

- » Distinguishing between grammar and style
- » Surveying the basic elements of grammar and style
- » Constructing your grammar profile

Chapter 1

Sampling the Ingredients of Grammar and Style

In the Middle Ages, *grammar* meant the study of Latin, the language of choice for educated people. The word soon came to refer to any kind of learning, the definition that applies when people of grandparent-age talk about their *grammar school*, not their elementary school. The term *grammar school* is a leftover from the old days. 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 in Standard English, what society has set as — surprise! — the standard for “correct” speech and writing. I placed *correct* in quotation marks because the way people speak and write changes according to situation, audience, and purpose. (More on this in Chapter 2.) In this chapter, I take you on a whirlwind tour of the elements of grammar and style and direct you to chapters that meet your needs.

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 the office 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 suggest a subtler color combination, or praise you 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. 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 All-in-One For Dummies*, 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*. 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 NOT STANDARD: The word order is scrambled.

GRAMMAR OR STYLE? Grammar.

STANDARD ENGLISH: I am going to the basketball game.

SENTENCE: She was born on March 18 2009.

WHAT'S NOT STANDARD: Most writers would insert a comma after 18.

GRAMMAR OR STYLE? Style.

ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS: She was born on March 18, 2009. Or, She was born on 18 March 2009.

SENTENCE: Them enjoy playing baseball.

WHAT'S NOT STANDARD: The word *them* isn't appropriate for that spot in the sentence.

GRAMMAR OR STYLE: Grammar.

STANDARD ENGLISH: They enjoy playing baseball.

SENTENCE: Ann spends too much time surfing the Internet.

WHAT'S NOT STANDARD: When it was first invented, *Internet* was generally capitalized.

These days, most publications prefer lowercase (*internet*).

GRAMMAR OR STYLE: Style.

NEW VERSION: Ann spends too much time surfing the internet.



TIP

Standard English isn't the "best" form of the language; nor is it the best choice in many situations. To find out more, turn to Chapter 2.

Getting to Know the Elements of Grammar and Style

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 can't ignore any if you want to express yourself correctly in Standard English. Here are the basics:

- » **Parts of speech:** Words, like people, 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.
- » **Parts of a sentence:** Words seldom like to be alone, 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 cars and other machines. In language, the term *mechanics* refers to the little things that help readers understand what you mean. Spelling and capitalization are included in mechanics. So is *punctuation*, the placement of periods, commas, question marks, and other symbols. With faulty mechanics, your writing may suffer.
- » **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. The next sections examine each in turn.

Parts of speech

According to one computer analysis, the English language includes more than a million words. All 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.

Check out these sentences, in which the parts of speech are underlined and labeled:

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

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

The baby shook the rattle. (*Shook* 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.)

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

You may ask, “Why should anyone bother labeling 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 can’t do an adjective’s job.

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

NONSTANDARD: Today the weather is beautifully.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Beautifully* is an adverb. You need an adjective here.

STANDARD: Today the weather is beautiful.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The adjective *beautiful* works well here.

NONSTANDARD: Bill and Tina agenda the next meeting.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Agenda* is a noun. You need an action word (a verb).

STANDARD: Bill and Tina will write the agenda for the next meeting.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The verb *will write* provides the action. *Agenda* correctly appears as a noun.

NONSTANDARD: The puppy lifted it's paw.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: You need a pronoun in this spot. *It's* means "it is."

STANDARD: The puppy lifted its paw.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *Its* is a pronoun.

NONSTANDARD: The rumor spread threw the class.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Threw* is a verb. An action word doesn't belong here.

STANDARD: The rumor spread through the class.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The verb has been replaced by a preposition, a word that relates ideas. In this sentence, it relates *spread* and *class*, showing where the rumor *spread*.

In Unit 2, 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.



TIP

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, see Chapter 16.

Parts of a sentence

A judge sentences criminals to prison, where inmates must follow many rules. You may feel that English sentences are prisons, too, because so many rules apply to them. But English sentences are *not* prisons; they're structures to hold your thoughts. They help your reader differentiate 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! That paragraph resembles a closet with no hangers. Take another look at the same paragraph, this time with 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. They organize your thoughts into complete sentences. In doing so, they sort out ideas the way hangers sort out clothing.



TIP

Complete and proper sentences aren't 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 is acceptable, turn to Chapter 2. For more about grammar and texting, see Chapter 25.

In creating sentences that are grammatically correct in Standard English, you should pay attention to verbs, subjects, complements, and descriptions.

Verbs

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 verb form that is correct in Standard English is important. Glance at these examples. Notice the underlined verbs:

NONSTANDARD: You was wrong.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: In Standard English, the verb form *was* does not pair with *you*.

STANDARD: You were wrong.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *Were* is the verb form that matches *you*. (To learn more about this topic, see Chapter 5.)

NONSTANDARD: The mayor speaked to voters yesterday.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Speaked* is not correct in Standard English.

STANDARD: The mayor spoke to voters yesterday.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *Spoke* is the irregular verb form you need in this sentence. (For more information about irregular verb forms, see Chapter 12.)

NONSTANDARD: John studying for his exam.

WHY IT'S NONSTANDARD: The verb form *studying* is not complete.

STANDARD: John is studying for his exam.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: Now the verb is complete. (See Chapter 8 for more about these verb forms.)

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 sample sentences:

Cindy arrived at 10 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)

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

Most times, you know who or what you're writing about. The subject, in other words, is usually easy to select. When the subject is a pronoun, errors often occur. Examine these examples. Pay special attention to the underlined words:

NONSTANDARD: Him and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Him* can't be a subject.

STANDARD: He and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *He* is a proper subject.

NONSTANDARD: Are youse ready?

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Youse* is not the plural of *you*. *Youse* is not a Standard English form.

STANDARD: Are you ready?

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *You* is Standard English. *You* is both singular (one) and plural (more than one).

NONSTANDARD: Us friends should stick together.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: Us is not a proper subject.

STANDARD: We friends should stick together.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *We* is a proper subject in Standard English.

Chapter 14 explains which pronouns work as subjects.

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

NONSTANDARD: Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones has been promoted.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Has been promoted* pairs up with one person. In this sentence, you have two people: *Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones*.

STANDARD: Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones have been promoted.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The verb *have been promoted* properly pairs with *Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones*. Both are plural (more than one).

NONSTANDARD: The list of grammar rules are too long.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: The subject of the sentence is *list*, a singular word. It can't pair with *are*, a plural verb form. Did you focus on *rules*? *Rules* is not the subject of this sentence. It's part of a description, *of grammar rules*.

STANDARD: The list of grammar rules is too long.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: 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 13.

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. Have a look at these example sentences. The complements are underlined:

Mary is happy.

Deborah mailed 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 9. To sort out pronouns as complements, see Chapter 14.

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 graduation.

Singing, the choir entered the church.

As you see, descriptions come in many shapes and sizes. Chapter 6 explains short descriptions, and Chapter 15 tackles longer ones.

Small but important: Punctuating, capitalizing, and spelling

Punctuation marks, capital letters, and spelling may seem unimportant, but they add more to your writing than you may expect. Take punctuation, for example. A few years ago, truck drivers in Maine won \$5 million in a lawsuit because of a missing comma!

Punctuation

I once saw a television show in which a conversation similar to this one 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 can't read it. There's no punctuation.

Angel: Oh, I'll worry about that stuff later.

Angel's friend: I don't 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 you should know:

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

- Ellens car (Ellen owns the car.)
- the boys' locker room (The locker room belongs to the boys.)
- my cousins shoes (My cousin owns the shoes.)
- the vice presidents staff (The staff belongs to the vice president.)
- states' rights (The rights belong to the states.)

» Apostrophes also shorten words:

- Annie doesn't ice-skate. (*Doesn't* is short for *does not*)
- I'm excited that vacation is finally here. (*I'm* is short for *I am*.)
- Olivia couldn't ride the roller coaster. (In this sentence, *couldn't* is short for *could not*.)
- Isn't that lemonade too cold? (*Isn't* is short for *is not*.)

» To learn more about apostrophes, turn to Chapter 17.

» **Period, question mark, exclamation point:** These three punctuation marks signal the end of a sentence. A *period* 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 point* is a vertical 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 period ends the statement.)
- Are Tim's shoes blue also? (The question mark ends the question.)
- No, they are not! (The exclamation point adds emphasis.)

» To learn more about these three important punctuation marks, see Chapter 10.

» **Comma:** A comma tells the reader to pause. This little curved hook starts on the line and reaches below. 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 19.

» **Quotation marks:** Quotation marks are pairs of curved marks 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 18 for everything you need to know about quotation marks.

Capitalization

Have you ever seen a very old piece of writing? Capital letters show up in strange places. The U.S. Declaration of Independence is more than 200 years old. In the middle of one sentence, you see a famous phrase:

the pursuit of Happiness

These days, *happiness* would appear in lowercase (noncapitals). The founders of the country could place a capital wherever they wanted, but you don't have the same freedom. 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 capitalized. Check these examples:

- When *I* am asleep, *I* don't 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 want. 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. Read these examples:

- *N*ana sings to the baby. *S*he has a terrible voice! *T*he baby does not mind. *H*e loves her anyway.
- *P*alm trees grow in my yard. *W*arm weather suits them. *R*ainstorms water the trees. *T*hey require little care.



TIP

» Are you curious about numbers? You can't capitalize *22* or *15* or any numeral. Are you wondering what happens when a number appears at the beginning of a sentence? Good question! The answer is that you should not 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 aren't the only rules that govern capital letters. Turn to Chapter 21 for more information.

Spelling

Spelling — placing every letter in the right spot — is important. Take 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 thum. Tina, who is makeing a new skirt, offen chats with Jenny wen they sew.

Before you check your answers, think for a moment. The preceding paragraph contains proper sentences. It clearly states the facts. Yet it's 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 16, 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 16 also explains how to understand and use the dictionary.



Many words sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. Other words are nearly alike in appearance or sound, but their definitions are not alike. Check Chapter 23 for help with these confusing words.

Recognizing Your Grammar Profile

No one else in the universe is exactly like you. Even your identical twin, if you have one, differs from you in some way. Your biology and experiences are unique. So is your grammar profile. Some aspects of grammar you know very well, and others may puzzle you. Your strengths and weaknesses form your grammar profile.

Table 1-1 is a checklist of common grammar problems. Next to each problem is a chapter number. If you say, "I know that already," consider skipping that chapter. If you say, "I need help with this one," you probably need to read the chapter listed in Column 3, labeled "Help Needed?" Once you have filled out the checklist, you have a road map through *English Grammar All-in-One For Dummies* and a clear route to a better command of the English language.

Table 1-1 Checklist of Common Grammar Problems

Problem	Chapter(s) Covering This Topic	Help Needed?
<i>that boxes or those boxes?</i>	3	
<i>you was or you were?</i>	4	
<i>will you had or will you have? we does or we do?</i>	5	
<i>should be nearby or could be nearby?</i>	5	
<i>real good or really good?</i>	6	
<i>feels bad or feels badly?</i>	6	
<i>an apple or a apple?</i>	6	
<i>both strict but kind or both strict and kind?</i>	7	
<i>Mary buying or Mary is buying?</i>	8	
<i>The pie is or The pie is delicious?</i>	9	
<i>John sang, I danced. Correct?</i>	10	
<i>It snowed, however, I went anyway. Correct?</i>	10	
<i>had been asked or has been asked? have did or have done?</i>	12	
<i>Yesterday he walk or Yesterday he walked?</i>	12	
<i>One plus one is two or One plus one was two?</i>	12	
<i>river flow or river flows?</i>	13	
<i>pen and pencil was or pen and pencil were? stick or stone is or stick or stone are?</i>	13	
<i>Everyone are or Everyone is? Here are three books or Here is three books? Some of the pie was or Some of the pie were?</i>	13	

Problem	Chapter(s) Covering This Topic	Help Needed?
<i>John and I went or John and myself went? Helen told me or Helen told I?</i>	14	
<i>easier or more easier? less difficult or least difficult?</i>	15	
<i>bought only one shirt? or only bought one shirt?</i>	15	
<i>Abraham Lincoln is better than any president. Correct or incorrect?</i>	15	
<i>monkies or monkeys? touches or touchs? independant or independent?</i>	16	
<i>childrens' clothing or children's clothing? I dont know or I don't know?</i>	17	
<i>its or it's? your or you're? who's or whose?</i>	17	
<i>Sally said, I love that movie. Correct?</i>	18	
<i>boys, girls, and parents or boys, girls and parents? No I will not or No, I will not?</i>	19	
<i>beautifully made clothing or beautifully-made clothing?</i>	20	
<i>, or : Which is correct?</i>	20	
<i>Director of Security or director of security?</i>	21	
<i>the amazon river or the Amazon River?</i>	21	
<i>affect your mood or effect your mood? Sometimes or Some times?</i>	23	
<i>too, to, or two?</i>	23	
<i>can't hardly or can hardly? Didn't do nothing or Didn't do anything?</i>	23	
<i>Having played, he left or Playing, he left?</i>	24	
<i>to swim, to dive, and floating or swimming, diving, and floating?</i>	24	
<i>Text LOL? or Text I am joking?</i>	25	
<i>The problem is: Correct punctuation?</i>	25	

