or try to anticipate future trends? I’ve chosen to jump in at a point somewhere between H.W. Fowler and Mignon Fogarty. My goal is to provide a bridge between older lawyers, who need to realize that “correctness” in English is actually a moving target, and younger lawyers, who need to realize that the opinions of those paying their salaries matter a whole lot more than trendier, permissive authorities.

2. **Organization.** Some of the treatises I consulted were organized like a bad game of hopscotch, darting from one topic to another, beginning at the end, and covering the same thing multiple times. I’ve tried to organize this book inductively, from small details to increasingly general principles, so we begin with “what is a noun” and crescendo to “how to write a legal memorandum” before addressing
topics worthy of special treatment. This may sound rather obvious until you consult treatises that begin with constructing an initial draft and organize even less intuitively from there: paragraphs, then words, then sentences, then punctuation, then a research guide, and so on. Another organizational objective arose out of my own frustration with having to check 18 different sections within each treatise to cull together all of an author’s advice on a single topic; my objective in organizing this book is that most topics are covered in only one section, the consistent exception being topics pervasively misused that warrant emphasis.

3. **Realistic Examples.** The usage standards and writing techniques presented in this book are similar to those contained in handbooks written for college-level courses, but all of the examples are taken from a legal context. Understanding the grammatical dynamics at work in “See Spot run!” does not automatically illustrate how the underlying principles work in more complicated sentence structures used by lawyers. My objective is to extrapolate simple principles into sophisticated examples that more closely emulate the challenges lawyers face in expressing complicated topics clearly.

4. **A Spoonful of Humor.** It would not shock or offend me to learn that many readers consider grammar and writing to be a rather dry subject, but that doesn’t mean it has to be so. Although the stereotypical image of the stern English teacher with wooden ruler clinched firmly in fist suggests otherwise, I can think of no reason that studying grammar and writing should not be an enjoyable endeavor, and one of my objectives in writing this book has been to intersperse humor with serious wisdom to make the journey more palatable for all.

5. **Excellence and Pride.** One of my objectives is to remind lawyers—or convince them, as the case may be—that we are well-paid wordsmiths called and accountable to a higher standard, who should continually endeavor to raise the written communication bar rather than adapt to the lowest acceptable common denominator. My objective has been to communicate the beauty and eloquence of our language by encouraging lawyers to take pride in their prose; I believe as a learned profession we should view the method of expressing points of law as being vital to convincing others of their substance.
6. **Straightforward and Straight to the Point.** This book is not written for English majors; it is not intended to discuss exhaustively every nuance of our language. The book is intended to provide straightforward information that is straight to the point of addressing the most common errors made in legal writing.