

- » Surveying the basic elements of grammar
- » Sorting out style
- » Coping with everyday writing tasks

Chapter **1**

Getting a Grip on Grammar

A friend recently told me that studying grammar was a waste of time. “Who cares whether somebody says *had gone* or *went*?” he added. “The world has more important problems!” My response was that grammar *does* matter. People may judge your intelligence and ability based on the way you speak and write. *Standard English*, the term given to language that follows commonly accepted rules, can lead to better jobs and higher grades. In this chapter, you survey key elements of Standard English.

Getting to Know the Ingredients of Standard English

When you bake a cake, you need all the right ingredients. If you forget one, the cake is tasteless. English has a number of ingredients, too. You can’t ignore any if you wish to express yourself properly in Standard English. Here are the ingredients:

- » **Parts of speech:** Words are like people. Both base a portion of their identity on the work they do. Words that name people or things, for example, are

nouns. English teachers call the identity of a word the *part of speech*. Understanding how to select the appropriate part of speech is an important aspect of grammar.

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

The rules for word forms and word order have changed only a few times in the last 500 years. *Style* — the preferred capitalization, punctuation, and word choice — shifts more frequently. That's why a 19th-century book seems odd to modern readers. Style changes with geography, too. In a list of three or more items, American writers usually place a comma before the word *and*. British writers generally omit that comma. Style also depends on context. Science journals and literary magazines capitalize titles differently, for example.



TIP

In *Basic English Grammar For Dummies*, 2nd edition, I explain current style points that most authorities agree on. For important projects, you can ask your teachers or supervisors to explain their preferred style. You can also consult a *manual*. Many schools and companies publish their own manuals of style, explaining every detail of what you must or must not write. A few popular manuals are available in bookstores and libraries. Select one that covers your field of interest. Some popular manuals are the *Modern Language Association Handbook* (literature, history, arts), *The Chicago Manual of Style* (general writing), the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (science), and the *MIT Guide to Science and Engineering Communication* (science, math, technology). If you're keeping score at home, this book follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Building Language, Block by Block: Parts of Speech

According to one survey, the English language includes more than one 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.

To give you an idea of how the parts of speech look within a sentence, here are some examples. 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 Faisal like opera, but Sal prefers jazz. (*And* and *but* are conjunctions.)

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

Most of the time, you think only about the meaning of a word, not its part of speech. 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:

WRONG: Today the weather is beautifully.

WHY IT'S WRONG: *Beautifully* is an adverb. You need an adjective here.

RIGHT: Today the weather is beautiful.

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

WRONG: Bill and Tina agenda the next meeting.

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

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

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

WRONG: The puppy lifted it's paw.

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

RIGHT: The puppy lifted its paw.

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

In Part 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 24.

Making Sentences

A judge sentences criminals to prison. There, criminals must follow many rules. You may feel that English sentences are prisons, too. So many rules apply to them! However, English sentences are definitely *not* prisons. They are structures to hold your thoughts. They help your reader pick apart one idea from another. Take a peek at this paragraph:

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

Oh, my! In that paragraph, all the ideas are jumbled together. Now take another look at the same paragraph, this time with proper sentences:

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

This one is easier to understand, isn't it? The extra words, capital letters, and punctuation organize your thoughts into complete sentences.



TIP

Complete and proper sentences are not always necessary. When you speak with your friends, for instance, you may use half-sentences. Read this conversation. Imagine that Joe and Barbara are speaking to or texting each other:

Joe: Want to go to the beach?

Barbara: Not without my dog.

Joe: Okay, the park instead.

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

To create grammatically correct sentences, you must pay attention to several issues. The following sections briefly show you these issues.

Action or being words

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

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

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

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

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

Selecting the right verb form is important. Glance at these examples. Notice the underlined verbs:

WRONG: You was wrong.

WHY IT'S WRONG: In Standard English, the verb form *was* doesn't pair properly with *you*.

RIGHT: You were wrong.

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

WRONG: The mayor speaked to voters yesterday.

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

RIGHT: The mayor spoke to voters yesterday.

WHY IT'S RIGHT: *Spoke* is the irregular verb form you need in this sentence. (More information on irregular verb forms appears in Chapter 10.)

WRONG: John studying for his exam.

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

RIGHT: John is studying for his exam.

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

As you see, you can make many mistakes with verbs. The chapters I mention in the preceding examples will help you avoid errors.

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 sentences:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WRONG: Him and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT'S WRONG: In Standard English, *him* can't be a subject.

RIGHT: He and John failed the Latin test.

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

WRONG: Are youse ready?

WHY IT'S WRONG: *Youse* is not the plural of *you* in Standard English.

RIGHT: Are you ready?

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

WRONG: Us friends should stick together.

WHY IT'S WRONG: *Us* is not a subject pronoun in Standard English.

RIGHT: We friends should stick together.

WHY IT'S RIGHT: *We* is a subject pronoun in Standard English.

Chapter 4 explains which pronouns work as subjects.

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

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

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

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

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

WRONG: The list of grammar rules are too long.

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

RIGHT: The list of grammar rules is too long.

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

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

Complements and descriptions

Your thoughts are rich and varied. You want to say more than “Mary is” or “I run.” Some elements, called *complements*, complete ideas. In these sentences, the complements are underlined:

Mary is happy.

Deborah mailed the letter.

Meera and Drew are always nervous in the dentist's office.

Give Jean her pizza.

Did you tell Bob the secret?

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

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

Every morning, I run through the park.

Pink paint covered the bumpy wall.

Silk thread is more expensive than cotton thread.

Wind in that area blows the fallen leaves away.

The book of speeches helped me prepare for graduation.

Singing, the choir entered the church.

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

Small but Important: Punctuating, Capitalizing, and Spelling

Punctuation marks, capital letters, and spelling may seem unimportant. Don't overlook these little things, though. They add more to your writing than you may expect. Take punctuation, for example. Some years ago, a dairy company had to pay \$5 million to its drivers because of a missing comma in a state law! This section gives you an overview of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

Punctuation

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

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

- Ellen's car (Ellen owns the car.)
- the boys' locker room (The locker room belongs to the boys.)
- the Vice President's 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. (Here, *doesn't* is short for *does not*)
- I'm excited that vacation is finally here. (*I'm* is short for *I am*.)
- Isn't that lemonade too cold? (*Isn't* is short for *is not*.)

To learn more about apostrophes, turn to Chapter 14.

» **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 13.

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

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

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

» **Quotation marks:** Quotation marks are 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 16 for everything you need to know about quotation marks.

Capitalization

In an old piece of writing, capital letters show up in strange places. Standards for capitalization had not yet been set. For example, the Declaration of Independence is more than 200 years old. In the middle of one sentence is this 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. You don't have the same

freedom. You must follow the rules. Glance at these situations, which require capital letters:

» **Speaker or writer:** The pronoun *I* always refers to the person who is writing. It is always capitalized:

- When I am asleep, I do not snore.
- Do I have to pay extra for my suitcase?

» **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:

- Nana sings to the baby. She has a terrible voice! The baby does not mind. He loves her anyway.
- Palm trees grow in my yard. Warm weather suits them. Rain storms water the trees. They require little care.



TIP

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

WRONG: 20 people live in that building.

RIGHT: Twenty 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 17 for more information.

Spelling

In silly television shows, *spell* is a magic word. In grammar, *spell* is also a magic word. To spell correctly, 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 is not a good piece of

writing. The misspelled words turn a good paragraph into a bad one. Here are the correctly spelled words: *pushes, thumb, making, often, when*.



TIP

In Chapter 24, 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 24 also explains how to understand and use the dictionary.



TIP

Many words sound the same but have different spelling and meaning. Other words are nearly alike in appearance or sound, but their definitions are not alike. Check Chapter 21 for help with these confusing words.

Facing Everyday Writing Tasks

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

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

When you face an everyday writing task, you should understand the rules and traditions that apply to it. Chapters 18, 19, and 20 tell you everything you need to complete your writing work easily and effectively.



TIP

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

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

Or, is this your reply when your friend asks, "Who's there?"

It is I.

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

