

- » Defining *good grammar*
- » Identifying features of accepted Australian English
- » Understanding the main word classes: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, verbals, determiners, prepositions and conjunctions

Chapter 1

Grappling with Grammar

Good communication and good grammar go hand in hand. The very point of using language is to express and exchange ideas in a way that conveys them clearly, with as few misunderstandings as possible. Sure, an occasional ‘Oh, you know what I mean’ is not going to stop the world from turning or upset your friends and family, but if you need to impress somebody, you need your communication to be accurate. If you want your job application to shine, your presentation to captivate or your documents to be precise, using good grammar will help you to achieve these things.

Of course, you probably already have pretty good grammar. Most people learn the basics of language use as if by osmosis, picking it up without necessarily understanding the rules. After all, you’re likely to have been talking almost all of your life and have probably forgotten when and how you first learned to read and write. But the fact that you have this book in your hands means that you have decided that learning *better* grammar is a valuable strategy. Yay you! This book will help you become a better communicator.

In this chapter, we look closely at what constitutes proper grammar and consider what makes Australian English unique. We also take a trip back in time to revisit probably the first thing you were taught about grammar as we consider the very basic unit of communication: the word.

Grasping Grammar: Good and Proper

Rightly or wrongly, your audience or readers judge you by the words you use and the way you string them together. Listen to the speech of the people in movies. An uneducated character sounds different from someone with five diplomas on the wall. The dialogue reflects reality: educated people follow certain rules when they speak and write. In fact, people who use language according to formal grammar rules are said to be speaking *properly*. If you want to present yourself as an educated person, you have to follow those rules too.

Actually, several different types of grammar exist, including *historical* (how language has changed through the centuries) and *comparative* (comparing languages). Vintage grammar-geeks and gurus loved to complicate things. But don't worry; we love to keep things simple. In this book, we use the best bits of the two easiest, most familiar ways of presenting the rules of grammar to come up with what's proper.

Descriptive grammar gives names to things — the parts of speech, or word groups, 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). Learning some grammar terms has a couple of important advantages — to be clear about *why* a particular word or phrase is correct or incorrect, and to be able to understand the explanations and advice given by your computer's grammar checker or in a dictionary or style guide.

Functional grammar tells you how words behave when they're doing their jobs properly. It 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 agonising over whether to say *I* or *me*, you're solving a problem of functional grammar. Most of the grammar we use in this book is functional grammar.

So here's the formula for better grammar: a little descriptive grammar plus a lot of functional grammar. Better grammar equals better self-expression. And better self-expression equals improved self-confidence. And with improved self-confidence, anything is possible. The news is all good!

Using Aussie English

In the Middle Ages, *grammar* meant the study of Latin, because Latin was the language of choice for educated people. In fact, knowing Latin grammar was so closely associated with being an educated person that the word *grammar* was also used to refer to any kind of learning. That's why *grammar schools* were called grammar schools; they were places of learning — and not just learning about how Latin and English work.

These days, grammar is the study of language — specifically, how words are put together to create meaning. Through time, grammar has also come to mean a set of standards that you have to follow in order to speak and write correctly. No doubt in your career as a student, you discovered that different teachers have different pet hates — English teachers included. The emphasis placed on the importance of certain points of grammar differs from classroom to classroom. Don't worry; we're consistent.

The accepted way that English is spoken is called *usage*, and this includes both *standard* and *non-standard usage*. Standard usage is the one that is regarded as proper. It consists of the commonly accepted correct patterns of speech and writing that mark an educated person in our society. You can find standard usage in government documents, in formal newspapers and magazines, and in textbooks. Non-standard usage includes slang and just plain bad grammar. It's common in everyday conversations, but should be avoided in formal situations.

Furthermore, the way the rules and patterns of grammar are applied varies in different English-speaking countries. Standard Australian English isn't the same as either standard American English or standard British English. Certainly, we choose different standard spellings for the same word (such as *-ise* endings in Australia versus *-ize* endings in America) or different words for the same thing (for example, a sidewalk in America is a pavement

in England and a footpath in Australia). More than this, the way we use certain punctuation marks varies, and sometimes we even put words in a different order to express the same meaning.

Examples of non-standard Australian English include using *verse* as a verb meaning ‘to compete against’ (*Our team is versing yours next week*) and choosing *youse* as a plural form of *you* (*Youse can all come too*). Using non-standard Australian English isn’t likely to get you that promotion you wanted. (But using plain English, where you keep your language clear, might — for more on this, see Chapter 10.)

So how do we decide what is standard Australian English? We refer to authorities. We use Australian dictionaries and Australian style guides. We follow the advice provided by the Australian National Dictionary Centre at the Australian National University, and scour the bulletins on English in Australia published by the Department of Linguistics at Macquarie University. Relax. In this book, all the research has been done for you. That’s a promise.

Having a Quick Squiz at Aussie Words

Today, just as your average Australian *dunny* is indoors, your average Australian neighbour is not a *bush cocky*. Uniquely Australian language is alive and well and living in the suburbs. (All italicised terms in this section are defined in the list at the end of the section.)

Naturally, the earliest examples of *true blue* Australian language come from the convict days. Early Australian vocabulary was borrowed from various forms of British English. The *crims* sent here by *Her Maj* were not well educated, and spoke a kind of street language that set them apart from the wealthy and privileged. *Lagging* on your *mates* has always been un-Australian, and *dobbing* continues to be a social crime in classrooms today — only *big-noting* or being a *wowser* are worse. Australia’s convict heritage has even been blamed for the all-too-prevalent *tall poppy syndrome* that characterises the culture.

Australians took other words that we claim as Australian English from the languages of our indigenous peoples. Let’s face it, what would anyone who’d never been *within cooee* of one before call a

wallaby or a *wobbegong*? And in households all over the nation, high-tech equipment regularly *goes bung*.

Making fun of others and being irreverent has always been a feature of Australian language. *Bananabenders* and *Sandgroppers* argue about who has the best beaches. We affectionately refer to each other as *dags* or *ratbags*. Even our first female prime minister is regularly referred to as a *ranga*.

Even our *pollies* themselves help keep Australian English healthy. John Howard gave us *economic rationalism* when he was prime minister. And where else in the world would there be *anti-hoon legislation*?

- » anti-hoon legislation: laws to curb anti-social driving
- » Bananabender: person from Queensland
- » big-noting: bragging about oneself
- » bush cocky: farmer
- » crim: criminal
- » dag: a likeable person who is unconcerned about fashion
- » dinky-di: genuine
- » dobbing: informing on another
- » dunny: toilet
- » economic rationalism: market- and money-oriented economic policy
- » goes bung: breaks down (from the Yagara language, originally meaning dead)
- » Her Maj: Her Majesty the Queen of England
- » lagging: informing on another
- » pollie: politicians
- » ranga: person with red hair
- » ratbag: an amusing troublemaker
- » Sandgroper: person from West Australia
- » squiz: look or glance
- » tall poppy syndrome: the systematic criticism of high achievers
- » true blue: patriotic Australian
- » wallaby: small pouched marsupial like a kangaroo

- » within cooee: in close proximity to
- » wobbegong: A species of shark
- » wowser: Person who tries to impose their own strict moral code on others

Choosing Levels of English

So, using good grammar clearly sounds like a great idea, but you may not always need to use standard English because the language of choice depends on your situation. Here's what we mean. Imagine that you're hungry. How would you invite someone to join you for lunch?

Would you care to accompany me to lunch?

Wanna go grab a bite?

Different levels of English are used in everyday life. We call the first example *formal English*, and the second example *informal English*. If you're like most people, you switch between levels of English dozens of times each day without even thinking about it. You choose the most suitable level of language depending on where you are, what's going on and who your audience is.

Impressing with formal English

Formal English shows that you've trotted out your best behaviour in someone's honour. You may use formal English when you have less power, importance and/or status than the other person in the conversation. You may also use it when you have *more* power, importance or status than the other person (to maintain the distance between you). Think of formal English as English on its best behaviour and wearing a business suit. If you're in a situation where you want to look your best, or in which you're being judged, use formal English.

Situations and types of writing that call for formal English include

- » authoritative reference books
- » business letters and emails (from individuals to businesses, as well as from or between businesses)

- » homework
- » important conversations such as job interviews, university interviews, parole hearings, sessions with teachers in which you explain that it wasn't you who did what they think you did, that sort of thing
- » letters to government officials
- » notes or letters to teachers
- » office memos
- » reports
- » speeches, presentations and formal oral reports.

Chances are formal English is the one that gives you the most trouble. In fact, it's probably why you bought this book. So, the grammar lessons you'll find here deal with how to handle formal English, because that's where the rewards for knowledge are greatest.

Chatting in informal English

Informal English is casual and often strays from the rules, even breaking some. It's the tone of most everyday speech, especially between equals. In informal English we take short cuts and combine words: *let's*, *we've*, *I'll*. Using informal English is fine for conversations, emails to friends or a note to your brother, but not for writing an essay or a business report.

In the written form, informal English also relaxes the punctuation rules. Sentences run together, dashes connect all sorts of things, and half-sentences pop up regularly. This book is in conversational English because we like to think we're chatting with you, the reader, not teaching grammar in a classroom. Think of informal English as being like English in jeans and a T-shirt: perfectly comfortable and presentable, but not suitable as corporate attire.

Specifically, informal English is appropriate in these situations:

- » comments made on public internet sites
- » communication (including by email or snail mail) with your extended personal community of family, friends and acquaintances

- » incidental conversations (but not in writing) with bosses, teachers and work colleagues
- » fiction and memoir writing.

Labelling Words

No doubt you've been in the frustrating position of having to try to decode what someone is trying to tell you about 'What's-her-name . . . You know . . . The one who works at that place . . . She has a sort of large thingamabob'. Without the right words, the correct labels, you cannot understand the message. The same is true when talking about language or, more specifically, about grammar. You don't need to be a professor or a walking dictionary, but you do need to understand the key terms so that we can communicate efficiently. So we're going to introduce you to (or just acquaint you with) some of the most important grammar terms, starting with the labels used for *word classes* or *parts of speech*. Understanding these is the first step to better grammar.

Nouns

We use nouns to provide a name or label. We have nouns for people (*lawyer, Vincent*); places (*beach, Monkey Mia*); objects (*pen, bird*); feelings (*happiness, boredom*); concepts (*accountability, freedom*); qualities (*bravery, intelligence*); ideas (*imagination, notion*); and activities (*golf, dancing, shopping*). Nouns are rarely troublemakers, but in Chapter 5 we take a peek at how they work in descriptions, while in Chapter 7 the connection between nouns and capital letters is made clear.

Pronouns

The name *pronoun* makes this part of speech sound either like a highly skilled, professional (pro) noun, or a class of word that is totally in favour of (pro) nouns. While both are possible, neither is entirely correct. A *pronoun* is a word that can be used in the place of a *noun*. (See how handy it is to have basic grammar vocabulary at your fingertips? Some parts of speech are defined according to their relationship to other word classes.) Chapter 4 explains how to peak with pronouns, but, in the meantime, here's an example of how *pronouns* substitute for *nouns* to minimise tedious repetition in communication:

With nouns (yawn): If *Kelly* wants to bring *Kelly's* friend, *Kelly* is welcome to do so.

With pronouns: If Kelly wants to bring *her* friend, *she* is welcome to do so.

Also with pronouns: If *you* want to bring *your* friend, *you* are welcome to do so.

Verbs

If you delve back into the darkest corner of your brain, you can probably dimly recall chanting the definition, 'A verb is a doing word'. Powering your language is exactly what the verb is 'doing'. Verbs refer to actions (*eat, write, take*), conditions (*seem, appear, become*) or states of being (*am, is, are*). They're also the key to understanding when a sentence is grammatically correct, so these guys deserve close attention. To locate a verb in a sentence, you need to ask yourself these questions: *What's happening? What is?* The word that provides the answer is the *verb*.

Because they change their form and attach to other verbs or other parts of speech to change their meaning, verbs can be tricky. But verbs have power, and understanding how they work is probably the most essential of all grammar essentials. Chapter 2 takes you further into the world of verbs.

Adjectives

When we add more information to a *noun* or *pronoun*, the word we use is called an *adjective*. Adjectives add to, describe or modify nouns and pronouns. They can be found lurking either in front of a noun or pronoun, or after a special kind of *verb* called a *linking verb* (you can read all about verbs in Chapter 2). Because adjectives add colour and detail to our language, they're worth careful consideration, so Chapter 5 provides ample advice but, basically, adjectives work like this:

Before a noun: The *sneaky* adjective attaches itself to the *unsuspecting* noun.

Before a pronoun: The noun is the *unsuspecting* one.

After a linking verb: The adjective is *sneaky* and the noun is *unsuspecting*.

Adverbs

Another of those grammar chants you may have learned at one stage goes like this: ‘An adverb adds meaning to a verb by telling us how, when, where or why a thing is done’. While that’s true, it’s only part of the adverb story. Adverbs can also be used to modify adjectives or even other adverbs. Another thing you may vaguely remember is that adverbs often end with *-ly*. True. But not all adverbs end with those letters, and *lovely* is an adjective. So, reading Chapter 5 will help you to master adverbs and to write so that your descriptions say precisely what you mean. Here are some adverbs at work:

With a verb: The sun shines *brightly*.

With an adjective: The day feels *unbearably hot*.

With another adverb: The sea glistens *most enticingly*.

Verbals

What do you get when you cross a verb with a noun, or an adjective, or an adverb? Answer: a *verbal*. A *verbal* is a word that looks like a *verb*, or part of a verb, but is not acting like a verb. It is being used as another *part of speech*. Even its label, *verbal*, suggests that this part of speech must have something to do with verbs. So, you need to know about these two-timers so that you don’t confuse them with the real verbs in your writing. Take a look at these examples:

As a noun: *Studying* gives me nightmares.

As an adjective: I rest my *tired* brain.

As an adverb: She should try *to sleep*.

Determiners

There was once a word class for just three words: *a*, *the*, *an*. They formed the word group called *articles*. But what makes those three little words so special? Well . . . Ummm . . . Nothing really. They do the same job as lots of other words. So, contemporary grammar-gurus include articles in a word class called *determiners*. A raft of words that also fit into other classes work extra shifts as determiners. Like articles, determiners go in front of a noun or a group of words that’s doing the work of a noun, and tell you how specific or otherwise something is.

Common determiners are words such as *the, both, every, my, his, our, this, that, these, those, each, ten*. As you can no doubt see, some of those words look suspiciously like other parts of speech — pronouns, for example, (*my, his, our*) or adjectives (*each, both, ten*). Different grammar books or teachers may even refer to them as such. What you need to know is that we prefer the simplest, most logical way of explaining language, so throughout this book, we'll stick with the label *determiner*.

Prepositions

If all the parts of speech were to form a sporting team, Preposition would be the easy-going one who fills in wherever and whenever required. During the game, Preposition would consistently pass the ball to Noun or Pronoun so they can score the points. *Prepositions* are unassuming but important contributors to the language game.

Prepositions show a relationship between a noun and another word. We can relate the two nouns *book* and *wombat* by using various prepositions to express different ideas. The book could be *about* the wombat, *beside* the wombat or maybe *behind* the wombat. Which would mean that the wombat was *in* the book, *near* the book and *in front of* the book.

Prepositions (the words in italics) come in front of a noun or group of words acting as a noun. That's why they're called *pre + positions*. In Chapter 8, we see how they work with pronouns, where they sometimes cause problems but, generally, they're helpful little words.

Conjunctions

The fact that the label *conjunction* contains the word *junction* is no coincidence. Just as a junction connects two or more roads, so a *conjunction* connects two or more words. Common joining words are *and, but, because, so, or*. That's pretty straightforward, but conjunctions come in several varieties, which is important to understand when you need to connect whole ideas rather than just individual words. So you can find out about two-part conjunctions in Chapter 8, while Chapter 10 shows you how important they are for connecting ideas in a logical way.

