

Chapter 1

Getting a Grip on Grammar

In This Chapter

- ▶ Surveying the basic elements of grammar
- ▶ Watching out for punctuation and spelling
- ▶ Coping with everyday writing tasks

Lots of people groan when they hear the word grammar. They think that grammar is just a long list of picky rules. Who cares if you say *had gone* or *went*? Why worry about the choice between *I* and *me*? These issues can seem silly. Wouldn't it be better to spend time searching for a cancer cure?

Yes, grammar is often picky. Certainly, the world needs more than grammar – much more! Yet proper language does matter. Rightly or wrongly, many people judge your intelligence and ability based on the way you speak and write. Better jobs and higher grades often go to those who follow the rules. In this chapter, you survey the key elements of Standard English – grammar, spelling and much more.

Getting to Know the Elements of Proper English

When you bake a cake, you need all the right ingredients. If you forget one, the cake is tasteless. English has a number of ingredients, too. You cannot ignore any if you wish to express yourself correctly. Here are the ingredients of proper English:

- ✓ **Parts of speech:** Words are like people. Both base a portion of their identity on the work they do. Words that name people or things, for example, are *nouns*. English teachers call the identity of a word the *part of speech*. Understanding how to select the appropriate part of speech is an important aspect of grammar.

Did you go to grammar school?

In the Middle Ages, the word *grammar* meant education. The term applied to all sorts of learning, not just to rules of the language. This old definition lasted a long time. When I was a child, quite a few centuries after the Middle Ages ended, I attended *grammar school*.

I did study English grammar during grades one through eight. I had lessons in maths, history, science and many other subjects. Now, children enrol in *secondary* school, not grammar school. Even so, the link between proper English usage and education remains strong.

- ✓ **Parts of a sentence:** Words seldom like to be alone. (This is another quality that words and people have in common.) When words join together, they form *sentences*. Complete sentences are essential in formal writing.
- ✓ **Mechanics:** Surprised? Usually, mechanics repair automobiles and other machines. In language, the term *mechanics* refers to the little things that help readers understand what you mean. Spelling and capitalisation are included in mechanics. So is *punctuation*, the placement of full stops, commas, question marks and other symbols. Without proper mechanics, your writing suffers.
- ✓ **Word order:** In English, location partly determines meaning. *The dog bit John* is different from *John bit the dog*. In the first version, the dog is in trouble. In the second, John has a problem. You should know the rules that govern the placement of words.
- ✓ **Word choice:** Some words sound alike (*eye* and *I*, for example). Others are nearly twins (for instance, *affect* and *effect*). Selecting the wrong word can wreck your writing.
- ✓ **Word forms:** Today *I walk*. Yesterday *I walked*. The form of the word *walk* changes to reveal the time period of the action. Knowing the correct form is essential.

These are the main ingredients that cook up proper English.

Building Language, Block by Block: Parts of Speech

According to one survey, the English language includes more than one million words. All of those words can be sorted into one of eight boxes: the *parts of speech*. Take a look at the Big Eight:

- ✓ Nouns
- ✓ Pronouns
- ✓ Verbs
- ✓ Adjectives
- ✓ Adverbs
- ✓ Prepositions
- ✓ Conjunctions
- ✓ Interjections

Not every box has the same number of words in it. The *interjection* container is light. The *noun* and *verb* containers are huge. The other boxes fall somewhere in between.

Just to give you an idea how these parts of speech look within a sentence, here are some examples. The parts of speech are underlined and labelled:

Nora likes algebra. (*Nora* and *algebra* are nouns.)

I told you the story already. (*I* and *you* are pronouns.)

The baby sat in the pram. (*Sat* is a verb.)

Great speeches require intense practice. (*Great* and *intense* are adjectives.)

Glen wrote his name carefully and correctly. (*Carefully* and *correctly* are adverbs.)

A play by that author received great reviews from the critics. (*By* and *from* are prepositions.)

Nora and Fred like opera, but Sal prefers jazz. (*And* and *but* are conjunctions.)

Oh, those tickets are cheap! (*Oh* is an interjection.)

You may ask, ‘Why should anyone bother labelling parts of speech?’ Good question! Most of the time, you think about the meaning of a word, not its part of speech. Most of the time, your writing is correct. However, some important grammar rules depend upon knowing the difference between one part of speech and another. For example, an *adjective* is a word that describes people, places or things. An *adverb* is also a description, but it cannot do an adjective’s job.

Take a look at these examples. Pay close attention to the underlined words:

WRONG: Today the weather is beautifully.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Beautifully* is not the proper part of speech for this spot in the sentence. *Beautifully* is an adverb. You need an adjective here.

RIGHT: Today the weather is beautiful.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The adjective *beautiful* works well here.

WRONG: Bill and Tina agenda the next meeting.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Agenda* is a noun. You need an action word (a verb).

RIGHT: Bill and Tina wrote the agenda for the next meeting.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The verb *wrote* provides the action. *Agenda* correctly appears as a noun.

WRONG: The puppy lifted it's paw.

WHY IT IS WRONG: You need a pronoun in this spot. *It's* means 'it is'.

RIGHT: The puppy lifted its paw.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *Its* is a pronoun.

WRONG: The rumour spread threw the class.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Threw* is a verb. You should not have an action word here.

RIGHT: The rumour spread through the class.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The verb is gone. In its place you have a preposition, a word that relates ideas. In this sentence it relates *spread* and *class*, showing where the rumour *spread*.

In Part II, you find in-depth information on every part of speech. Well, every part of speech except for *interjections*. An *interjection* is a word that briefly comments on the rest of the sentence. *Ouch*, *wow* and *oh* are interjections. I don't provide in-depth commentary on interjections. They have no depth! They simply add a little interest to your conversation.



Every dictionary tells you the part of speech of the word, usually right in front of the definition. Some words may have several labels, because they change their identity in different sentences. For more information on how to understand every part of a dictionary definition, check out Chapter 21.

Making Sentences

A judge sentences criminals to prison. There, criminals must follow many rules. You may feel that English sentences are prisons, too. So many rules apply to them! I am just kidding. English sentences are definitely *not* prisons.

They are structures to hold your thoughts. They help your reader pick apart one idea from another. Take a peek at this paragraph:

going to the beach bad idea no pets allowed want take the dog he does not bite you know kind and friendly he is to the park instead

Oh, my! In that paragraph, all the ideas are jumbled together. It resembles a wardrobe with no hangers. The clothes are impossible to find.

Take another look at the same paragraph, this time with proper sentences:

Going to the beach is a bad idea. No pets are allowed. I want to take the dog. He does not bite. You know how kind and friendly he is. We should go to the park instead.

This one is easier to understand, isn't it? The extra words, capital letters and punctuation are like hangers in a wardrobe. They organise your thoughts into complete sentences. In doing so, they sort out ideas the way hangers sort out clothing.



Complete and proper sentences are not always necessary. When you speak with your friends, for instance, you may use half-sentences.

Read this conversation. Imagine that Joe and Barbara are speaking to or texting each other:

Joe: Want to go to the beach?

Barbara: Not without my dog.

Joe: Okay, the park instead.

These comments work well because Joe and Barbara are not in a formal situation. To find out when formal English is necessary and when conversational English will do, turn to Chapter 2. For more about grammar and texting, see Chapter 18.

When you do want to create grammatically correct sentences, you must pay attention to several issues. The sections that follow briefly show you these issues.

Action or being words

Every sentence has at least one word that expresses action or being. That word is a *verb*. In these sentences, the verbs are underlined:

Candice loves her engagement ring. (*loves* = action word)

Duke ate every dog biscuit in the box. (*ate* = action word)

She will be pleased with your work. (*will be* = being words)

Were the lights on? (*Were* = being word)

Selecting the right verb form is important. Have a look at these examples. Notice the underlined verbs:

WRONG: You was wrong.

WHY IT IS WRONG: The verb form *was* does not pair properly with *you*.

RIGHT: You were wrong.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *Were* is the verb form that matches *you*. (To find out more about this topic, see Chapter 9.)

WRONG: The mayor speakd to voters yesterday.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Speaked* is not correct in Standard English.

RIGHT: The mayor spoke to voters yesterday.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *Spoke* is the irregular verb form you need in this sentence. (For more information about irregular verb forms, see Chapter 10.)

WRONG: John studying for his exam.

WHY IT IS WRONG: The verb form *studying* is not complete.

RIGHT: John is studying for his exam.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: Now the verb is complete. (See Chapter 9 for more about these verb forms.)

As you see, you can make many mistakes with action and being words. Verbs are complicated! Don't panic. The chapters I mention in the earlier examples explain the rules you must follow.

Subjects

In a sentence, someone or something does the action or exists in the state of being. That word is the *subject*. Notice the underlined subjects in these example sentences:

Cindy arrived at ten o'clock. (*Cindy* = subject)

We had sandwiches for lunch. (*We* = subject)

The sandwiches were delicious. (*sandwiches* = subject)

Do you like peanut butter? (*you* = subject)

It is smooth and sticky. (*It* = subject)

Marmalade and jam go well with peanut butter. (*Marmalade* and *jam* = subjects)

Most times, you know who or what you want to write about. The subject, in other words, is usually easy to select. When the subject is a pronoun, errors often occur. Examine these examples. The underlined words are important:

WRONG: Him and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Him* cannot be a subject.

RIGHT: He and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *He* is a proper subject.

WRONG: Are youse ready?

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Youse* is not the plural of *you*. *Youse* is not a Standard English form.

RIGHT: Are you ready?

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *You* is Standard English. *You* is both singular (one) and plural (more than one).

WRONG: Us friends should stick together.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Us* is not a proper subject.

RIGHT: We friends should stick together.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *We* is a proper subject.

Chapter 4 explains which pronouns work as subjects.

Pairing subjects with verbs can also cause trouble. Check these examples. Pay attention to the underlined words:

WRONG: Mr Smith and Ms Jones has been promoted.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Has been promoted* pairs up with one person. In this sentence, you have two people, *Mr Smith and Ms Jones*.

RIGHT: Mr Smith and Ms Jones have been promoted.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The verb *have been promoted* matches well with *Mr Smith and Ms Jones*. Both are plural (more than one).

WRONG: The list of grammar rules are too long.

WHY IT IS WRONG: The subject of the sentence is *list*, a singular word. It cannot pair with *are*, a plural verb form. Did you focus on *rules*? *Rules* is not the subject of this sentence. It is part of a description, *of grammar rules*.

RIGHT: The list of grammar rules is too long.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The singular verb form, *is*, pairs correctly with the singular subject, *list*.

To find out more about matching singular subjects to singular verb forms and plural subjects to plural verb forms, check out Chapter 11.

Complements and descriptions

Your thoughts are rich and varied. You want to say more than ‘Mary is’ or ‘I run’. Some elements, called *complements*, complete ideas. Take a peek at these example sentences. The complements are underlined:

Mary is happy.

Deborah posted the letter.

Cathy and Drew are always nervous in the dentist’s office.

Give Jean her pizza.

Did you tell Barbara the secret?

Usually, complements fall into place correctly. Pronouns can cause problems when they act as complements. (Have you noticed that pronouns are troublemakers?) For more information on complements, check out Chapter 12. To sort out pronouns, see Chapter 4.

Your writing would be very boring without descriptions. Notice the underlined descriptions in these examples:

Every morning I run through the park.

Pink paint covered the bumpy wall.

Silk thread is more expensive than cotton thread.

Wind in that area blows the fallen leaves away.

The book of speeches helped me prepare for the ceremony.

Singing, the choir entered the church.

As you see, descriptions come in many shapes and sizes. Chapter 6 explains what type of description is best for every situation.

Small but Important: Punctuating, Capitalising and Spelling

Punctuation marks, capital letters and spelling may seem unimportant. Don't overlook these little things, though. They add more to your writing than you may expect. Take punctuation, for example. Some years ago, lawmakers debated the placement of a comma for several hours. With the comma, the law had one meaning. Without it, the law was completely different! This section gives you an overview of punctuation, capitalisation and spelling.

Punctuation

I once saw a television show in which something similar to this conversation took place:

Angel (waving a thick stack of paper): I am writing a book.

Angel's friend (looking at the first page): What is this? I cannot read it. There is no punctuation.

Angel: Oh, I will worry about that stuff later.

Angel's friend: I do not think so! You need punctuation now!

Angel's friend is right. You can't read without punctuation, the little marks that show the reader where to pause, when someone is speaking and so on. These are the basic punctuation marks that you should know:

✓ **Apostrophe:** This is a little curved hook above the line. An apostrophe, along with the letter s, shows possession:

- Ellen's car (Ellen owns the car.)
- the boys' changing room (The changing room belongs to the boys.)
- my cousin's shoes (My cousin owns the shoes.)
- the Prime Minister's staff (The staff belongs to the Prime Minister.)
- women's rights (The rights belong to women.)

Apostrophes also shorten words:

- Annie doesn't ice skate. (Here, *doesn't* is short for *does not*)
- Im excited that our holiday is finally here. (*I'm* is short for *I am*.)
- Olivia couldn't go on the rollercoaster. (In this sentence, *couldn't* is short for *could not*.)
- Isn't that lemonade too cold? (*Isn't* is short for *is not*.)

To find out more about apostrophes, turn to Chapter 14.

- ✓ **Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark:** These three punctuation marks signal the end of a sentence. A *full stop* is a little dot. It follows a sentence that makes a statement. A *question mark* is made from a curve and a dot. It follows a sentence that asks a question. An *exclamation mark* is a line and a dot. It shows emphasis – the punctuation mark that shouts. Look at these punctuation marks in action:

- Mary's socks are blue. (The full stop ends the statement.)
- Are Tim's shoes blue also? (The question mark ends the question.)
- No, they are not! (The exclamation mark adds emphasis.)

To discover more about these three important punctuation marks, see Chapter 13.

- ✓ **Comma:** This little curved hook starts on the line and reaches below. A comma tells the reader to pause. Notice the commas in these sentences:

- Katie, my friend, is visiting from Chicago.
- Katie arrived yesterday, but she has to leave tomorrow.
- Chicago, which is in the state of Illinois, is a large city.
- Tim, have you ever visited Chicago?

If you read these sentences aloud, you can hear the short silences that appear at each comma. If commas trouble you, check out Chapter 15.

- ✓ **Quotation marks:** Quotation marks are little curves that appear above the line. Their most common job is to mark off the exact words that someone said or wrote. Notice the quotation marks in these examples:

- 'Be quiet,' said the librarian.
- The children cried, 'We were not very loud.'
- 'In the library,' replied the librarian, 'any noise is too loud.'

To use quotation marks properly, you must follow many rules. Turn to Chapter 16 for everything you need to know about quotation marks.

Capitalisation

Have you ever seen a very old piece of writing? Capital letters show up in strange places. Thomas Hobbes's book, *The Elements of Law*, is more than 300 years old. In the middle of one sentence, you see this phrase:

parts of our natural Reason

These days, *Reason* would appear in lowercase (non-capital letters). The writers of earlier times could place a capital wherever they wanted. You

don't have the same freedom. You must follow the rules. Glance at these situations, which require capital letters:

✓ **Speaker or writer:** The pronoun *I* always refers to the person who is writing. It is always capitalised. Check these examples:

- When I am asleep, I do not snore.
- Gene and I love to sail on the lake.
- Do I have to pay extra for my suitcase?

By the way, poets sometimes place the pronoun *I* in lowercase. Poets break rules whenever they wish. Outside of a poem, however, use a capital letter for *I*.

✓ **First word in a sentence:** A capital letter begins every sentence. The letter serves as a signal that one sentence has ended and another has begun. Look at these examples:

- Nana sings to the baby. She has a terrible voice! The baby does not mind. He loves her anyway.
- The new pub will open tomorrow. It looks stylish and modern. My guess is that the prices will be high there.



Are you curious about numbers? You can't capitalise *22* or *15* or any numeral. So what happens when a number appears at the beginning of a sentence? Good question! The answer is that you shouldn't begin a sentence with a numeral. If you need a number there, use the word:

- **WRONG:** 22 people live in that building.
- **RIGHT:** Twenty-two people live in that building.

✓ **Names:** I am *Geraldine Woods*, not *geraldine woods*. Nearly all names require capital letters. (Some companies choose lowercase letters for products. The *iPad* is an example of a name that doesn't begin with a capital letter.)

Of course, these are not the only rules that govern capital letters. Turn to Chapter 17 for more information.

Spelling

In silly television shows, *spell* is a magic word. In grammar, *spell* is also a magic word. Spelling – placing every letter in the right spot – is important. Have a close look at the following paragraph. Can you identify five misspelled words?

Jenny enjoys sewing. She pushes the needle into the cloth with her thumb.
Tina, who is makeing a new skirt, offen chats with Jenny wen they sew.

Before you check your answers, think for a moment. The earlier paragraph contains proper sentences. It clearly states the facts. Yet it is not a good piece of writing. The misspelled words turn a good paragraph into a bad one. Here are the correctly spelled words: *pushes, thumb, making, often, when*.

In Chapter 21, you find some rules for English spelling. Unfortunately, many, many English words don't follow those rules. To check your spelling, you may need help from the dictionary. Chapter 21 also explains how to understand and use the dictionary.



Many words sound the same but have different spelling and meaning. Other words are nearly alike in appearance or sound, but their definitions are not alike. Check Chapter 22 for help with these confusing words.

Facing Everyday Writing Tasks

Do you spend most of your time sitting at a desk? If you do, you probably face writing tasks such as these:

- ✓ **School assignments:** You write an essay during an exam or for your coursework. You answer questions based on a reading assignment. Perhaps you have to write a book review or a laboratory report. Your teacher may ask for a research paper or a short story. All these writing jobs call for good grammar. All follow patterns that are easy to learn. Knowing proper English and formatting will raise your grades.
- ✓ **Work-related writing:** You send an email to your co-workers or to your supervisor. The boss wants a report or a presentation. Perhaps it is your responsibility to respond to queries from customers. In the business world, good writing is expected – and often rewarded. Grammar rules apply to every writing task in the working world. Knowing the best format for each type of writing is also important.
- ✓ **Personal writing:** Outside of school and work, you may write a note to a friend. Perhaps you must send a letter to a landlord or a government official. You probably email or text friends and family members. In many situations, informal language and nonstandard grammar are fine. In others, you need your best writing skills.

When you face an everyday writing task, you should understand the rules and traditions that apply to it. Chapters 18, 19 and 20 tell you everything you need to complete your writing work easily and effectively. Explanations of the newer forms of communication – texts and slide presentations, for example – appear in these chapters also.



Sometimes it's fine to bend the rules of grammar and to use informal language. For example, would you send this text to a friend?

Would you accompany me to the cafeteria at your earliest convenience?

Is this your reply when your friend asks, 'Who's there?'

It is I.

If you answered 'yes', you probably eat alone and receive very few phone calls. With friends, proper grammar may turn a fun social occasion into something more formal. To find out more about when proper English is required and when you should relax the rules, see Chapter 2.

Mum and Dad

Because the ancient Romans once ruled a huge empire, babies are born in *maternity* wards. For the same reason, fathers may take a *paternity* test to prove that they are, indeed, fathers. These words come from Latin, the language of ancient Rome. *Mater* and *matr* are word parts associated with motherhood. *Pater* and *patri* are word parts associated with fatherhood. Here are some members of this word family:

Maternity means 'motherhood'. Example: Pregnant women go to the *maternity* ward.

A **matriarch** is the 'female head of a family'. Example: The aunts and uncles often went to Great Grandmother, the *matriarch*, for advice.

Maternal means 'motherly, relating to the mother'. Example: Her *maternal* feelings grew as she held her new baby.

A **matron** is 'a married woman, a woman in charge of children'. Example: The children in the audience were afraid of the *matron*, who watched them carefully.

Paternity means 'fatherhood'. Example: The *paternity* test showed that he was the baby's father.

A **patriarch** is the 'male head of a family'. Example: Every Sunday they had dinner with Oliver, the *patriarch* of their family.

Paternal means 'fatherly, relating to the father'. Example: Her *paternal* grandfather was ill, so she immediately flew to Manchester, where her father's family lived.

Keep your eye out for 'mum and dad' words as you read. Add any you find to your personal vocabulary list.

