

# Chapter 1

## Grasping Grammar Nitty-Gritty

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Defining what *grammar* means
- ▶ Identifying the problems grammar can solve
- ▶ Bringing grammar into the real world

**I**'m well aware that you've been studying grammar in one form or another for a lot of years. You may have been in first or second grade when a teacher introduced the notion that different words in a sentence do different things: Some words name people, animals, and objects, for example, and other words indicate what those people, animals, and objects are doing.

If you were blessed with brilliant, enlightened teachers, your experience with grammar has led you to understand not only how to use it but also why it's essential. However, because you're holding this book in your hands, I suspect that may not have been the case. More likely, you were blessed with caring, dedicated teachers who followed a pattern of instruction handed down to them from teachers past. That pattern likely focused on memorizing parts of speech and diagramming sentences. And here you are, years later, trying to recall what indirect objects are and why you should care.

In this chapter, I explain how I approach the study of grammar in this book. A clue: I honestly don't care whether you can identify an indirect object (a part of speech I describe in Chapter 4). I do, however, care a great deal about your ability to construct a complete sentence that communicates information clearly and meets the needs of your audience.

## Grammar: What It Is!

In the Middle Ages (a few years before I went to school), *grammar* meant the study of Latin, the language of choice for educated people. In fact, grammar was so closely associated with Latin that the word referred to any kind of learning. This meaning of *grammar* shows up when people of grandparent age talk about their *grammar school*, not their elementary school. The term *grammar school* is a leftover from the old days.

These days, *grammar* is the study of language — specifically, how words are put together. Because of obsessive English teachers and their rules, *grammar* also means a set of standards that you have to follow in order to speak and write better. However, the definition of *better* changes according to your situation, your purpose, and your audience. (I discuss this subject more in the final section of this chapter, as well as in Chapter 11, where I offer tips on how to become a better writer.)

Actually, several different types of grammar exist, including *historical* (how language has changed through the centuries) and *comparative* (how languages differ from or resemble each other). In this book, I deal with only two types of grammar — the two you need to know in order to improve your speech and writing:

✓ **Descriptive grammar:** This type of grammar gives names to the parts of speech and parts of a sentence. When you learn descriptive grammar, you understand what every word is (its part of speech) and what every word does (its function in the sentence).



Knowing some grammar terms can help you understand why a particular word or phrase is correct or incorrect, so I sprinkle descriptive grammar terms throughout this book. However, you don't need to be able to explain the difference between a participle and a gerund to use them correctly. My main purpose is to show you how to put words together in appropriate ways so you can write a school assignment, a report for work, or any other formal communication effectively. That's why descriptive grammar plays second fiddle in this book to the type I describe in the next bullet.

✓ **Functional grammar:** The bulk of this book is devoted to *functional grammar*, which shows you how words behave when they're doing their jobs properly. Functional grammar guides you to the right expression — the one that fits what you're trying to say — by ensuring that the sentence is put together correctly. When you're agonizing over whether to say *I* or *me*, you're solving a problem of functional grammar.

So here's the formula for success: A little descriptive grammar plus a lot of functional grammar equals better grammar overall.

## The Big Ideas of Grammar

When you get right down to it, the study of grammar is the study of three key issues: choosing the right words to get your point across to a reader or listener, putting those words in the right order, and (when you're writing) inserting the correct punctuation marks (commas, apostrophes, and so on) in the correct places. In this section, I explain why each issue matters so much.

### *Making the right word choices*

This issue is an umbrella that covers many grammar gremlins. Four of the biggest are selecting verb forms that match the subjects in your sentence, using the right pronouns, deciding between adjectives and adverbs, and choosing wisely between two (or more) words that sound similar or seem to be interchangeable (but aren't).

### *Creating subject-verb harmony*

Say you're writing a sentence that describes what three people are doing:

Ralph, Lulu, and Stan is skipping through the woods.

Do you detect a problem? Even if you can't put your finger on what's wrong, you probably realize that something about this sentence doesn't sound right. That "something" is the verb *is*, which doesn't get along with *Ralph, Lulu, and Stan*.

In grammatical terms, what you have here is a subject-verb disagreement. The *subject* of a sentence is the *noun* (person, place, thing, or idea) that is doing or being something. The *verb* is the part of the sentence that explains what the subject is doing.

To make the multiple (or *plural*) subjects in this sentence play nice with the verb, you must change *is* to *are*:

Ralph, Lulu, and Stan are skipping through the woods.

Subject-verb agreement can get complicated sometimes, and I devote Chapter 2 to refreshing your memory about how to identify subjects and verbs and how to create harmony between them.

### ***Selecting pronouns***

Allow me to tell you a riveting story:

My brother and me went to the store yesterday to look for some new dish towels. We looked in every department but couldn't find it anywhere. We asked a salesman for help, but they couldn't answer our question.

Aside from "riveting" being an out-and-out lie, can you figure out what's wrong with this story? This example contains three grammatical errors, all of which are problems with pronoun selection.



A *pronoun* is a word that substitutes for a noun, and figuring out which pronoun to use in a sentence can sometimes be truly challenging. Choosing incorrectly can offend your reader's ear and also create confusion.

To correct this story, you need to make the following changes (shown in *italics*):

My brother and *I* went to the store yesterday to look for some new dish towels. We looked in every department but couldn't find *them* anywhere. We asked a salesman for help, but *he* couldn't answer our question.

Not sure why you need *I* instead of *me* or *he* instead of *they*? Chapter 3 offers a detailed discussion of how to make good pronoun choices; be sure to check it out.

### ***Describing nouns and verbs with the right words***

The reason you're reading this chapter is that you want to write good, right? Actually, no. What you really want to do is to write *well*. The grammatical explanation is that *good* is always an *adjective*: a word used to describe nouns. *Well*, on the other hand, is usually an *adverb*: a word that describes a verb or modifies an adjective. But even if you never memorize the grammatical reason, you must know when to use *good* and when to use *well*.

Likewise, you need to know when to use an adjective versus when to use an adverb. Luckily, Chapter 6 provides all the details, so you'll never again feel *bad* (as opposed to *badly*) about your writing.

### ***Choosing between similar words***

If you're going to write well, your word choices have to be correct. In some cases, you choose *among* several words that sound alike. In others, you choose *between* two words that most people (incorrectly) believe to be interchangeable. *Sometimes* the choices are tricky, but if you spend *some time* reading Chapter 9, I can help.

## ***Arranging words for optimal understanding***

In this book, I commit a particular grammatical sin that wouldn't be acceptable in a more formal type of writing: I write *fragments*, which are incomplete sentences. Like this one. And this one.

The opposite of a fragment is a *run-on* sentence: one that keeps going long after it should have stopped. For example, I create a run-on if I use a comma to try to join two complete sentences, I should use a semicolon or a *conjunction* (such as *and*, *or*, or *but*) instead. (That was intentional, mind you. I do have my certified grammarian's license.)

Fragments and run-ons are two problems writers grapple with when trying to create complete sentences. Other problems can be a bit tougher to identify, such as combining ideas of unequal importance in ways that make them seem equal. Consider an example:

**First idea:** I tripped and broke my leg.

**Second idea:** I was chewing gum.

**Combination:** I tripped and broke my leg, and I was chewing gum.

Technically, the combined sentence is okay. But are you really helping the reader understand what happened here? Just by changing *and* to a different connecting word, you can clarify what happened. For example:

I tripped and broke my leg *while* I was chewing gum.

I tripped and broke my leg *because* I was chewing gum.

I devote Chapter 4 to a thorough discussion of how to create complete sentences that provide the reader with an appropriate amount of information arranged in a helpful way.

Chapter 5 tackles still more issues related to word arrangement, such as making sentences parallel. Take a look at a sentence that isn't parallel:

My goal is to study economics, Arabic, and impress my boss.

What you're saying is that you plan to study three things, the third being "impress my boss." Huh? By making the sentence parallel, you clarify for your reader what you actually mean:

My goal is to study economics, *learn* Arabic, and impress my boss.

By adding *learn*, you start each of the three items in your list with a verb, which makes the sentence parallel.

Chapter 5 deals with several other word arrangement issues as well, with the goal of helping you create clear, consistent writing.

## ***Pinpointing punctuation***

It's a real shame, when you write a perfectly fine sentence; and mess it up with 'improper' punctuation.



We all need occasional reminders about how to use punctuation marks. So many rules exist, and not all of them make logical sense. Your job is not to argue the logic; it's to apply the rules to every sentence you write. If you don't, your boss, teacher, or other authority figure is likely to dismiss your written observations because he or she won't be able to look past the errors to discover your brilliance.

To impress someone with your writing, you simply must know the punctuation rules and use punctuation marks correctly. That's why I suggest getting very cozy with Chapter 7. After all,

It's a real shame when you write a perfectly fine sentence and mess it up with improper punctuation.

Oh, and if you ever get confused about when to use capital letters and when to stick with lowercase, be sure to check out Chapter 8.

## *Putting Grammar to Work in the Real World*

The grammar lessons in this book are useless if they don't stick with you when you sit down to write. I strongly suggest keeping this book handy as a reference whenever you're working on an assignment or report; I don't expect you to memorize every punctuation or capitalization rule.

However, I work hard to bring the lessons in this book to life for you by providing lots of examples. The goal is for your "ear" — the part of your brain that can tell whether something you've written sounds right or wrong — to get lots of practice identifying common problems.

You can improve your grammar ear in lots of easy ways every day. Chapter 12 offers ten simple suggestions that range from reading good books, newspapers, and magazines to listening to news radio programs and watching quality TV shows in which the characters use proper English. (Think the History Channel, for example — not so much *The Sopranos*.)

The more you read and listen, the easier you'll be able to identify situations in which formal (or *standard*) English is required and situations in which you can relax the rules a bit. In Chapter 11, I explain the differences between formal and conversational English and note that just about any important communication requires formal English.



You may have the impression, for example, that you can relax the grammar rules when you're writing an e-mail or a text message. But as I explain in Chapter 11, the medium conveying your message isn't the deciding factor; your *audience* is. Who is going to read your e-mail or text message? Your best friend? Break as many grammar rules as you want. Your boss or teacher? Keep it formal. Even if you suspect that the individual won't mind a conversational tone, you don't want to risk a miscommunication, and you don't want a grammatically lax e-mail to be forwarded. Save yourself any potential embarrassment or hassle: Keep it formal.

Chapter 11 offers lots of other suggestions for improving your writing as well, including choosing juicy verbs and eliminating repetition. But in the end, the only way to improve your writing is to write. Reading a book — even one as astute and inspiring as this one — can take you only so far. Practice is essential, so dedicate a small amount of time every day to improving your speech and writing. Before long, you may start noticing billboards, store signs, and even newspaper headlines with grammatical errors. At that point, you'll be ready to apply for your official grammarian's license, too. (Calm down, now. Your heart may not be able to handle this much excitement.)