Grammar for Writing

Understanding the Mechanics of Grammar and How Language Works

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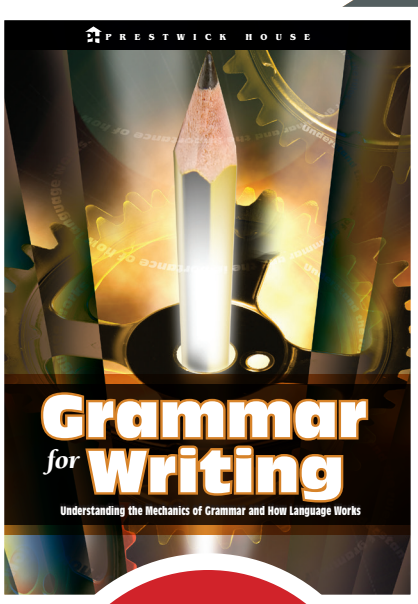

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For those who use this book, *Grammar for Writing* will prove to be an exciting and different approach to the notions of correctness and clarity in writing. Using language is one of the few things that children come to school *already doing.* Children just starting school might have learned how to count, and they might have a sense of adding and subtracting, but their mathematics teachers tend to find them blank slates on which to write correct mathematical knowledge and procedures.

Language, however, is different. Students come to school having already been using language for years. Language has surrounded them from birth. They hear, speak, think, and reason in words. Language has already helped them to understand and interact with their environments, other people, and themselves. They have a sense of "what sounds right" and "what sounds wrong." They've already developed some good language habits. But some of their language habits are not so good, and these can actually hinder effective communication or hamper their success in school.

Grammar for Writing, therefore, does not assume that the student is a linguistic *tabula rasa* on which all the "rules" can be written. This book does not even presume that there are hard and fast *rules*.

Instead, *Grammar for Writing* invites students to look closely at their own understanding and use of language and, from that understanding, examine the agreed-upon *conventions* that make communication possible. *Grammar for Writing* invites the student to examine *how and why* these conventions exist, and, thus, to remember and apply them more effectively.

The focus of *Grammar for Writing* is not on "correct" English or "proper" English, but on *Standard Edited American English,* the language necessary for success in the American school, workplace, and marketplace.

Whether your students are Advanced Placement Scholars, challenged learners, or English Language Learners whose primary language is not English, the explanations, examples, and exercises in *Grammar for Writing* are designed to establish habits of effective communication that are based on *understanding*, not on a rote application of rules.

Here you are at the beginning of a book entitled *Grammar for Writing*, and you're probably looking forward to studying grammar about as much as you'd look forward to listening to someone read to you from the dictionary.

You probably don't see much point in studying grammar anyway, do you? After all, there are more exceptions than rules, right? You think that no one really follows the rules. Breaking the rules is called "style."

So what's the big deal?

The big deal is that...

> grammar signposts readers listeners writer's speaker's message understand provides look intended for to the the and or

The words above *represent* a sentence, and it is a very appropriate sentence for this chapter.

Perhaps you didn't understand it because the writer was more interested in "style" than in being grammatically correct, and using correct grammar is quite often the same thing as being clear.

The Role of Word Order in English Grammar:

Much of English grammar depends on the placement of the word in the sentence, so maybe if we rearrange the words in the above sentence and punctuate it properly, you'll understand it better:

> Grammar provides the signposts readers and listeners look for to understand the writer's or speaker's intended message.

There are, of course, a few other grammatical conventions at work in the sentence above, and we will deal with them in later chapters, but the sentence should give you an idea that English is a language that does depend on the order of the words in sentences.

Look at the following "sentence":

> an alien general would explain to you what a electric microwave does how

You might get the meaning that a creature from another planet can explain microwaves, but some grammatical and word placement issues are confusing within the sentence. Let's look at it differently, using the exact same words as before, but in a different order:

> general how would you explain what a microwave does to an electric alien

This version makes a bit more sense, and it seems to mean that a general can

Exercise 1: Below are a few passages that are difficult to understand—or might actually be *mis*understood—because the writer has not taken into consideration those rules and conventions of grammar that help us to understand each other. In the spaces provided, explain what the problems are and how the writer could fix them. Then rewrite the passage. The first one has been done for you.

1. Medical science is. One of the most rapid advance sciences of the twenty-first century every day. New and wonderful Developments are announced.

ERRORS:
These sentences contain errors in capitalization, punctuation, and word form. The writer needs to capitalize the first word of every sentence and place periods only at the ends of complete sentences. The passage also should read "rapidly advancing," not "rapid advance."

REWRITE:
Medical science is one of the most rapidly advancing sciences of the twenty-first century. Every day, new and wonderful developments are announced.

2. yet, again we read about a miracle drug this time. it is aspirin that 100 year old drug. which in the 1920s was touted as safe by maker. bayer corporation do not affect the heart, state the ads now we learn. that in fact aspirin do affect the heart. beneficial

ERRORS:

REWRITE:

The Prescriptive Approach versus the Descriptive Approach to Grammar:

There are two popular approaches to the study and teaching of grammar, the **prescriptive** and the **descriptive** approaches. Both are useful, and neither is "more right" than the other, but they are not useful in the same way.

The **prescriptive** approach looks at the rule first and then examines the rule in practice, which is essentially a **deductive** approach. Certainly you've been taught rules like:

> Do **not** begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction.
>
> **Never** end a sentence with a preposition.

The biggest problem with prescriptive rules is that there are many exceptions to the rule. These do not invalidate the rule, but they do make effective language use difficult if you have to learn each rule and its exception(s).

The **descriptive** approach to grammar looks at how the language is used by educated, native speakers and writers, and then formulates a rule from that usage—a more **inductive** approach. Descriptive rules would be stated as follows:

> Whatever follows a coordinating conjunction in a sentence will be linked (in the reader's or listener's mind) to whatever *immediately preceded* it.
>
> The time or space relationship conveyed by the preposition can be lost or misdirected if the preposition comes *after* its object.

Exercise 2: Examine the following groups of sentences. Briefly explain what each sentence means and then develop a rule that describes how word order communicates that meaning. The first one has been done for you.

1. *Bob liked Mary.*
   Mary liked Bob.

MEANING, SENTENCE ONE:
Bob had a feeling of regard and affection for Mary.

MEANING, SENTENCE TWO:
Mary reciprocated Bob's feeling.

RULE:
The noun that comes first in the sentence is the performer of the action. The noun that comes last in the sentence is the receiver of the action.

6. Bannerman Island be primary a warehouse where war weapon and explosive's be store.

Correction:

Explanation:

Exercise 4: The words in the sentences below are in the correct *form*, but not necessarily in the right *order*. See if you can rewrite the sentences into SEAE. The first one has been done for you.

NOTE: Again, don't worry if you don't know all of the formal terms for your explanations, but, when talking about word order in sentences, you will probably draw on what you know about *subjects, direct objects, indirect objects,* etc.

1. when parents our overseas to live were sent our brother went with aunt and I and my sons and their two uncle.

Correction:
When our parents were sent overseas, my brother and I went to live with our aunt and uncle and their two sons.

Explanation:
"I" is subjective (nominative), so it must be in a subject position. "Brother" is logically linked to "I" ("my brother and I"), so it, too, must be in a subject position– they must either be the pair sent overseas or the pair who went to live with someone. It is more logical to assume the parents were sent overseas and the siblings went to live with their aunt, uncle, etc.

Exercise 2: Examine the six sentences below and answer the questions that follow each. If there is no answer to the question, write "none."

a. The amazing volunteer happily read the children a story.

b. She really showed them her love of books.

c. They heartily thanked her for the work.

d. The grateful librarian gave the finder of the book a thank-you note.

e. He secretly offered her a cash stipend.

f. Marie immediately reported him to the American Library Council.

1. Which word indicates the *performer* of the action of each sentence (subject)?

2. Which word indicates the *recipient* or *beneficiary* of the action in each sentence (indirect object)?

3. Which word indicates the *thing acted upon* in each sentence (direct object)?

4. Which words in the above sentences are *nouns* (the specific word that identifies the subject or object)?

5. Which words in the above sentences are *pronouns* (fills the space and prevents repetition of a noun which preceded it in the sentence or the sentence before)?

I, we, you, he, she, it, and *they* are all in the **subjective case** (sometimes called the **nominative case**). Those forms are typically used *only* for subjects and predicate nouns. That's how your reader knows who's performing the action in the sentence, even if you put the subject in a different place.

Me, us, you, him, her, it, and *them* are all in the **objective case**, and educated writers and speakers use them to indicate the recipient of the action, or the thing acted upon.

Notice how *you* is the form for both the subjective and objective cases. That's why it was repeated in the chart that showed you the plural forms of the pronouns.

When a poet writes something like:

> *Me she did kiss;*
> *Her my gaze did seek.*

even though the words are not in the expected order, we know who's doing the kissing, who's being kissed, and what's seeking whom.

This is what that Peace Corps volunteer meant when she said it "didn't matter where you put the words." As long as you know the difference between *her* and *she* and *I* and *me*, you can put them almost anywhere you want.

The **only problem with English grammar** is that, sometimes, meaning is based on word order and sometimes (though not very often), it is based on word form.

Exercise 5: In the sentences that follow, underline the form of the pronoun in brackets you would use to replace the noun. Consider both number and case when making your choice. Then, in the spaces provided, explain why you made the decisions you made. Many of the sentences would not make sense if *only* pronouns were used and not nouns, but this exercise is *to determine your understanding of how and why each type of pronoun is used.* Do *not* force the sentences into making sense just by the pronoun usage; we are concerned only with your understanding which *number and case* of pronoun to use. The first one has been done for you.

1. In 1839, in the sleepy hamlet of Cooperstown, New York, Abner Doubleday [**he**/~~**him**~~] mapped out the first baseball diamond and established a few rules [~~**it**~~/~~**they**~~/**them**].

Reasons for choices:
Abner Doubleday is a single person and the subject of the sentence , so we need the singular pronoun in the subjective case. "Rules" is a plural word and the direct object, so we need the plural, objective form.

3. An action that **has not happened yet**, but **will happen in the future**:

I **will wear** my new dress to the prom.

Will Jacqueline **accept** our invitation?

A monument to the memory of John Lennon **will be considered** at our fan club's next meeting.

This tense is called the **simple future tense** or merely the **future tense**.

These are the three **simple tenses** that are used in English—**present, past, and future**—and they communicate some very important information about when an action is occurring in a sentence. They are the most common tenses used, but they do not provide the flexibility to cover all instances in which the verb is used to convey time.

Next, we need to look at what are called the progressive tenses and examine the concepts of time they communicate:

4. An action **is occurring** now, seemingly as the sentence is being written, in the present:

The motor **is running**.

Those frequent P.A. announcements that interrupt class **are** very **annoying**.

Miriam **is nagging** me again about the prom.

This tense is called the **present progressive tense**. Notice the important difference between what the simple present and present progressive tenses communicate.

Look at the following sentences and decide whether they are correct in terms of the conventions of SEAE. If a sentence is correct, simply note that it is. If it is not, correct it and explain why you made the correction you made.

Every day I am going to work and I am struggling to earn a paycheck.

Hurry! The passengers are boarding.

Older automobiles cause much more pollution than newer cars.

Exercise 9: If the italicized tenses in the following sentences are correct, place a C in the blank. If a tense is used incorrectly, mark the blank with an "X" and rewrite the sentence using the correct tense.

1. ___ Juan *has written* to the movie star many times before she finally sent him her autograph.
2. ___ The crowd *will have been waiting* for an hour by the time the band *takes* the stage.
3. ___ Rain *is predicted* all week, but the weather remained dry.
4. ___ The train *left* the station in a minute.
5. ___ Last New Year's Eve, I *was staying* up until 2 in the morning.
6. ___ During the summer, my dog *likes* to lie down in front of the fan, and he *blocks* the breeze.
7. ___ Kristin *will wear* her prom dress at the wedding last week.
8. ___ Humans *will* probably *be living* on the moon within a century.
9. ___ Despite the usual warm weather, snow *has been falling* in March every year since 2000.
10. ___ I *had* already *ordered* the food when Sanjhi *had been calling* to say he'd come.
11. ___ Where *have* you *been*? I *have been calling* your cell phone for days!
12. ___ Delores and Emily *had been* extremely happy since they *had passed* the softball tryouts.

Singular or Plural Verbs:

Like nouns, most verbs change form slightly to indicate whether the performer of the action is **singular** or **plural**.

Study the following sentences and see what conventions of grammar you can infer about the use and formation of the **plural form of verbs**.

Campers **come** from all over the country to camp in this vast wilderness.

The typical camper register**s** at the registration cabin and then hike**s** off into the wild.

At the registration cabin, **they receive** a safety guide.

The guide stress**es** being careful in the park.

Over the years, very few campers **have gotten** lost or **been devoured** by wild animals.

Still, it happen**s**.

Exercise 1: In the space provided, write a brief paragraph entirely of simple sentences. Remember that each simple sentence can contain any number of noun, adjective, adverb, or prepositional phrases, but it must contain **only one clause.**

Some suggestions for paragraph topics are provided, but feel free to choose one of your own.

- the various activities in an airport, bus station, or train station waiting room
- the variety of foods available in a supermarket mega-store
- the career choices available to a modern high school student
- the selection of extra-curricular clubs and activities offered by your school

Compound Sentences:

As the name suggests, the **compound sentence** combines and communicates **two closely related ideas in a single sentence**. In a sense, the **compound sentence** is the combination of two simple sentences, but, the ideas of the two sentences **must belong together in a single thought**, and they must be **equal in importance**.

A **compound sentence** is, then, **the combination of two main clauses into a single sentence**.

Consider the following:

> I like to eat. Johanna likes to cook.

In the above pair of simple sentences, the reader is left to make the connection between the two individual thoughts.

> *I like to eat, and Johanna likes to cook.*

In the **compound sentence** above, the writer has specifically pointed out that

Compound and Complex Sentences:

Exercise 4: Following are 27 clauses. Some are main clauses, and some are subordinate clauses (which cannot stand alone as a sentence). Together, they make up an entire paragraph about Ralph Ellison. In the spaces provided, state whether you would leave the clause unchanged or whether you would connect it to the clause before it or after it. Write the new **complex sentence** in the space of the main clause to which you added the subordinate clause.

The first three have been done for you.

1. Ralph Waldo Ellison was named after philosopher and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson.
Keep as is.

2. That name was chosen by his parents.
That name was chosen by his parents because they predicted their son would one day also be an accomplished writer.

3. Because they predicted their son would one day also be an accomplished writer.
Combine with main clause above.

4. He was born in 1913 in Oklahoma City.

5. Where many great jazz musicians performed.

6. In school, Ellison studied classical composition.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Most people already have a sense of how this works in SEAE: A singular noun in the subject must be followed by the singular form of the verb (see Chapter 3), while a plural subject requires the plural form of the verb.

Ralph	*drives.*
The mayor	*speaks.*
The voting public	*decides.*
The teachers	*laugh.*
Large dogs	*like to run.*
The residents of Whoville	*scream loudly.*

Singular Subjects

The above convention presents problems *only when* there are so many words, phrases, or even clauses in the subject that the *exact noun* that governs the verb becomes unclear.

Remember that, no matter how many words compose the subject of the sentence, the actual performer of the action *almost always* amounts to one noun or pronoun. The rest, as you've seen in many of the previous exercises, is simply additional information. One clue: The subject of a sentence **is never found in a prepositional phrase**.

Consider:

The mayor speaks.

The mayor *of all of the areas north of Main Street* ***speaks.***

The mayor *of the people* ***speaks.***

The mayor*, whom the people chose in three consecutive elections,* ***speaks.***

Of all people, ***the mayor*** *is the last one you'd expect to have an opinion on the subject, but, regardless, he* ***speaks.***

The *scandal-ridden, greedy, and corrupt* ***mayor****, the scourge of the city, disowned by her own family,* ***speaks.***

The mayor, *as well as all of his cabinet members,* ***speaks.***

All Ready and Already

All ready means to be "completely ready." One can be **partly ready, nearly ready,** or **all ready**. The use of the word **all** as an adverb meaning "completely" should not confuse you.

Already is an adverb that expresses a quickness or suddenness of time.

> *Are you here **already**? Have a seat. I'm not **quite ready** yet, but I'll be down when I'm **all ready**. Is that **all right** with you?*

A few more examples:

> The movie had *already* begun when we arrived.
>
> Before I finished the test, the bell had *already* rung.
>
> Is the meal *all ready* yet?
>
> I'm sorry, but your car is not *all ready* for you to pick it up now.

A Lot

As we already pointed out earlier, **a lot** is a two-word phrase.

> *There is **a lot** of noise in this room.*

Thinking logically, the plural construction would be **lots**:

> *There were **lots** of presents under the Christmas tree.*

Still thinking logically, the opposite would be **a little**, and you understand that there is no such word as **alittle**, so using **alot** makes no sense:

> *They expressed **a little** anxiety at the price of gasoline.*
>
> *Sara cleaned up her room **a lot** when she was grounded.*

Remember, however, that **a lot** is an informal expression, and you would be wise simply to avoid using it altogether in your formal academic and business writing; if you must write it, though, make sure to use it properly.

Passed and Past

Pass is a verb that primarily means "to go by":

> *Every day on my way to work, I **pass** a goat farm.*

It also means to "succeed in an inspection or test":

> *I hope I **pass** my algebra test tomorrow.*

Passed is just the simple past tense of pass:

> *When I **passed** the goats today, they were huddled against the cold.*
>
> *I **passed** the algebra test with flying colors.*

Think logically: If you're using the word as a verb, you need **pass + ed**.

Glossary of Terms

Note: Italicized terms are also defined in this Glossary.

active voice—a construction that places the focus of the *sentence* on the performer of the action

adjective—a word or *phrase* that clarifies or specifies the nature, quality, or quantity of a *noun* or *pronoun*

adverb—a word or *phrase* that clarifies or specifies the time, place, manner, degree, or affirmation or negation of a *verb*, *adjective,* or other *adverb*

amount—the quality of a *noun* that is measured (pound, quart) rather than counted

antecedent—the *noun* to which a *pronoun* refers

appositive—a *noun* or *noun phrase* that provides additional information about the *noun* it immediately follows

case—the quality of a *noun* or *pronoun* that describes the *noun*'s or *pronoun*'s function in a *sentence*

complex sentence—see *sentence*

compound sentence—see *sentence*

compound-complex sentence—see *sentence*

clause—any group of words that serves a common function in a *sentence* and contains a *subject* and a *verb*

- **dependent clause**—a *clause* that, grammatically, cannot stand alone as a complete *sentence*
- **independent clause**—a *clause* that, grammatically, can stand alone as a complete *sentence*
- **main clause**—an *independent clause* that contains the most important information in its *sentence*
- **subordinate clause**—a *dependent clause* that contains additional or supplementary information

conjunction—a word that connects two or more words, *phrases*, or *clauses* in a *sentence*

- **coordinating conjunction**—a word that connects two items of equal importance
- **subordinating conjunction**—a word that connects one *clause* of lesser importance to one of greater importance