

- » Distinguishing between grammar rules and style guidelines
- » Choosing language to suit your audience, message, and medium
- » Using grammar-checking apps and programs effectively

Chapter 1

Using the Right Words at the Right Time

In the Middle Ages, *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 and older talk about their *grammar school*, not their elementary school. The term *grammar school* is a leftover from the old days. The very old days.

These days the word *grammar* refers to the nuts and bolts of language, specifically, how words are put together to create meaning. Most people also apply the term to a set of rules you have to follow in order to speak and write better. However, the definition of *better* changes according to situation, purpose, and audience.

In this chapter, I show you the difference between formal and informal English and explain when each is called for. I also tell you what apps, speech-to-text, and word-processing programs can and can't do to help you write proper English. I also give you some pointers about generally accepted grammar for texting, tweeting, emailing, and other forms of electronic communication.

What This Year's Sentence Is Wearing: Understanding Grammar and Style

Fresh from the shower, you're standing in front of your closet. What should you select? Some options aren't open to you. You can't show up at work wearing nothing — not if you want to keep your job and, in addition, stay out of jail. That's a law (in the real world) and a rule (in the world of grammar). You *can* choose a bright purple jacket and a fluorescent green scarf. The fashion police may object, but real cops will leave you alone. In both the real world and Grammar Land, this sort of decision is a matter of *style*. A style point is more flexible than a grammar rule. Take that jacket-scarf selection. Your friends may stare and suggest a subtler color combination, or they may praise you for team loyalty if your school colors are purple and green and you're cheering at a pep rally.

The grammar rules of proper English can and do change, but not often — maybe a few times every 500 years. (Sometimes people break grammar rules on purpose. See the next section, “Distinguishing Between the Three Englishes,” for more information.) Style, on the other hand, shifts much more frequently. A sentence from the early 20th century may look odd to 21st century readers, and a sentence from the 19th century will seem even stranger. Style also changes with context. Science publications and literary journals, for example, capitalize titles differently. Geography matters, too. In the United States, a comma often appears before *and* in a list of three or more items. British writers generally omit that comma.



TIP

In *English Grammar For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, I discuss the most common style points. If I tackled every situation, though, you'd be reading a thousand-page book. For your most important writing projects, you may want to consult a manual of style. Many institutions publish this sort of book, listing their preferences for punctuation, capitalization, and a whole bunch of other *-ations* you've never heard of. A few popular style manuals are the *Modern Language Association Handbook* (for academic writing in the humanities), *The Chicago Manual of Style* (for general writing), the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, and the *MIT Guide to Science and Engineering Communication* (for science writing).

These examples illustrate the difference between grammar and style:

SENTENCE: Am going basketball game I to the.

WHAT'S WRONG: The word order is scrambled.

GRAMMAR OR STYLE? Grammar.

CORRECTED SENTENCE: I am going to the basketball game.

SENTENCE: She was born on March 18 2009.

WHAT'S WRONG: Most writers would insert a comma after *18*.

GRAMMAR OR STYLE? Style. Some writers prefer a completely different format for the date.

CORRECTED SENTENCE: She was born on March 18, 2009. Or, She was born on 18 March 2009.

SENTENCE: Them enjoy playing baseball.

WHAT'S WRONG: The word *them* isn't appropriate for that spot in the sentence. (Why? Check Chapter 8.)

GRAMMAR OR STYLE: Grammar.

CORRECTED SENTENCE: They enjoy playing baseball.

SENTENCE: Ann spends too much time surfing the Internet.

WHAT'S WRONG: When it was first invented, "Internet" was generally capitalized. These days, many publications prefer lowercase (*internet*).

GRAMMAR OR STYLE: Style.

CORRECTED SENTENCE: Ann spends too much time surfing the internet.



REMEMBER

When you're speaking or writing, you should take care not to break any grammar rules. You should also follow the style guidelines of the authority figure who's judging your work. However (there's always a *however* in life, isn't there?), your surroundings, audience, and purpose affect the grammar and style choices you make. For more information, read the next section, "Distinguishing Between the Three Englishes."

Distinguishing Between the Three Englishes

Good grammar sounds like a great idea, but *good* is tough to pin down. Why? Because you know several "Englishes," and the language that works in one situation is not suitable in another. Here's what I mean. Imagine that you're hungry. What do you say or write?

Wanna get something to eat? or c u in caf?

Do you feel like getting a sandwich?

Will you accompany me to the dining room?

These statements illustrate the three Englishes of everyday life. I call them friendspeak, conversational English, and formal English.

Before you choose, you need to know where you are and what's going on. Most important, you need to know your audience.

Wanna get something to eat? Friendspeak

Friendspeak is informal and filled with slang. Its sentence structure breaks all the rules that English teachers love. It's the language of *I know you and you know me and we can relax together*. In friendspeak, the speakers are on the same level. They have nothing to prove to each other, and they're comfortable with each other's mistakes. In fact, they make some mistakes on purpose, just to distinguish their personal conversation from what they say on other occasions. Here's a conversation in friendspeak:

Me and him are going to the gym. Wanna come?

He's like, I did 60 push-ups, and I'm like, no way.

I doubt that the preceding conversation makes sense to many people, but the participants understand it quite well. Because they both know the whole situation (the guy they're talking about gets muscle cramps after 4 seconds of exercise), they can talk in shorthand. They can write in shorthand, too, in texts such as *c u in caf* (which means "see you in the cafeteria"), tweets, instant messages, and similar communications between close friends.

For the most part, I don't deal with friendspeak in this book. You already know it. In fact, you've probably created a version of it with anyone who's your *bff* (best friend forever). In Chapter 16, I do explain some factors you should consider when you're writing online — to your friends or to anyone else.

FLEEK GRAMMAR

Want to be in the in-crowd? Easy. Just create an out-crowd and you're all set. How do you create an out-crowd? Manufacture a special language (slang) with your friends that no one else understands, at least until the media picks it up or someone *earjacks* you. (*Earjack* is slang for "secretly listen to.") Slang is the ultimate friendspeak. You and your pals are on the inside, talking about a *sketchy neighborhood* (*sketchy* means "dangerous"). Everyone else is on the outside, wondering what *fleek* (awesome, exactly right) means. Should you use slang in your writing? Probably not, unless you're dealing with a good friend. The goal of writing and speaking is communication, and slang may be a mystery to your intended audience. Also, because slang changes quickly, even a short time after you've written something, the meaning may be obscure. Instead of cutting-edge, you sound dated.

When you talk or write in slang, you also risk sounding uneducated. In fact, sometimes breaking the usual rules is the point of slang. In general, you should make sure that your readers know that you understand the rules before you start breaking them (the rules, not the readers) safely.

Do you feel like getting a sandwich? Conversational English

A step up from friendspeak is *conversational English*. Although not quite friendspeak, conversational English includes some warmth and informality. Conversational English doesn't stray too far from English class rules, but it does break some. You can relax, but not completely. It's the tone of most everyday speech, especially between equals. Conversational English is — no shock here — usually for conversations. Specifically, conversational English is appropriate in these situations:

- » Chats with family members, neighbors, and acquaintances
- » Informal conversations with teachers and co-workers
- » Friendly conversations (if there are any) with supervisors

Conversational English also shows up in writing, where it creates a "just us friends" or "no big deal" tone. I'm using conversational English in this book because I'm

pretending that I'm chatting with you, the reader, not teaching grammar in a classroom situation. Look for conversational English in these communications:

- » Notes, emails, instant messages, tweets, and texts to acquaintances and friends
- » Posts or comments on social media, blogs, and so on
- » Friendly letters to relatives
- » Letters to acquaintances who enjoy a warm, friendly tone

Conversational English has a breezy sound. Letters are dropped in contractions (*don't, I'll, would've*, and so forth). In written form, conversational English breaks punctuation rules, too. Sentences run together, and commas connect all sorts of things. Multiple punctuation marks (two or three exclamation points, for example) show strong emotion, especially in social media posts and texts.

Will you accompany me to the dining room? Formal English

You're now at the pickiest end of the language spectrum: formal, grammatically correct speech and writing. Formal English displays the fact that you have an advanced vocabulary, a knowledge of etiquette, and command of standard rules of English usage. You may use formal English when you have less power, importance, and/or status than the other people in the conversation to demonstrate that you respect them. You may also speak or write in formal English when you have *more* power, importance, and/or status than the audience to create a tone of dignity or to provide a suitable role model for someone who is still learning. Situations that call for formal English include:

- » Business letters or emails (from or between businesses as well as from individuals to businesses)
- » Letters or emails to government officials
- » Online comments posted to publications or government websites
- » Office memos or emails
- » Reports
- » Homework
- » Communications to teachers
- » Speeches, presentations, oral reports

- » Important conversations (for example, job interviews, college interviews, parole hearings, congressional inquiries, inquisitions, sessions with the principal in which you explain that unfortunate incident with the stapler, and so on)

Think of formal English as business clothing. If you're in a situation where you want to look your best, you're also in a situation where your words matter. In business, homework, or any situation in which you're being judged, use formal English.



POP QUIZ

Can you adapt your writing to suit the situation and audience? Try this quiz. Which note is correct?

- A.** no hw — ttyl
- B.** Hi, Ms. Smith. Just a note to let you know I didn't do the homework. I'll explain later! Ralph
- C.** Dear Ms. Smith,
- I was not able to do my homework last night. I will speak with you about this matter later.
- Sincerely,
- Ralph

Answer: The correct answer depends upon a few factors. How willing are you to be stuck in the corner of the classroom for the rest of the year? If your answer is “very willing,” send A, a text written in friendspeak. (By the way, *hw* is short for “homework” and *ttyl* means “talk to you later.”) Does your teacher come to school in jeans and sneakers? If so, note B is probably acceptable. Note B is written in conversational English. Is Ms. Smith prim and proper, expecting you to follow every rule ever created, including a few she made up? If so, note C, which is written in formal English, is your best bet.

Thumbing Your Way to Better Grammar

I live in New York City, and I seldom see thumbs that aren't tapping on very small screens — texting (sending written notes over the phone), IMing (instant messaging), tweeting (sending 140-character notes), posting comments on social media, or simply jotting down ideas and reminders. I can't help wondering what sort of grammar will evolve from these forms of communication. Perhaps the 19th edition of *English Grammar For Dummies* will be only ten pages long, with

“sentences” like *u ok? lmk — bbl*. (Translation for the techno-challenged: “Are you okay? Let me know. I’ll be back later.”)

At present, however, match the level of formality in electronic communication to your situation, message, and audience. If you’re dealing with a friend, feel free to abbreviate and shorten anything you like. If you’re communicating with a co-worker or an acquaintance or a general audience on social media, conversational English is probably fine, and it may even be the best choice. Formal English, on some websites, comes across as stiff and artificial. In general, the more power the recipient has, the more careful you should be. When you’re unsure of your audience or writing to someone you want to impress with your level of knowledge, play it safe and opt for formal English.



TIP

Before you post or tweet, skim what others have written. Chances are you’ll identify a preferred level of formality. If you want to fit in, match that style. Or be a rebel, if you wish! (Check out Chapter 16 to see more guidelines for electronic communication.)

Probing the Limits of Grammar-Checking Software

Learning grammar in the 21st century is irrelevant because grammar-checking apps, autocorrect functions, and word-processing programs make human knowledge obsolete. Right? Wrong!

English has a half million words, and you can arrange those words trillions of ways. No app or device can catch all of your mistakes, and many programs identify errors that aren’t actually wrong. Worse, some apps automatically guess what you mean and make changes automatically. A friend of mine tried to sign up for an online *writing course*, which her phone changed to a *worrying vise*. (On second thought, writing does sometimes cause so much worry that you feel you’re trapped in a vise! Maybe the phone was accurate after all.) Other programs show you a few choices in a tiny space, where it’s all too easy to hit the wrong word. Imagine what happens when you type or tap “garage” and it shows up as “grave” in answer to the question “Where’s Pam?” (Speech-to-text programs that try to capture your words on a screen frequently make mistakes like this one.)

True, *some* apps find *some* problems and *sometimes* suggest good alternatives. But *some* is not the same as *all*. Often, computers can’t tell the difference between

homonyms — words that sound alike but have different meanings and spelling. For example, if I type

Eye through the bawl at hymn, but it went threw the window pain instead.

my word-processing program is perfectly satisfied. However, I was actually trying to say

I threw the ball at him, but it went through the window pane instead.



REMEMBER

Machines aren't as smart as people (especially people who've already shown their intelligence by reading *English Grammar For Dummies*). Take a look at the words your device inserts, changes, or identifies as wrong. Then use your knowledge of spelling and grammar to say exactly what you mean, correctly.

What's Your Problem? Solutions to Your Grammar Gremlins

I love to stroll around my neighborhood pondering the meaning of life, my grocery list, and other important topics. With my head in the clouds, I sometimes stub my toe. Once I know where the sidewalk cracks are, though, I can avoid them. If you can figure out where the cracks are in your *grammatical neighborhood* — the gremlins likely to trip you up — your sentences will roll along without risk of falling flat. Table 1-1 shows common usage problems and the location of their solutions. Skim the first column until you recognize something that stumps you. Then turn to the chapter listed in the second column.

TABLE 1-1 Problems and Solutions

Problem	Solution Chapter
The winner is he? Is he the winner?	2
We may? might? be right.	2
Here is? are? five pencils.	3
Three deers? deer? Two dogcatchers-in-chief? dogcatcher-in-chiefs?	3
You used too much chocolate sauce, nevertheless, you can have a cherry. Correct? Incorrect?	4
The superhero is. Complete sentence? Incomplete?	4

(continued)

TABLE 1-1 *(continued)*

Problem	Solution Chapter
The IRS apologized? had apologized? in your dreams apologizes?	6
You was? were? my first choice.	6
Mary, in addition to Sam, has? have? a little lamb?	7
Everyone needs their? his? your? this? grammar book.	7
She told he? him? an incredibly ridiculous story.	8
Keep this secret between you and I? me? me and the tabloids?	8
Getting on? in? over? the plane.	9
Jack feels bad? badly? about climbing.	10
More clear? Clearer?	10
The mayor was better than any public official. Correct? Incorrect?	10
Bagels' ? Bagels are on sale.	11
Bo declared that he was "tired." Correct? Incorrect?	12
Say it isn't so Joe. Comma needed?	13
Grammatically correct sentence? Grammatically-correct sentence?	14
The pigeon flew East? east?	15
Are you and the boss bff? or best friends forever?	16
The window was broken by me. Correct? Incorrect?	17
While combing my hair, the world ended. Correct? Incorrect?	18
Down the hill tumbled Jill. Correct? Incorrect?	19
I like grammar, ice cream, and to be on vacation? vacations?	20
Being fifteen, the video game is great fun. Correct? Incorrect?	21
The way life is suppose? supposed? to be.	22
A good part of speech to end a sentence with?	22