

CHAPTER 1

GRAMMAR

FINDING NOUNS, VERBS, AND SUBJECTS

Definitions

- A **noun** is a word or set of words for a person, place, thing, or idea. A noun of more than one word (*tennis court, gas station*) is called a **compound noun**.

There are **common nouns** and **proper nouns**. Common nouns are words for a general class of people, places, things, and ideas (*man, city, award, honesty*). They are not capitalized. Proper nouns are always capitalized. They name specific people, places, and things (*Joe, Chicago, Academy Award*).

- A **verb** is a word or set of words that shows action (*runs, is going, has been painting*); feeling (*loves, envies*); or state of being (*am, are, is, have been, was, seem*).

NOTE

We will use the standard of underlining subjects once and verbs twice.

Examples: He ran around the block.
 I like my friend.
 They seem friendly.

State-of-being verbs are called **linking verbs**. They include all forms of the verb *to be* (*be*, *being*, *been*, *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*), plus such words as *look*, *feel*, *appear*, *act*, *go*, followed by an adjective. (See the “Adjectives and Adverbs” section later in this chapter.)

Examples: You look happy.
We feel fine.
He went ballistic.

Verbs often consist of more than one word. For instance, *had been breaking down* is a four-word verb. It has a two-word main verb, *breaking down* (also called a **phrasal verb**), and two **helping verbs** (*had* and *been*). Helping verbs are so named because they help clarify the intended meaning.

Many verbs can function as helping verbs, including *is*, *shall*, *must*, *do*, *has*, *can*, *keep*, *get*, *start*, *help*, etc.

You will sometimes hear the word **participle**, which is the form of a verb used with helping verbs to make verb tenses or is used to form adjectives. For instance, *breaking* and *broken* are the present and past participles, respectively, of the verb *break*. *A broken dish* is an example of a phrase containing a participle as an adjective (see the “Adjectives and Adverbs” section later in this chapter).

Verbs often take **direct objects**, which receive the action of the verb carried out by the subject.

Examples: I like cake. (*cake* receives the action, *like*, done by the subject, *I*)
She lifts weights. (*weights* receives the action, *lifts*, done by the subject, *She*)

Verbs may also take **indirect objects**, which receive the direct object. You can spot an indirect object if it makes sense to place *to* or *from* in front of it.

Examples: I gave Joe the cake. (The indirect object, *Joe*, receives the direct object, *cake*, given by the subject, *I*. Note that you could also say *I gave the cake to Joe*.)
She did me a favor. (The indirect object, *me*, is affected by the direct object, *favor*, done by the subject, *She*. Note that you could also say *She did a favor for me*.)

Sometimes verbs require prepositions to complete a sentence. (See the “Prepositions” section later in this chapter.) A noun affected by a preposition is called simply the **object of a preposition**.

Examples: *Stop talking about them.* (The object of the preposition *about* is *them*.)
I saw someone inside the house. (The object of the preposition *inside* is *the house*.)

Gerund is another verb-related term we'll mention only briefly. Gerunds are also called verbal nouns, because they are formed when verbs have *-ing* added to them and are used as nouns.

Example: *Walking is great exercise.* (The *-ing* word, the gerund, is the subject of the sentence.)

- A **subject** is the noun, pronoun (see the “Pronouns” section later in this chapter), or set of words that performs the verb.

Examples: *The woman hurried.*
Woman is the subject.
She was late.
She is the subject.
The Shape of Water won an Academy Award.
The Shape of Water is the subject.

Rule 1. To find the subject and verb, always find the verb first. Then ask who or what performed the verb.

Examples: *The jet engine **passed** inspection.*
Passed is the verb. Who or what passed? The engine, so *engine* is the subject. (If you included the word *jet* as the subject, lightning will not strike you. But technically, *jet* is an adjective here and is part of what is known as the complete subject.)
*From the ceiling **hung** the chandelier.*
The verb is *hung*. Now, if you think *ceiling* is the subject, slow down. Ask *who* or *what* hung. The answer is the chandelier, not the ceiling. Therefore, *chandelier* is the subject.

Rule 2. Sentences can have more than one subject and more than one verb.

Examples: *I like cake, and he likes ice cream.* (Two subjects and two verbs)
He and I like cake. (Two subjects and one verb)
She lifts weights and jogs daily. (One subject and two verbs)

Rule 3. If a verb follows *to*, it is called an **infinitive**, and it is not the main verb. You will find the main verb either before or after the infinitive.

Examples: *He is trying to leave.*
 To leave is an infinitive; the main verb is *trying*.
 To leave was his wish.
 The main verb is *was*.

NOTE

One of the most stubborn superstitions in English is that it is wrong to insert a word between the *to* and the verb in an infinitive. This is called a **split infinitive** (*to gladly pay, to not go*). There is no English scholar alive who will say a split infinitive is technically wrong. However, split infinitives tend to be clumsy and unnecessary. Experienced writers do not use them without good reason.

Rule 4. Any request or command, such as *Stop!* or *Walk quickly*, has the understood subject *you*, because if we ask who is to stop or walk quickly, the answer must be “you.”

Example: *(You) Please bring me some coffee.*
 Bring is the verb. Who will do the bringing? The subject *you* is understood.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Being able to find the right subject and verb will help you correct errors of subject-verb agreement.

Basic rule. A singular subject (*she, Bill, car*) takes a singular verb (*is, goes, shines*), whereas a plural subject takes a plural verb.

Example: *The list of items is/are on the desk.*
 If you know that *list* is the subject, then you will choose *is* for the verb.

Exceptions to the Basic rule:

- a. The first-person pronoun *I* takes a plural verb (*I go, I drive*).
- b. The basic form of the verb is used after certain main verbs such as *watch, see, hear, feel, help, let, and make* (*He watched Ronaldo score the winning goal.*)

Rule 1. A subject will come before a phrase beginning with *of*. This is a key rule for understanding subjects. The word *of* is the culprit in many, perhaps most, subject-verb mistakes.

Hasty writers, speakers, readers, and listeners might miss the all-too-common mistake in the following sentence:

Incorrect: *A bouquet of yellow roses lend color and fragrance to the room.*

Correct: *A bouquet of yellow roses lends. . . (bouquet lends, not roses lend)*

Rule 2. Two singular subjects connected by *or*, *either/or*, or *neither/nor* require a singular verb.

Examples: *My aunt or my uncle is arriving by train today.*

Neither Juan nor Carmen is available.

Either Kiana or Casey is helping today with stage decorations.

Rule 3. The verb in an *or*, *either/or*, or *neither/nor* sentence agrees with the noun or pronoun closest to it.

Examples: *Neither the plates nor the serving bowl goes on that shelf.*

Neither the serving bowl nor the plates go on that shelf.

This rule can lead to bumps in the road. For example, if *I* is one of two (or more) subjects, it could lead to this odd sentence:

Awkward: *Neither she, my friends, nor I am going to the festival.*

If possible, it's best to reword such grammatically correct but awkward sentences.

Better: *Neither she, I, nor my friends are going to the festival.*

OR

She, my friends, and I are not going to the festival.

See the "Pronouns" section, Rules 11a and 11b for more discussion of subject-verb agreement with pronouns.

Rule 4. As a general rule, use a plural verb with two or more subjects when they are connected by *and*.

Example: *A car and a bike are my means of transportation.*

But note these exceptions:

Exceptions: *Breaking and entering is against the law.*
The bed and breakfast was charming.

In those sentences, *breaking and entering* and *bed and breakfast* are compound nouns.

NOTE

Some think it is incorrect to place a personal pronoun first in a multi-subject sentence.

Examples: *I, my dad, and my step-mom are going to the movies.*
She and Orville bought a dog.

While not grammatically incorrect per se, it is a courtesy to place the pronoun last, except when awkward to do so as shown under **Rule 3** above.

Rule 5a. Sometimes the subject is separated from the verb by such words as *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, *not*, etc. These words and phrases are not part of the subject. Ignore them and use a singular verb when the subject is singular.

Examples: *The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.*
Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.

Rule 5b. Parentheses are not part of the subject.

Examples: *Joe (and his trusty mutt) was always welcome.*
If this seems awkward, try rewriting the sentence.

Rule 6. In sentences beginning with *here* or *there*, the true subject follows the verb.

Examples: *There are four hurdles to jump.*
There is a high hurdle to jump.
Here are the keys.

NOTE

The word *there's*, a contraction of *there is*, leads to bad habits in informal sentences like *There's a lot of people here today*, because it's easier to say "there's" than "there are." Take care never to use *there's* with a plural subject.

Rule 7. Use a singular verb with distances, periods of time, sums of money, etc., when considered as a unit.

Examples: *Three miles **is** too far to walk.*
*Five years **is** the maximum sentence for that offense.*
*Ten dollars **is** a high price to pay.*
BUT
*Ten dollars (i.e., dollar bills) **were** scattered on the floor.*

Rule 8a. With words that indicate portions—e.g., *a lot*, *a majority*, *percent*, *some*, *all*—Rule 1 given earlier in this section is reversed, and we are guided by the noun after *of*. If the noun after *of* is singular, use a singular verb. If it is plural, use a plural verb.

Examples: *A lot of the **pie** has disappeared.*
*A lot of the **pies** have disappeared.*
*Fifty percent of the **pie** has disappeared.*
*Fifty percent of the **pies** have disappeared.*
*A third of the **city** is unemployed.*
*A third of the **people** are unemployed.*
*All of the **pie** is gone.*
*All of the **pies** are gone.*
*Some of the **pie** is missing.*
*Some of the **pies** are missing.*

NOTE

Some teachers, editors, and the SAT testing service, perhaps for convenience, have considered *none* to be strictly singular. However, authorities agree that *none* has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. When *none* is clearly intended to mean “not one,” it is followed by a singular verb.

Rule 8b. With **collective nouns** such as *group*, *jury*, *family*, *audience*, *population*, the verb might be either singular or plural, depending on the writer’s intent.

Examples: *All of my **family** has arrived OR have arrived.*
*Most of the **jury** is here OR are here.*
*A third of the **population** was not in favor OR were not in favor of the bill.*

NOTE

Anyone who uses a plural verb with a collective noun must take care to be accurate—and also consistent. It must not be done carelessly. The following is the sort of flawed sentence one sees and hears a lot these days:

The staff is deciding how they want to vote.

Careful speakers and writers would avoid assigning the singular *is* and the plural *they* to *staff* in the same sentence.

Consistent: *The staff are deciding how they want to vote.*

Rewriting such sentences is recommended whenever possible. The preceding sentence would read even better as:

The staff members are deciding how they want to vote.

Rule 9. The word *were* replaces *was* in sentences that express a wish or are contrary to fact:

Example: *If Joe were here, you'd be sorry.*

Shouldn't *Joe* be followed by *was*, not *were*, given that *Joe* is singular? But *Joe* isn't actually here, so we say *were*, not *was*. The sentence demonstrates the **subjunctive mood**, which is used to express a hypothetical, wishful, imaginary, compulsory, or factually contradictory thought. The subjunctive mood pairs singular subjects with what we usually think of as plural verbs.

Examples: *I wish it were Friday.*

She requested that he raise his hand.

The foreman demanded that Joe wear safety goggles.

In the first example, a wishful statement, not a fact, is being expressed; therefore, *were*, which we usually think of as a plural verb, is used with the singular subject *it*. (Technically, *it* is the singular subject of the object clause in the subjunctive mood: *it were Friday*.)

Normally, *he raise* would sound terrible to us. However, in the second example, where a request is being expressed, the subjunctive mood is correct.

Note: The subjunctive mood is losing ground in spoken English but should still be used in formal speech and writing.

IRREGULAR VERBS

English verbs are either **regular** or **irregular**. We call a verb regular when we add *ed* (*wanted*, *looked*) or sometimes just *d* (*created*, *loved*) to form what are called the **simple past tense** and the **past participle** (see third and fourth paragraphs below). A regular verb's simple past tense and past participle are always identical.

Not so with irregular verbs. They form the simple past tense and the past participle in any number of unpredictable ways. Some irregular verbs, like *let*, *shut*, and *spread*, never change, whether present or past. Others, like *feel* and *teach*, become modified versions of themselves (*felt*, *taught*) to form both the past tense and the past participle. Still others, like *break* and *sing*, change to form the past tense (*broke*, *sang*) and change again to form the past participle (*broken*, *sung*). And then there are a few really weird ones, like *go*: its past participle (*gone*) is recognizable enough, but its simple past tense is a strange new word (*went*).

Let's get back to the irregular verb *break*. The simple past tense is *broke*, which we use in sentences like *I broke your dish*. We use the past participle, *broken*, to form **compound verbs** in sentences like *I **have broken** your dish*. The compound verb *have broken* is so called because we've added a **helping verb** (*have*) to the main verb's past participle (*broken*). Be careful never to add a helping verb to the simple past form of an irregular verb—I *have broke* your dish is an embarrassing confession in more ways than one.

The past participle of an irregular verb can also function as an adjective: *a **broken** dish*. But the simple past form, if it differs from the participle, cannot function as an adjective: *a **broke** dish* is substandard English.

There are far fewer irregular verbs than regular ones, but we use them all the time. "The ten commonest verbs in English (*be*, *have*, *do*, *say*, *make*, *go*, *take*, *come*, *see*, and *get*) are all irregular," notes Steven Pinker, an American experimental psychologist and linguist, "and about 70% of the time we use a verb, it is an irregular verb." Pinker acknowledges 180 irregular English verbs, but there is an online Extended Irregular Verb Dictionary which contains over 470 irregular verbs, including rare ones such as *bestrew*, *enwind*, and *hagride*.

Proper use of irregular verbs requires old-fashioned memorization—there are no secret formulas or shortcuts. This is why these words can create havoc for conscientious speakers of English.

CLAUSES AND PHRASES

Definitions

- A **clause** is a group of words containing a subject and verb. An **independent clause** is a simple sentence. It can stand on its own.

Examples: *She is hungry.*
I am feeling well today.

- A **dependent clause** cannot stand on its own. It needs an independent clause to complete a sentence. Dependent clauses often begin with such words as *although*, *since*, *if*, *when*, and *because*.

Examples: *Although she is hungry. . .*
Whoever is hungry. . .
Because I am feeling well. . .

Dependent	Independent
<i>Although she is hungry,</i>	<i>she will give him some of her food.</i>
<i>Whatever they decide,</i>	<i>I will agree to.</i>

- A **phrase** is a group of words without a subject-verb component, used as a single part of speech.

Examples: *Best friend* (this phrase acts as a noun)
Needing help (this phrase acts as an adjective; see the “Adjectives and Adverbs” section later in this chapter)
With the blue shirt (this **prepositional phrase** acts as an adjective; see the “Prepositions” section later in this chapter)
For twenty days (this prepositional phrase acts as an adverb)

PRONOUNS

Definition

- A **pronoun** (*I, me, he, she, herself, you, it, that, they, each, few, many, who, whoever, whose, someone, everybody*, etc.) is a word that takes the place of a noun. In the sentence *Joe saw Jill, and he waved at her*, the pronouns *he* and *her* take the place of *Joe* and *Jill*, respectively. There are three types of pronouns: **subject** (for example, *he*); **object** (*him*); or **possessive** (*his*).

Rule 1. Subject pronouns are used when the pronoun is the subject of the sentence. You can remember subject pronouns easily by filling in the blank subject space for a simple sentence.

Example: ___ did the job.

I, he, she, we, they, who, whoever, etc., all qualify and are, therefore, subject pronouns.

Rule 2. Subject pronouns are also used if they rename the subject. They will follow *to be* verbs, such as *is, are, was, were, am, will be, had been*, etc.

Examples: *It is he.*
 This is she speaking.
 It is we who are responsible for the decision to downsize.

NOTE

In informal English, most people tend to follow *to be* verbs with object pronouns like *me, her, them*. Many English scholars tolerate this distinction between formal and casual English.

Example:	<i>It could have been them.</i>
Technically correct:	<i>It could have been they.</i>
Example:	<i>It is just me at the door.</i>
Technically correct:	<i>It is just I at the door.</i>

Rule 3. This rule surprises even language watchers: when *who* refers to a personal pronoun (*I, you, he, she, we, they*), it takes the verb that agrees with that pronoun.

Correct: *It is I who **am** sorry. (I **am**)*
Incorrect: *It is I who is sorry.*
Correct: *It is you who **are** mistaken. (you **are**)*
Incorrect: *It is you who's mistaken.*

Rule 4. In addition to subject pronouns, there are also object pronouns, known more specifically as **direct object**, **indirect object**, and **object of a preposition** (for more detail, see the definition of a **verb** in the Finding Nouns, Verbs, and Subjects section). Object pronouns include *me, him, herself, us, them, themselves*.

Examples: Jean saw **him**.

Him is the direct object of the verb saw.

Give **her** the book.

The direct object of give is *book*, and *her* is the indirect object. Indirect objects always have an implied *to* or *for* in front of them: Give [**to**] **her** the book. Do [**for**] **me** a favor.

Are you talking to **me**?

Me is the object of the preposition *to*.

Rule 5. The pronouns *who*, *that*, and *which* become singular or plural depending on the subject. If the subject is singular, use a singular verb. If it is plural, use a plural verb.

Example: He is the only one of those men *who* is always on time.

The word *who* refers to *one*. Therefore, use the singular verb *is*.

Sometimes we must look more closely to find a verb's true subject:

Example: He is one of those men *who* **are** always on time.

The word *who* refers to *men*. Therefore, use the plural verb *are*.

In sentences like this last example, many would mistakenly insist that *one* is the subject, requiring **is** *always on time*. But look at it this way: *Of those men who are always on time, he is one*.

Rule 6. Pronouns that are singular (*I*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *everyone*, *everybody*, *anyone*, *anybody*, *no one*, *nobody*, *someone*, *somebody*, *each*, *either*, *neither*, etc.) require singular verbs. This rule is frequently overlooked when using the pronouns *each*, *either*, and *neither*, followed by *of*. Those three pronouns always take singular verbs. Do not be misled by what follows *of*.

Examples: Each of the girls sings well.

Either of us is capable of doing the job.

Neither of them is available to speak right now.

Exception 1: The singular pronouns *I* and *you* take plural verbs.

Examples: I sing well.

You sing well.

She sings well.

Exception 2: When *each* follows a noun or pronoun in certain sentences, even experienced writers sometimes get tripped up:

Incorrect: *The women each gave her approval.*

Correct: *The women each gave their approval.*

Incorrect: *The words are and there each ends with a silent vowel.*

Correct: *The words are and there each end with a silent vowel.*

These examples do not contradict Rule 6, because *each* is not the subject, but rather an **adjunct** describing the true subject.

Rule 7. To decide whether to use the subject or object pronoun after the words *than* or *as*, mentally complete the sentence.

Examples: *Tranh is as smart as she/her.*

If we mentally complete the sentence, we would say *Tranh is as smart as she is*. Therefore, *she* is the correct answer.

Zoe is taller than I/me.

Mentally completing the sentence, we have *Zoe is taller than I am*.

Daniel would rather talk to her than I/me.

We can interpret this sentence in two ways: *Daniel would rather talk to her than to me*. **OR** *Daniel would rather talk to her than I would*. A sentence's meaning can change considerably, depending on the pronoun you choose.

Rule 8. The possessive pronouns *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *its*, *ours*, *theirs*, and *whose* never need apostrophes. Avoid mistakes like *her's* and *your's*.

Rule 9. The only time *it's* has an apostrophe is when it is a contraction for *it is* or *it has*. The only time *who's* has an apostrophe is when it means *who is* or *who has*. There is no apostrophe in *oneself*. Avoid "one's self," a common error.

Examples: *It's been a cold morning.*

The thermometer reached its highest reading.

He's the one who's always on time.

He's the one whose wife is always on time.

Keeping oneself ready is important.

Rule 10. Pronouns that end in *-self* or *-selves* are called **reflexive pronouns**. There are nine reflexive pronouns: *myself*, *yourself*, *himself*, *herself*, *itself*, *oneself*, *ourselves*, *yourselves*, and *themselves*.

Reflexive pronouns are used when both the subject and the object of a verb are the same person or thing.

Example: *Joe helped **himself**.*

If the object of a preposition refers to a previous noun or pronoun, use a reflexive pronoun:

Example: *Joe bought it for **himself**.*

Reflexive pronouns help avoid confusion and nonsense. Without them, we might be stuck with sentences like *Joe helped Joe*.

Correct: *I worked **myself** to the bone.*

The object *myself* is the same person as the subject *I*, performing the act of working.

Incorrect: *My brother and **myself** did it.*

Correct: *My brother and **I** did it.*

Don't use *myself* unless the pronoun *I* or *me* precedes it in the sentence.

Incorrect: *Please give it to John or **myself**.*

Correct: *Please give it to John or **me**.*

Correct: *You saw **me** being **myself**.*

Myself refers back to *me* in the act of being.

A sentence like *Help yourself* looks like an exception to the rule until we realize it's shorthand for *You may help yourself*.

In certain cases, a reflexive pronoun may come first.

Example: *Doubting **himself**, the man proceeded cautiously.*

Reflexive pronouns are also used for emphasis.

Example: *He **himself** finished the whole job.*

Rule 11a. The use of *they* and *their* with singular pronouns is frowned upon by many traditionalists. To be consistent, it is a good practice to try to avoid *they* and its variants (e.g., *them*, *their*, *themselves*) with previously singular nouns or pronouns.

Not consistent: *Someone has to do it, and **they** have to do it well.*

The problem is that *someone* is singular, but *they* is plural. If we change *they* to *he* or *she*, we get a rather clumsy sentence, even if it is technically correct.

Technically correct: *Someone has to do it, and he or she has to do it well.*

Replacing an inconsistent sentence with a poorly written one is a bad bargain. The better option is to rewrite.

Rewritten: *Someone has to do it, and has to do it well.*

Many writers abhor the *he* or *she* solution. Following are more examples of why rewriting is a better idea than using *he* or *she* or *him* or *her* to keep sentences consistent.

Inconsistent: *No one realizes when their time is up.*

Awkward: *No one realizes when his or her time is up.*

Rewritten: *None realize when their time is up.*

Inconsistent: *If you see anyone on the trail, tell them to be careful.*

Awkward: *If you see anyone on the trail, tell him or her to be careful.*

Rewritten: *Tell anyone you see on the trail to be careful.*

Rule 11b. When rewriting is not practical and gender-neutrality is desired, use *they*, *them*, *their*, *themselves*, or *themselves* with singular nouns, proper nouns, and pronouns. (This is sometimes referred to as the *singular they*, which has a long history in the English language.)

Example: *If you see Charlie on the trail, tell them to be careful.*

Rule 12 When a pronoun is linked with a noun by *and*, mentally remove the *and* + noun phrase to avoid trouble.

Incorrect: *Her and her friend came over.*

If we remove *and her friend*, we're left with the ungrammatical *Her came over.*

Correct: ***She** and her friend came over.*

Incorrect: *I invited he and his wife.*

If we remove *and his wife*, we're left with the ungrammatical *I invited he.*

Correct: *I invited **him** and his wife.*

Incorrect: *Bill asked my sister and I.*

If we remove *my sister and*, we're left with the ungrammatical *Bill asked I.*

Correct: *Bill asked my sister and **me**.*

NOTE

Do not combine a subject pronoun and an object pronoun in phrases like *her and I* or *he and me*. Whenever *and* or *or* links an object pronoun (*her, me*) and a subject pronoun (*he, I*), one of those pronouns will always be wrong.

Incorrect: *Her and I went home.*

Correct: *She and I went home.* (She went and I went.)

Rule 13. If two people possess the same item, and one of the joint owners is written as a pronoun, use the possessive form for both.

Incorrect: *Maribel and my home*

Incorrect: *mine and Maribel's home*

Correct: *Maribel's and my home*

Incorrect: *he and Maribel's home*

Incorrect: *him and Maribel's home*

Correct: *his and Maribel's home*

Incorrect: *you and Maribel's home*

Incorrect: *yours and Maribel's home*

Correct: *Maribel's and your home*

Note: As the above examples demonstrate, when one of the co-owners is written as a pronoun, use **possessive adjectives** (*my, your, her, our, their*). Avoid **possessive pronouns** (*mine, yours, hers, ours, theirs*) in such constructions.

WHO VS. WHOM

The pronoun *who* is always subjective. Use *who* wherever you would use the subjective pronouns *I, he, she, we, or they*. It is correct to say **Who** wants to go? because we would say **I** want to go or **We** want to go.

The pronoun *whom* is always an object. Use *whom* wherever you would use the objective pronouns *me, him, her, us, or them*. It is not correct to say *Who did you choose?* We would say **Whom** because you choose **me** or **them**.

Handy memory aid: Use this *they* or *them* method to decide whether *who* or *whom* is correct:

they = who

them = whom

Examples: *Who/Whom wrote the letter?*
They wrote the letter. Therefore, who is correct.
Who/Whom should I vote for?
Should I vote for them? Therefore, whom is correct.
We all know who/whom pulled that prank.
 This sentence contains two clauses: *we all know* and *who/whom pulled that prank*. We are interested in the second clause because it contains the *who/whom*. *They pulled that prank. Therefore, who is correct.*
We wondered who/whom the book was about.
 This sentence contains two clauses: *we wondered* and *who/whom the book was about*. Again, we are interested in the second clause because it contains the *who/whom*. The book was about *them*. Therefore, *whom* is correct.

Note: This rule is compromised by an odd infatuation people have with *whom*—and not for good reasons. At its worst, the use of *whom* becomes a form of one-upmanship some employ to appear sophisticated. The following is an example of the pseudo-sophisticated *whom*.

Incorrect: *a woman whom I think is a genius*
 In this case *whom* is not the object of *I think*. Put *I think* at the end and the mistake becomes obvious: *a woman whom is a genius, I think*.
Correct: *a woman who I think is a genius*

Learn to spot and avoid this too-common pitfall.

WHOEVER VS. WHOMEVER

To determine whether to use *whoever* or *whomever*, the *they/them* rule in the previous section applies:

they = whoever
 them = whomever

Rule 1. The presence of *whoever* or *whomever* generally indicates a dependent clause. Use *whoever* or *whomever* to agree with the verb in that dependent clause, regardless of the rest of the sentence.

Examples: *Give it to whoever/whomever asks for it first.*
They ask for it first. Therefore, whoever is correct.
We will hire whoever/whomever you recommend.

You recommend *them*. Therefore, *whomever* is correct.
We will hire **whoever**/*whomever* is most qualified.
They are most qualified. Therefore, *whoever* is correct.

Rule 2. When the entire *whoever/whomever* clause is the subject of the verb that follows the clause, analyze the clause to determine whether to use *whoever* or *whomever*.

Examples: *Whoever is elected will serve a four-year term.*
Whoever is the subject of *is elected*. The clause *whoever is elected* is the subject of *will serve*.
Whomever you elect will serve a four-year term.
Whomever is the object of *elect*. *Whomever you elect* is the subject of *will serve*.

A word to the wise: *Whomever* is even more of a vogue word than *whom*. Many use it indiscriminately to sound cultured, figuring that no one will know any better.

WHO, THAT, WHICH

Rule 1. *Who* and sometimes *that* refer to people. *That* and *which* refer to groups or things.

Examples: *Anya is the one **who** rescued the bird.*
*“The Man **That** Got Away” is a great song with a grammatical title.*
*Lokua is on the team **that** won first place.*
*She belongs to a great organization, **which** specializes in saving endangered species.*

Rule 2a. *That* introduces what is called an **essential clause** (also known as a **restrictive** or **defining clause**). Essential clauses add information that is vital to the point of the sentence.

Example: *I do not trust products **that** claim “all natural ingredients” because this phrase can mean almost anything.*
We would not know the type of products being discussed without the *that* clause.

Rule 2b. *Which* introduces a **nonessential clause** (also known as a **nonrestrictive** or **nondefining clause**), which adds supplementary information.

Example: *The product claiming “all natural ingredients,” **which** appeared in the Sunday newspaper, is on sale.*

The product is already identified. Therefore, *which appeared in the Sunday newspaper* is a nonessential clause containing additional, but not essential, information.

NOTE

Essential clauses do not have commas introducing or surrounding them, whereas nonessential clauses are introduced or surrounded by commas.

Rule 3. If *that* has already appeared in a sentence, writers sometimes use *which* to introduce the next clause, whether it is essential or nonessential. This is done to avoid awkward formations.

Example: *That which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.*

This sentence is far preferable to the ungainly but technically correct *That that doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.*

NOTE

The distinction between *that* and *which*, though a useful guideline, is not universally accepted as a hard-and-fast rule. For many centuries and up to the present, *which* has been routinely used by great writers and journalists to introduce essential clauses.

ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

Definitions

- An **adjective** is a word or set of words that **modifies** (i.e., describes) a noun or pronoun. Adjectives may come before the word they modify.

Examples: *That is a **cute** puppy.*
 *She likes a **high school** senior.*

Adjectives may also follow the word they modify:

Examples: *That puppy looks **cute**.*
 *The technology is **state-of-the-art**.*

- An **adverb** is a word or set of words that modifies verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. Adverbs answer *how*, *when*, *where*, or *to what extent*—*how often* or *how much* (e.g., *daily*, *completely*).

Examples: *He speaks **slowly** (tells *how*).*
 *He speaks **very** slowly (the adverb **very** tells *how* slowly).*
 *They arrived **today** (tells *when*).*
 *They will arrive **in an hour** (this adverb phrase tells *when*).*
 *Let's go **outside** (tells *where*).*
 *We looked **in the basement** (this adverb phrase tells *where*).*
 *Bernie left **to avoid trouble** (this adverb phrase tells *why*).*
 *Jorge works out **strenuously** (tells *to what extent*).*
 *Jorge works out **whenever possible** (this adverb phrase tells *to what extent*).*

Rule 1. Many adverbs end in *-ly*, but many do not. Generally, if a word can have *-ly* added to its adjective form, place it there to form an adverb.

Examples: *She thinks **quick/quickly**.*
 *How does she think? **Quickly**.*
 *She is a **quick/quickly** thinker.*
 *Quick is an adjective describing *thinker*, so no *-ly* is attached.*
 *She thinks **fast/fastly**.*
 *Fast answers the question *how*, so it is an adverb. But *fast* never has *-ly* attached to it.*
 *We performed **bad/badly**.*
 *Badly describes *how* we performed, so *-ly* is added.*

Rule 2. Adverbs that answer the question *how* sometimes cause grammatical problems. It can be a challenge to determine if *-ly* should be attached. Avoid the trap of *-ly* with linking verbs such as *taste*, *smell*, *look*, *feel*, which pertain to the senses. Adverbs are often misplaced in such sentences, which require adjectives instead.

Examples: *Pat's roses smell **sweet/sweetly**.*
 *Do the roses actively smell with noses? No; in this case, *smell* is a linking verb—which requires an adjective to modify *roses*—so no *-ly*.*
 *The painter looked **angry/angrily** to us.*

Did the painter look with eyes, or are we describing the painter's appearance? We are describing appearance (the painter appeared angry), so no -ly.

*The painter looked angry/**angrily** at the paint splotches.*

Here the painter actively looked (using eyes), so the -ly is added.

Avoid this common mistake:

Incorrect: *Ingrid feels badly about the news.*

Ingrid is not feeling with fingers, so no -ly.

Correct: *Ingrid feels **bad** about the news.*

Rule 3. The word *good* is an adjective, whose adverb equivalent is *well*.

Examples: *You did a good job.*

Good describes the job.

You did the job well.

Well answers *how*.

You smell good today.

Good describes your fragrance, not how you smell with your nose, so using the adjective is correct.

You smell well for someone with a cold.

You are actively smelling with your nose here, so use the adverb.

Rule 4. The word *well* can be an adjective, too. When referring to health, we often use *well* rather than *good*.

Examples: *You do not look well today.*

I don't feel well, either.

Rule 5. Adjectives come in three forms, also called **degrees**. An adjective in its normal or usual form is called a **positive degree adjective**. There are also the **comparative** and **superlative** degrees, which are used for comparison, as in the following examples:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
<i>sweet</i>	<i>sweeter</i>	<i>sweetest</i>
<i>bad</i>	<i>worse</i>	<i>worst</i>
<i>efficient</i>	<i>more efficient</i>	<i>most efficient</i>

A common error in using adjectives and adverbs arises from using the wrong form of comparison. To compare two things, always use a **comparative** adjective:

Example: She is the **cleverer** of the two women (never *cleverest*)

The word *cleverest* is what is called the **superlative** form of *clever*. Use it only when comparing three or more things:

Example: She is the **cleverest** of them all.

Incorrect: Chocolate or vanilla: which do you like best?

Correct: Chocolate or vanilla: which do you like **better**?

Rule 6. There are also three degrees of adverbs. In formal usage, do not drop the *-ly* from an adverb when using the comparative form.

Incorrect: Terry spoke *quicker* than Nguyen did.

Correct: Terry spoke **more quickly** than Nguyen did.

Incorrect: Talk *quieter*.

Correct: Talk **more quietly**.

Incorrect: Alfredo is the *more efficient* assembly worker in the unit.

Correct: Alfredo is the **most efficient** assembly worker in the unit.

Rule 7. When *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* are followed by a noun, they are adjectives. When they appear without a noun following them, they are pronouns.

Examples: This house is for sale.
This is an adjective.

This is for sale.
This is a pronoun.

PREPOSITIONS

Definition

- A **preposition** is a word or set of words that indicates location (*in*, *near*, *beside*, *on top of*) or some other relationship between a noun or pronoun and other parts of the sentence (*about*, *after*, *besides*, *instead of*, *in accordance with*). A preposition isn't a preposition unless it goes with a related noun or pronoun, called the **object of the preposition**.

Examples: *Let's meet before noon.*
 Before is a preposition; *noon* is its object.
 We've never met before.
 There is no object; *before* is an adverb modifying *met*.

Rule 1. A preposition generally, but not always, goes before its noun or pronoun. One of the undying myths of English grammar is that you may not end a sentence with a preposition. But look at the first example that follows. No one should feel compelled to say, or even write, *That is something with which I cannot agree*. Just do not use extra prepositions when the meaning is clear without them.

Correct: *That is something I cannot agree **with**.*
Correct: *Where did you get this?*
Incorrect: *Where did you get this **at**?*
Correct: *How many of you can I depend **on**?*
Correct: *Where did he go?*
Incorrect: *Where did he go **to**?*

Rule 2a. The preposition *like* means “similar to” or “similarly to.” It should be followed by an object of the preposition (noun, pronoun, noun phrase), not by a subject and verb. Rule of thumb: Avoid *like* when a verb is involved.

Correct: *You look like your mother.*
 That is, you look *similar to* her. (*Mother* is the object of the preposition *like*.)
Incorrect: *You look like your mother does.*
 (Avoid *like* with noun + verb.)

Rule 2b. Instead of *like*, use *as*, *as if*, *as though*, or *the way* when following a comparison with a subject and verb.

Correct: *You look **the way** your mother does.*
Incorrect: *Do like I ask.* (No one would say *Do similarly to I ask*.)
Correct: *Do **as** I ask.*
Incorrect: *You look like you're angry.*
Correct: *You look **as if** you're angry. (OR **as though**)*

Some speakers and writers, to avoid embarrassment, use *as* when they mean *like*. The following incorrect sentence came from a grammar guide:

Incorrect: *They are considered as any other English words.*

Correct: *They are considered as any other English words would be.*

Correct: *They are considered to be like any other English words.*

Remember: *like* means “similar to” or “similarly to”; *as* means “in the same manner that.” Rule of thumb: Do not use *as* unless there is a verb involved.

Incorrect: *I, as most people, try to use good grammar.*

Correct: *I, **like** most people, try to use good grammar.*

Correct: *I, **as** most people **do**, try to use good grammar.*

NOTE

The rule distinguishing *like* from *as*, *as if*, *as though*, and *the way* is increasingly ignored, but English purists still insist upon it.

Rule 3. The preposition *of* should never be used in place of the helping verb *have*.

Correct: *I should have done it.*

Incorrect: *I should of done it.*

See also **COUPLE OF; OFF OF; OUT OF; OUTSIDE OF** in Chapter 5, “Confusing Words and Homonyms.”

Rule 4. It is a good practice to follow *different* with the preposition *from*. Most traditionalists avoid *different than*. Although it is an overstatement to call *different than* incorrect, it remains polarizing: *A is different than B* comes across as sloppy to a lot of literate readers. If you can replace *different than* with *different from* without having to rewrite the rest of the sentence, why not do so?

Polarizing: *You’re different than I am.*

Unchallengeable: *You’re different from me.*

See also **DIFFERENT FROM, DIFFERENT THAN** in Chapter 5, “Confusing Words and Homonyms.”

Rule 5. Use *into* rather than *in* to express motion toward something. Use *in* to tell the location.

- Correct:** *I swam in the pool.*
Correct: *I walked into the house.*
Correct: *I looked into the matter.*
Incorrect: *I dived in the water.*
Correct: *I dived into the water.*
Incorrect: *Throw it in the trash.*
Correct: *Throw it into the trash.*

EFFECTIVE WRITING

Rule 1. Use concrete rather than vague language.

- Vague:** *The weather was of an extreme nature on the West Coast.*
This sentence raises frustrating questions: When did this extreme weather occur? What does “of an extreme nature” mean? Where on the West Coast did this take place?
Concrete: *California had unusually cold weather last week.*

Rule 2. Use **active voice** whenever possible. Active voice means the subject is performing the verb. **Passive voice** means the subject receives the action.

- Active:** *Barry hit the ball.*
Passive: *The ball was hit.*

Notice that the party responsible for the action—in the previous example, whoever hit the ball—may not even appear when using passive voice. So passive voice is a useful option when the responsible party is not known.

- Example:** *My watch was stolen.*

NOTE

The passive voice has often been criticized as something employed by people in power to avoid responsibility:

- Example:** *Mistakes were made.*
Translation: *I made mistakes.*

Rule 3. Avoid overusing *there is*, *there are*, *it is*, *it was*, etc.

Example: *There is a case of meningitis that was reported in the newspaper.*

Revision: *A case of meningitis was reported in the newspaper.*

Even better: *The newspaper reported a case of meningitis.* (Active voice)

Example: *It is important to signal before making a left turn.*

Revision: *Signaling before making a left turn is important.*

OR

Signaling before a left turn is important.

OR

You should signal before making a left turn.

Example: *There are some revisions that must be made.*

Revision: *Some revisions must be made.* (Passive voice)

Even better: *Please make some revisions.* (Active voice)

Rule 4. To avoid confusion (and pompousness), don't use two negatives to make a positive without good reason.

Unnecessary: *They are not unwilling to help.*

Better: *They are willing to help.*

Sometimes a *not un-* construction may be desirable, perhaps even necessary:

Example: *The book is uneven but not uninteresting.*

However, the novelist-essayist George Orwell warned of its abuse with this deliberately silly sentence: "A not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field."

Rule 5. Use consistent grammatical form when offering several ideas. This is called **parallel construction**.

Correct: *I admire people who are honest, reliable, and sincere.*

Note that *are* applies to and makes sense with each of the three adjectives at the end.

Incorrect: *I admire people who are honest, reliable, and have sincerity.*

In this version, *are* does not make sense with *have sincerity*, and *have sincerity* doesn't belong with the two adjectives *honest* and *reliable*.

Correct: *You should check your spelling, grammar, and punctuation.*

Note that *check your* applies to and makes sense with each of the three nouns at the end.

Incorrect: *You should check your spelling, grammar, and punctuate properly.*
 Here, *check your* does not make sense with *punctuate properly*, and *punctuate properly* doesn't belong with the two nouns *spelling* and *grammar*.
 The result is a jarringly inept sentence.

Rule 6. Word order can make or ruin a sentence. If you start a sentence with an incomplete phrase or clause, such as *While crossing the street* or *Forgotten by history*, it must be followed closely by the person or thing it describes. Furthermore, that person or thing is always the main subject of the sentence. Breaking this rule results in the dreaded, all-too-common **dangling modifier**, or **dangler**.

Dangler: *Forgotten by history, his autograph was worthless.*
 The problem: *his autograph* shouldn't come right after *history*, because *he* was forgotten, not his autograph.

Correct: *He was forgotten by history, and his autograph was worthless.*

Dangler: *Born in Chicago, my first book was about the 1871 fire.*
 The problem: the sentence wants to say *I* was born in Chicago, but to a careful reader, it says that *my first book* was born there.

Correct: *I was born in Chicago, and my first book was about the 1871 fire.*

Adding *-ing* to a verb (as in *crossing* in the example that follows) results in a versatile word called a **participle**, which can be a noun, adjective, or adverb. Rule 6 applies to all sentences with a participle in the beginning. Participles require placing the actor immediately after the opening phrase or clause.

Dangler: *While crossing the street, the bus hit her.* (Wrong: the bus was not crossing.)

Correct: *While crossing the street, she was hit by a bus.*

OR

She was hit by a bus while crossing the street.

Rule 7. Place descriptive words and phrases as close as is practical to the words they modify.

Ill-advised: *I have a cake that Mollie baked in my lunch bag.*
 Cake is too far from *lunch bag*, making the sentence ambiguous and silly.

Better: *In my lunch bag is a cake that Mollie baked.*

Rule 8. A sentence fragment is usually an oversight, or a bad idea. It occurs when you have only a phrase or dependent clause but are missing an independent clause.

Sentence fragment: *After the show ended.*

Full sentence: *After the show ended, we had coffee.*

Rule 9a. When writing dialogue, indent each new line, enclose it in quotation marks, and attribute it to the speaker. Once the speakers are established, their attributions may be dropped until needed again for clarity. Each change in speaker also begins a new line.

Example: *"I want to know where the coins are," Bartholomew said.*
 "I have no idea," Jacoby replied.
 Bartholomew stared at him.
 "You do know," he said.
 "I do not."
 Jacoby gazed back at him blankly.
 "Then explain why I found the red dirt on your shoes," Bartholomew said.

If a speaker's dialogue continues beyond one paragraph, an opening quotation mark is placed at the start of each new line. The closing quotation mark appears at the end of the dialogue.

Example: *"Then explain why I found the red dirt on your shoes. You and I both*
 know there is only one place it could have come from.
 "You must tell me where the coins are, and you will tell me.
 "And after you tell me, you will deal with Ricardo yourself."

Rule 9b. A writer can apply many different attributive verbs in describing dialogue. Just a few examples are *added*, *declared*, *muttered*, *responded*, and *yelled*.

Examples: *"You will deal with Ricardo yourself as to why the coins were removed,"*
 Bartholomew added.
 "I will not," Jacoby responded.

While such verbs help to color dialogue and keep it moving, good dialogue will establish context and mood without over-relying on them. The right words and intonation will convey the spirit of a conversation. In some cases, an attributive verb can be redundant.

Example: “You will deal with Ricardo, and you will bear the consequences,”
Bartholomew insisted. (*The dialogue contains the insistence; the attributive verb can simply be said.*)

