Have you ever found yourself in the following situation? You are teaching a French language class, and a student asks, “Why it is wrong to say J’aime des chats et des chiens?” You respond that one should say les chats and les chiens, citing the rule that after verbs of liking, disliking or preferring (the well-known aimer, adorer, détester, préférer list), one uses the definite article. The student then informs you that he does not like dogs and cats in general; he likes SOME dogs and SOME cats. Now, if you think quickly on your feet, you reply that one should then say certains chats and certains chiens. The truth is, though, you are not quite sure why des does not work in this context. If you are a novice instructor and you panic, you might even reply, “OK, well then, des would be acceptable.” Yet you know in your heart that it is not. You just don’t know why.

Perhaps you are a language program director or a course supervisor, and a teaching assistant asks which sentence is correct: Je ne sais pas de quoi tu as besoin, or Je ne sais pas ce dont tu as besoin. Both sound pretty good, and since you are not sure which sentence is correct “correct,”
you ask a few native French speakers. They too find them both acceptable and have no idea which structure is indeed prescriptively “right.” So you pose the same question to your friendly departmental syntactician (if you are lucky enough to have one). He or she gets very excited and goes off into a long discussion about indirect questions and their use in the spoken language. You nod as though you are following, but actually you understand precious little. More discouraged after your conversation, you still do not know which form one should use.

If you can relate to the awkward situations just described, we have written this book for you. As TA trainers and applied linguists with a background in formal linguistics and sociolinguistics, we have come to the conclusion that something should be done about grammar. Instructors need resources that not only facilitate their teaching of French grammar but also help them come to a better understanding of how French grammar functions in discourse. If you are a literature specialist, or perhaps an applied linguist who has never studied French syntax, pragmatics, or sociolinguistics extensively, we want to help fill in the gaps. If you are a new TA and are overwhelmed by your students’ questions, our goal is to enhance your understanding of French grammar. You will probably find that our approach is quite different from the methods you have seen before.

A common complaint we hear from colleagues is that while many recent French textbooks have made great strides in teaching reading, writing, vocabulary, and culture, the presentation of grammar remains problematic. As Cheryl Krueger, director of the French language program at the University of Virginia, observes:

Have you noticed that textbooks (elementary and often intermediate) tend to present vocabulary in a way that would allow a confused, unprepared, or unsure teacher to open the book and “walk” through a fairly interactive presentation? In fact, that teacher might even pick up on some ways of teaching vocabulary (how to group and map related words, how to involve students in the presentation phases, etc.) by following the presentation in the book. In other words, the teacher finds an organization, a context, visual back-up, and prompts—all applicable to use in class, and in fact, all providing a model for preparing presentations of vocabulary. The vocabulary presentations reinforce at least some of the theories and methods TA’s have learned in their methods course.

However, the grammar is presented (usually in English) in a sort of ref-
ereference grammar format, with model sentences in French. If the same un-prepared/uncertain teacher relies on the book, he or she will end up read-ing or having students read an explanation in English. In other words, there is no model for presenting grammar in class implicit in the textbook presenta-tion—no reinforcement of the methods or techniques studied in the methods course (and here, I am not even concerned about what method is reinforced, as long as it involves thinking, interaction, use of French). (personal correspondence)

Textbook grammar explanations are usually either overly simplified, or they contain grammatical terms that are not adequately defined or explained. In addition, instructors sometimes do not know how to integrate these explanations (or their accompanying activities, for that matter) into their lesson plans and classroom presentations. Instructors simply have not been provided with the tools or the support to make grammar accessible to their students.

There are two major reasons why teaching grammar has become such a difficult undertaking, and these issues are reflected in textbook grammar explanations. First, with the advent of the communicative approach in the 1980s, grammar took a backseat to communication. It was assumed that students would pick up grammatical structures through studying succinct grammar explanations at home and then performing communicative activities, which did not focus on grammar, in class. Research has shown that students do indeed acquire some grammar without explicit instruction or focused attention, but it has also demonstrated that there are grammar points that may require more than just a good deal of input in order for students to master them.

Second, most textbooks continue to teach grammatical constructions at the sentence level, even though such an approach cannot account for many of the phenomena that make grammar confusing and complicated from the learner’s perspective. Although some grammatical items are straightforward and easily learned at the word or sentence level (such as verb or adjective endings, for example), other topics are more complex and are impossible to master without considering the greater discourse environments in which they are found. Put differently, this book is not so much about traditional grammar rules per se, but rather about usage: when to use the passé composé or the imparfait in recounting past events, when to use the definite or the indefinite article, when to use different word order constructions or interrogative constructions in com-
munication. This book also makes no attempt to provide a comprehensive guide to all aspects of French grammatical usage. Only those areas that have been recognized as being the most problematic for learners to acquire and for instructors to explain have been included.

It is important to point out that our goal is not to advocate a return to traditional methods for teaching grammar. On the contrary, we aim to demonstrate how grammar can be taught using methods that are currently showing great promise in the foreign and second language classroom. Intended to help instructors and teacher trainers develop a knowledge of French discourse that is grounded in recent theoretical and sociolinguistic research, this book explains various approaches to teaching discourse grammar that may be easily incorporated into today’s French language classrooms. At the same time, we propose an approach that is eclectic; not all French grammar needs to be studied as “discourse grammar.” It is important to distinguish between topics that require a discourse approach and those that do not.

In particular, the goals of this book are to help instructors

- acquire a metalanguage for explaining discourse-conditioned grammar;
- distinguish when a grammar item requires a sentential vs. a discourse frame and consequently develop different types of treatments in the classroom for each;
- become aware of the importance of pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors that influence the use of grammatical forms in discourse;
- develop their own discourse activities as needed;
- adapt sentential textbook activities in textbooks to focus on discourse;
- guide students to discover discourse patterns and properties on their own (and allow students to work as “language researchers”—see Rigggenbach 1999).

The book is divided into two sections: the initial Background chapters and the Grammar chapters. In the Background chapters, the goal is to define discourse grammar and explain why it is necessary to conceive of grammar as connected discourse. We begin in Chapter 2 with a discussion that shows the influence of the attitudes of linguists, students, and instructors on the ways grammatical topics are taught and learned (or not learned). Chapter 3 presents various methods for teaching French grammar and includes a discussion of which methods seem to work best for different types of grammar points. Most important in Chapter 3 is a dis-
cussion of the disparity in the complexity of grammatical constructions. Although some grammatical constructions are highly conditioned by context, others can be profitably studied at the word or sentence level. It is important for instructors to be able to differentiate between various types of grammatical structures and thus choose the most effective techniques for teaching them.

The second part of the book concentrates precisely on the grammatical structures that are best studied and more effectively learned within discourse. Chapter 4 treats the noun phrase and its components. We pay specific attention to determiners, a particularly difficult topic for instructors to explain and students to master. Chapter 5 contains an analysis of narration in the past, focusing on the linguistic topics of tense and aspect. Chapters 6 and 7 both stress the importance of distinguishing between the features of spoken and written French in order to communicate in a manner that is pragmatically and sociolinguistically appropriate. Chapter 6 treats word-order constructions; much of this material will be new for readers, as non-linguists do not usually study this topic. Chapter 7 treats the topic of interrogation, stressing that not all interrogative forms are appropriate in various settings and situations. Finally, Chapter 8 offers practical advice for instructors about integrating the study of grammar into the communicative classroom. Suggestions are provided for creating lesson plans where grammar is no longer treated as a peripheral, unrelated component of a content- or task-based language program.

The grammar chapters (Chapters 4–7) all follow the same format, which is as follows:

1. **Overview/Key Considerations**
   To begin, we provide a short overview of the major points of the chapter (the road map).

2. **Difficulties for the Learner**
   This section contains a description of the problems that students have with the structure at hand, focusing on the structures and concepts that confuse students, as well as student (and teacher) misconceptions. In addition, some background knowledge is provided for the topics that will be discussed throughout the chapter.

3. **Basic Forms and Meanings**
   Here we provide the reader with a short summary of the grammar point from a traditional perspective. The goal is to lay out for the reader the