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*).

For more on nouns, see Chapter Two, “Apostrophes,” Rules 2a through 2e.

• 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*).
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, 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.

• 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.  
Shakespeare in Love won an Academy Award.  
Shakespeare in Love 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.
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.

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.

Rule 5. 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 6. With words that indicate portions—percent, a lot, majority, some, all, etc.—Rule 1 given earlier 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: 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
In recent years, the SAT testing service has considered none to be strictly singular. However, according to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage: “Clearly none has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. The notion that it is singular only is a myth of unknown origin that appears to have arisen in the 19th century. If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. Both are acceptable beyond serious criticism.” When none is clearly intended to mean “not one,” it is followed by a singular verb.

Rule 7. 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 8. 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 9. Some collective nouns, such as family, couple, staff, audience, etc., may take either a singular or a plural verb, depending on their use in the sentence.

Examples:  
The staff is in a meeting.
Staff is acting as a unit.
The couple disagree about disciplining their child.
The couple refers to two people who are acting as individuals.

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 10. 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 things that are hypothetical, wishful, imaginary, or factually contradictory. 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.

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 I.
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.

### 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 . . .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent</th>
<th>Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Although she is hungry, she will give him some of her food.</td>
<td>Whatever they decide, I will agree to.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

### 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*.
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:** It could have been them.

**Technically correct:** It could have been they.

**Example:** It is just me at the door.

**Technically correct:** It is just I at the door.

**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.** Object pronouns are used everywhere else beyond Rules 1 and 2 (direct object, indirect object, object of a preposition). Object pronouns include me, him, herself, us, them, themselves, etc.

**Examples:** Jean saw him.

- Him is the direct object.
- Give her the book.
- Her is the indirect object. The direct object is book.
- 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, 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: 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. Avoid they and their with singular pronouns.

Incorrect: Someone brought their lunch.
Correct: Someone brought her lunch.
OR
Someone brought his lunch.

If the gender is undetermined, you could say Someone brought his or her lunch (more on this option in Rule 11b).

Rule 11b. Singular pronouns must stay singular throughout the sentence.

Incorrect: 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 ungrammatical sentence with a poorly written correction 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 make sentences grammatical.

Incorrect: No one realizes when their time is up.
Correct but awkward: No one realizes when his or her time is up.
Rewritten: None realize when their time is up.
Incorrect: If you see anyone on the trail, tell them to be careful.
Correct but 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 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.

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**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.)

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**WHO VS. WHOM**

**Rule.** Use this he/him method to decide whether who or whom is correct:

he = who
him = whom

**Examples:**

Who/Whom wrote the letter?
*He* wrote the letter. Therefore, who is correct.

Who/Whom should I vote for?
Should I vote for *him*? 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. *He* 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 *him*. 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 witness the folly: 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 he/him rule in the previous section applies:

he = whoever
him = whomever

Rule 1. The presence of whoever or whomever 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.
He asks for it first. Therefore, whoever is correct.
We will hire whoever/whomever you recommend.
You recommend him. Therefore, whomever is correct.
We will hire whoever/whomever is most qualified.
He is 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. 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, 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 begins 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 widely
disregarded: Which is routinely used in place of that, even by great writers and
journalists, perhaps because it sounds more elegant.

ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

Definitions
• An adjective is a word or set of words that modifies (i.e., describes) a noun or pro-
noun. 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.

Examples: He speaks slowly (modifies the verb speaks)
He is especially clever (modifies the adjective clever)
He speaks all too slowly (modifies the adverb slowly)

An adverb answers how, when, where, or to what extent—how often or how much (e.g.,
daily, completely).

Examples: He speaks slowly (answers the question how)
He speaks very slowly (answers the question how slowly)
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, etc., that pertain to the senses. Adverbs are often misplaced in such sentences, which require adjectives instead.

Examples: 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 woman looked angry/angrily to us.
Did the woman look with her eyes, or are we describing her appearance?
We are describing her appearance (she appeared angry), so no -ly.
The woman looked angry/angrily at the paint splotches.
Here the woman actively looked (used her eyes), so the -ly is added.
She feels bad/badly about the news.
She is not feeling with fingers, so no -ly.

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Comparative</th>
<th>Superlative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sweet</td>
<td>sweeter</td>
<td>sweetest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad</td>
<td>worse</td>
<td>worst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>efficient</td>
<td>more efficient</td>
<td>most efficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:* She spoke quicker than he did.  
*Correct:* She spoke *more quickly* than he did.  
*Incorrect:* Talk quieter.  
*Correct:* Talk *more quietly*.

**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 that indicates location (in, near, beside) or some other relationship (about, after, besides) between a noun or pronoun and other parts of the sentence. 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.

Rule 4. Follow different with the preposition from. Things differ from other things; avoid different than.

Incorrect: You’re different than I am.
Correct: You’re different from me.
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

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

Or

**Revision:**
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:** He is not unwilling to help.

**Better:** He is 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.