C21

Communicating IN THE 21st CENTURY

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CHAPTER 1

Writing skills 1: grammar

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Identify the eight parts of speech and explain why words sometimes perform as more than one part of speech or word class
- Explain different properties of verbs, such as transitivity, finiteness/non-finiteness, mood, voice and agreement with subjects
- Explain the difference between phrases, clauses, sentences, sentence fragments and appositives
- Explain the role of case and the nature of pronoun reference
- Explain the functions of and problems associated with modifiers

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This is the first of several chapters on writing skills. The approach taken here is:

- Writing skills 1: grammar
- Writing skills 2: punctuation, spelling and usage
- Writing skills 3: style
- Writing skills 4: plain English
- Writing skills 5: how to write

All five chapters interconnect and overlap.

Let's begin by looking at grammar. Don't worry, it doesn't bite, and it's not as threatening as it looks.

But do we need to brush up on our understanding of grammar (or pick it up for the first time, if we don't have any to brush up on)? Surely in this age of software packages that have in-built grammar and spell checkers we don't need to bother.

Only up to a point, unfortunately. For example, if you use such packages, you might find they keep giving you messages about your writing, such as those shown in figure 1.1.

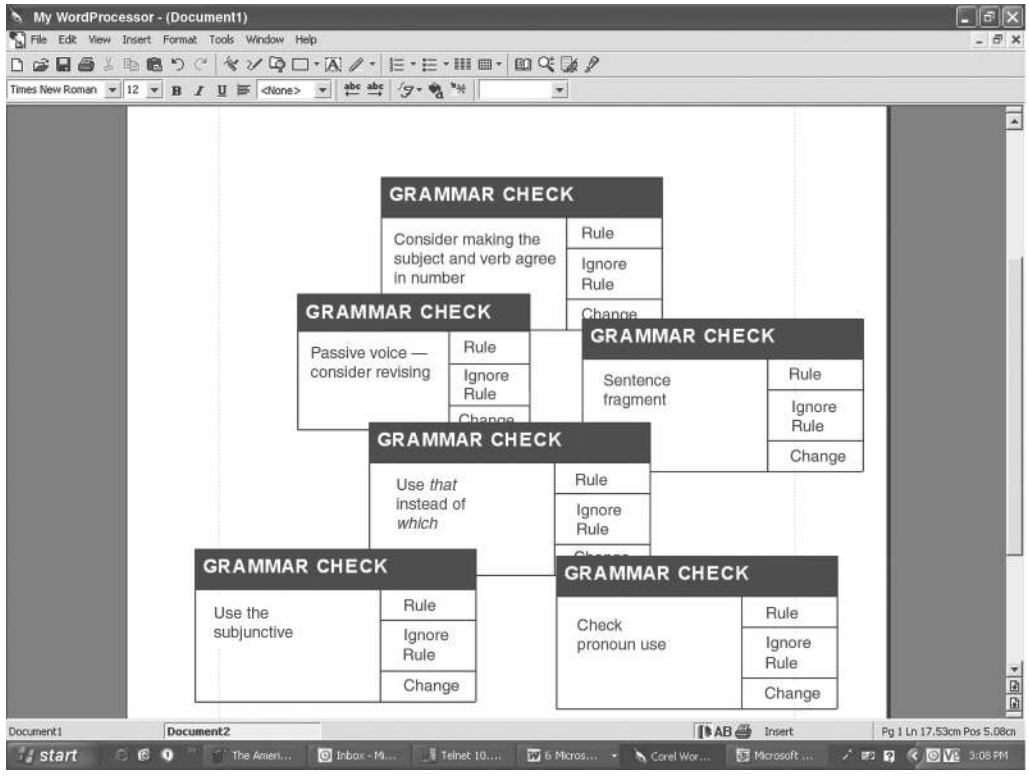


Figure 1.1: Common messages from software grammar/style checkers

These remarks come from grammar checkers and they concern our use and placement of words – as opposed to spell checkers, which check our spelling. We will return to these messages throughout this chapter to see what they really mean.

This chapter will give you the basics of grammar, and some interconnections with punctuation and usage, in an almost painless way. Grammar is a very big area of study, and we can look at only some facets of it here. If you would like to get a bigger picture (including, for example, tense and aspect, coordination and subordination, and other non-traditional approaches to grammar) consider referring to Anson and Schwegler (2008), Biber, Johansson and Conrad (1999), Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), Cook and Newsom (2007), Carter and McCarthy (2006), Langacker (2008), Weaver and Bush (2008), Fowler and Aaron (2007) and Curzan and Adams (2009).

After reading this chapter you should find the software messages about passive voice, sentence fragments and the like to be understandable, and be able to decide whether to follow their advice. The next online chapter, 'Writing skills 2: punctuation, spelling and usage', will give you an overview of the areas complementary to grammar: punctuation, spelling and usage.

Grammar checkers and spell checkers: can we trust them?
How reliable are these grammar checkers and spell checkers? Consider for example, this passage:

> If it whirr a tall posse bull, whee wood lake two bok uh rheum wither war dubbed. (If it were at all possible we would like to book a room with a water bed.)

Most spell checkers will pass this sentence, even though it is nonsensical. This is because a spell checker will only tell you if a word is right (i.e. whether it exists in its dictionary), not if it is the right word.

There are also problems with grammar checkers. For example, some grammar checkers will find fault with this sentence:

> Much of this work should be completed by the end of 2007.

Some grammar checkers will analyse this sentence and diagnose it as having problems with active and passive voice (see p. 15). The advice given may be to recast it to read:

> The end of 2007 should complete much of this work.

In this situation the grammar checker has confused the meanings of 'by' (agency versus its role as a time marker). But if we were not sure about grammar checkers or our command of grammar (and had a tendency to believe everything software programs told us), we might accept the advice and replace our initial, valid sentence with the nonsensical one.

Can we trust grammar checkers and spell checkers to analyse accurately English sentences and words? To a certain extent we can, despite certain shortcomings. They can be a useful means of drawing our attention to potential and actual errors in our work. There is, however, no substitute for the software between our ears; in fact, only by learning a bit about grammar, spelling, punctuation, style and usage can we make effective use of — rather than be made fools of by — grammar checkers and spell checkers.

In other words, we need skill in grammar and spelling simply to understand what checkers are telling us, and to know when to accept their recommendations and when to reject them.

Candidate for a Pullet Surprise
by Jerry Zar

I have a spelling checker.
It came with my PC.
It plane lee marks four my revue
Miss steaks aye can knot sea.

Eye ran this poem threw it,
Your sure reel glad two no.
Its vary polished in it's weigh.
My checker tolled me sew.

A checker is a bless sing,
It freeze yew lodes of thyme.
It helps me right awl stiles two reed,
And aides me when aye rime.

Each frays come posed up on my screen
Eye trussed too bee a joule.
The checker pours o'er every word
To cheque sum spelling rule.

Bee fore a veiling checkers
Hour spelling mite decline,
And if we're lacks oar have a laps,
We wood bee maid too wine.

Butt now bee cause my spelling
Is checked with such grate flare,
Their are know faults with in my cite,
Of nun eye am a wear.

Now spelling does knot phase me,
It does knot bring a tier.
My pay purrs awl due glad den
With wrapped words fare as hear.

To rite with care is quite a feet
Of witch won should bee proud,
And wee mussed dew the best wee can,
Sew flaws are knot aloud.

Sow ewe can sea why aye dew prays
Such soft wear four pea seas,
And why eye brake in two averse
Buy righting want too pleas.

Source: Zar (1994)

Grammar: what is it, and why should we bother?

Grammar: a system of rules (and exceptions to those rules) that reveals and structures meaning in language

Syntax: the pattern or sequence of words in sentences

Morphology: the shape or nature of words

Grammar is a system of rules (and exceptions to those rules) that reveals and structures meaning in language, and is made up of two things: **syntax** and **morphology**. Syntax is concerned with the pattern or sequence of words in sentences, while morphology, as the name suggests, is concerned with the shape or nature of words.

Thus, in the sentence:

> I gave my sister a sweater for her birthday.

I and *my* are different references to the one person, but are obviously different words. If more than one sweater was given, we would use the plural word *sweaters*, rather than the singular word '*sweater*'. That's morphology. *I* comes before *gave*, which is the conventional pattern in English of a subject or a doer of actions appearing before a verb. Similarly, most of us would agree that a sequence of words that runs *I my sister gave a sweater for birthday her* is not a valid sentence. That's syntax (adapted from Carter & McCarthy 2006, p. 1; see also Higginbotham, 2009).

Although bores and pedants may think otherwise, grammar is only a means to an end, and not an end in itself. If it doesn't help us to communicate more clearly, then we should leave it in a wasteland where it belongs. Fortunately, when used properly, grammar can help us to communicate more clearly and – more than that – it can help us communicate with style (see online chapter 3, 'Style'; see also Higginbotham 2009).

Tufte, for example, shows how grammatical concepts such as infinitive phrases and gerund phrases and adverbs are used in real examples of writing to create particular effects.

In the following sentences, Tufte's use of the infinitive of purpose (in the first sentence) has a unique dynamic, whereby the four infinitives help define a book's purpose; the second sentence introduces the use of gerund phrases in the subject position:

> We envision information in order *to reason about, communicate, document, and preserve that knowledge* — activities nearly always carried out on two-dimensional paper and computer screens. *Escaping this flatland* and *enriching the density of data displays* are the essential tasks of information design. (Edward Tufte, in V Tufte 2006, p. 74)

Often single adverbs (or adverbial phrases or clauses) serve admirably as sentence openers. It may be that as many as one-quarter of the sentences in English and American fiction begin with adverbial modifiers. These opening adverbials can then join with others to create effective links from one sentence to another and establish a thematic unity, as in this fictional passage about the boredom of a news writer:

> *When he was thirteen and a baseball zealot*, his sister had ridiculed his interest in baseball games by saying, 'They're all the same except for the score'. *At the time*, the remark had seemed to him symbolic of her deep feminine ignorance of what was truly important in life, but he *later* decided that she had aptly described not only baseball games but also political campaigns. (Calvin Trillin, in Tufte 2006, p. 96)

Grammar, however, is not the be-all and end-all of language. Crystal suggests that to get the full picture of communicating in English, we also need to look at vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation and the structure of discourse – the manner in which people express themselves, formally and informally, in speech as well as writing: 'There is much more to language than grammar' (Crystal 2006, p. 206). We will develop some of these concepts in the following

chapters, noting the overlaps and synergies, and not be distracted by the artificial divisions of chapters (and that's why there is such a lot of cross-referencing in this book). Samuel Butler, the British novelist, pointed out this need for the bigger picture a long time ago:

> The old saying of Buffon's that style is the man himself is as near the truth as we can get — but then most men mistake grammar for style, as they mistake correct spelling for words or schooling for education. (Butler 1903 [1964], p. 7)

We must also be careful of those who would create a 'moral panic' about grammar – seeing the decline of formal grammar teaching leading to the decline of civilisation itself (Cameron 1995, chapter 3). While much traditional grammar teaching was instructive and logical, much of it was also pedantic, sterile and linguistically and historically wrong (see the following section, descriptivism vs prescriptivism). Nevertheless, the partial or total abandonment of grammar teaching and learning was very much a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, or overkill (depending upon your taste in idiom or cliché – see online chapter 4).

Descriptivism versus prescriptivism

If we compare more than one dictionary when trying to define a word, we may detect slight differences. These differences should not surprise us unduly, as people who write dictionaries and grammars often disagree.

Descriptivism: an approach to language that describes actual usage, and does not attempt to make specific rules about the use of grammar for writing and discourse

Prescriptivism: an approach to language that describes an ideal or preferred usage and provides specific rules about grammar for writing and discourse

One of the chief differences among such writers is whether they adopt **descriptivism** or **prescriptivism**. Descriptivists, broadly speaking, are sceptical about a purely logical system of rules for grammar, and may approve the use of unsystematic grammar in writing or discourse. They may be sceptical about whether an obscene word should be excluded from a dictionary on the grounds that it offends good taste. They may also be sceptical about 'proper grammar usage' books. Descriptivists, who often work in the field of linguistics, prefer language as it is (as it is being used), not as some would like it to be or how others would prescribe it.

Perhaps descriptivists would count themselves among those who believe that grammar cannot or should not be taught, echoing the sentiments of a 1921 British Board of Education committee:

> It is impossible at the present juncture to teach English grammar in the schools for the simple reason that no-one knows exactly what it is. (quoted in Crystal 2006, p. 200)

Prescriptivists, by contrast, search for systematic rules for proper grammar usage. They may make arguments to exclude certain words from dictionaries on moral grounds or because the words are neologisms – new words that may stay in use, but equally may not. Prescriptivists tend to be found more in the fields of education and publishing. In the eyes of some descriptivists, perhaps prescriptivists are seen to *pro*scribe – to condemn or outlaw, rather than just prescribe.

In this book, we will try and steer a middle course between the two schools of thought (see online chapter 2).

It's only grammar, but we might get to like it – especially if we can learn about it in a fresh, practical and visual way. I hope you find that the rest of this chapter helps you do just that.

Starting at the beginning: the parts of speech

Just what are *verbs*, *nouns*, *adjectives* and *adverbs*? We use them every day, so let's begin to analyse them within a framework.

Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are parts of speech, or classes of words. There are eight of these classes (see table 1.1).

Table 1.1: The parts of speech

	Part of speech	Function	Example
1	**Nouns**	name people, places, things, qualities or concepts.	Smith, child, London, plateau, oil, sadness, freedom, evil
2	**Verbs**	express action or being.	fly, transmit, be, appear
3	**Pronouns**	substitute for nouns and function as nouns.	I, me, myself, mine, they, she, yours
4	**Adjectives**	describe, qualify or modify nouns or pronouns.	far, pleasant, total
5	**Adverbs**	modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs or groups of words.	loudly, here, later
6	**Prepositions**	show relationships between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence.	across, on, during
7	**Conjunctions**	link words and groups of words.	and, but, because
8	**Interjections**	express feelings or attitudes.	Wow! Hey! I say

Noun: a word that names a person, place, thing, quality or concept

Verb: a word that expresses action or being

Adjective: a word that describes, qualifies, or modifies a noun or pronoun

Adverb: a word that modifies a verb, adjective, other adverb or group of words

Pronoun: a word that substitutes for a noun

Preposition: a word that shows a relationship between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence

Conjunction: a word that links words and groups of words

Interjection: a word that expresses feelings or attitudes

Don't let these terms frighten or confuse you. Grammar has its own jargon, and these terms are just names of the building blocks of expression. Before too long you will be using them with ease.

These eight categories are not mutually exclusive: words can appear in different categories or classes. Remember, *the part of speech of a word in a sentence is determined by how the word functions in that sentence.*

For example, consider these groups of sentences:

1. (a) She's moving *out* today.
   (b) When I came home, the lights were *out*.
   (c) *Out*! And don't come back!
   (d) What's my *out* if things go wrong?
   (e) He fell *out* the window.
   (f) The truth will *out*.
2. (a) I'll get around to it *one* day.
   (b) It was the voice of *one* crying in the wilderness.
   (c) We'll stop for lunch at *one*.
3. (a) I got *neither* the gift nor the card.
   (b) I like *neither* of them.
   (c) *Neither* statement was true.
   (d) I was not happy and *neither* were they.
4. (a) That much food will only *last* you two days.
   (b) I was the *last* to leave.
   (c) I came *last* in the race.
   (d) They might just be famous *last* words.
5. (a) It's your *go*.
   (b) All systems are *go*.
   (c) I'll *go* when I want to.
6. (a) Ten voted *for*, and eleven against.
   (b) Let me carry that bag *for* you.
   (c) I won't drink, *for* I dislike alcohol.

Notice how in table 1.2 (the word-class matrix) the function of a word in a sentence controls what part of speech that word will be classified as.

Table 1.2: Word-class matrix

Word	Sentence	Noun	Pronoun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb	Preposition	Conjunction	Interjection
Out	She's moving *out* today.					■			
	When I came home, the lights were *out.*				■				
	Out! And don't come back!								■
	What's my *out* if things go wrong?	■							
	He fell *out* the window.						■		
	The truth will *out.*			■					
One	I'll get around to it *one* day.				■				
	It was the voice of *one* crying in the wilderness.		■						
	We'll stop for lunch at *one.*	■							
Neither	I got *neither* the gift nor the card.							■	
	I like *neither* of them.		■						

Table 1.2 (*continued*)

Word	Sentence	Noun	Pronoun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb	Preposition	Conjunction	Interjection
Neither *(contd)*	*Neither* statement was true.				■				
	I was not happy and *neither* were they.					■			
Last	That much food will only *last* you two days.			■					
	I was the *last* to leave.	■							
	I came *last* in the race.					■			
	They might just be famous *last* words.				■				
Go	It's your *go*.	■							
	All systems are *go*.				■				
	I'll *go* when I want to.			■					
For	Let me carry that bag *for* you.						■		
	Ten voted *for*, and eleven against.					■			
	I won't drink, *for* I dislike alcohol.							■	

Homonym: a word that is spelt and pronounced the same, but has a different meaning and performs a different syntactic function

Such words are known as **homonyms** – they are spelt and pronounced the same, but have different meanings and perform different syntactic functions (as distinct from homographs, homophones and heterophones, see online chapter 2).

Awareness of homonyms can help us analyse and resolve ambiguities in sentences, such as *Visiting relatives can be boring* (Chomsky, 1965).

Article: a, an and the. Articles behave like adjectives and are also known as determiners

The words *a*, *an* and *the* are called **articles** or determiners. They behave like adjectives. *A* and *an* are called indefinite articles because they refer to or modify nouns that are unknown to the reader or listener, while *the* is called the definite article, because it refers to nouns already known to the reader or listener (Fowler & Aaron 2007).

William Cobbett, in his 1818 *Grammar of the English Language*, classified articles as the ninth part of speech, in addition to the eight we have just considered.

Currently, many linguists regard articles as being a subset of a class of words known as determiners. Traditionally regarded as adjectives, many determiners are still defined that way in most dictionaries.

The Longman Dictionary, the only dictionary thus far to regard determiners as a discrete word class or part of speech, defines a determiner as 'a word that is used before a noun in order to show which thing you mean. In the phrases "the car" and "some cars", "the" and "some" are determiners'.

Determiner: a word that is used before a noun in order to show which thing you mean

The **determiners** in English are:

> a/an, all, another, any, both, each, either, enough, every, (a) few, fewer, fewest, half, (a) little, less, least, many, more, most, my, your, his, Jim's (etc.), no, one (numeral), two, three (etc.), some, such, several, the, this, that, these, those, what (interrogative), what (quantitative), what, such (exclamative), which, whose.

Source: Carter & McCarthy 2006, p. 187 (see also Troyka & Hesse 2007, 184–185).

It is useful to further define word classes or parts of speech as open-class words, which contain lexical words, and closed-class words, which contain grammatical words. Open class means just that – lexical words that are theoretically infinite in number (i.e. they can be added to); closed class means – grammatical words that are finite in number (i.e. they cannot be added to).

Table 1.3: Lexical words (open-class words) and grammatical words (closed-class words)

Open class	Closed class
Nouns (*bicycle, joy, Joe*) Verbs (*arrive, jump, be*) Adjectives (*quick, beautiful, contrary*) Adverbs formed from adjectives (*quickly, beautifully, contrariwise*)	Pronouns (*she, herself, her, hers*) Conjunctions (*and, but, unless*) Prepositions (*down, in, across*) Adverbs not formed from adjectives (*then, there, very*) Interjections (*oh, dear me, alas!*) Determiners (*a, the, several*) Auxiliaries (*must, might, would*)

Sources: Adapted from Carter and McCarthy (2006, p. 621) and Barber (2000, pp. 21–2).

Verbs, nouns, subjects and predicates

Verbs are words that express action or being. Verbs work with nouns and pronouns to form the basic structure of all sentences.

Consider for example these basic sentences:

Fish swim.

She disagrees.

The telephone rang.

We can analyse these sentences thus:

Noun/Pronoun	Verb
Fish (noun)	swim.
She (pronoun)	disagrees.
(The) telephone (noun)	rang.

These sentences are making simple statements about people or things – telling us what happened. When something or someone swims, disagrees or rings, action occurs. Not surprisingly, these verbs are known as *action* verbs. The other verbs we need to know about at this stage are those that do not show action but show being or appearance, such as *be*, *seem*, *appear* and *become*. These are known as *being* verbs.

Verbs tell us about nouns (or pronouns). With nouns they make up the key parts of the two sections of most sentences, known as the **subject** and the **predicate**.

Subject: the subject of a sentence names the person, place, thing, quality or concept about which something is being said (i.e. what the sentence is about)

Predicate: the predicate of a sentence says something about the person, place, thing, quality or concept named in the subject

Subject	Predicate
The caterpillar	ate.
Johnny	turned the wheel.
Anger	grew in their hearts.
The doctor	gave the injection.
The model alien spacecraft	exploded loudly and convincingly.

At this stage we need to note that:

- the subject of a sentence names the person, place, thing, quality or concept about which something is being said (i.e. what the sentence is about).
- the predicate of a sentence says something about the person, place, thing, quality or concept named in the subject.
- a complete sentence requires both a subject and a predicate.

- the key part of a subject is a noun (or pronoun).
- the key part of a predicate is a verb – but not, as we shall soon see, just any kind of verb.

Subject–verb agreement

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Check subject–verb agreement	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

Person: a three-part system of singular or plural noun–verb and pronoun–verb combinations, helping readers or listeners to clarify the source of speech or writing. The distinction is between first person (the person or people speaking or writing), second person (the person or thing addressed), and third person (the person, people or thing spoken of or written about).

Verbs change according to **person** and number, as shown in table 1.4.

Table 1.4: Verbs: number and person

		Number	
		Singular	Plural
Person	First	I	We
	Second	You	You
	Third	He, she, it, the people	They, the people

The first person (singular and plural) relates to the person speaking or writing. The pronouns *I* and *we* are the only subjects that occur in the first person.

The second person (singular and plural) refers to the person who is being spoken or written to. In English, the same pronoun, *you*, is used for both the singular and plural. This pronoun is the only subject that occurs in the second person. The third person is the person(s) or thing(s) being spoken about. Nouns and a wide variety of pronouns can be used for subjects in the third person.

Nouns that form their plurals in a regular way do so by the simple addition of *s* or *es*. Exceptions to this rule are nouns that form their plurals by means of internal changes (*child*/*children*, *goose*/*geese*), and nouns that have the same form for singular and plural (*fish*/*fish*, *deer*/*deer*).

Verbs in the present tense form their third person singular forms by adding *s* or *es*.

The bird eats. The birds eat.
The large golden eagle flies. The large golden eagles fly.

Words and word groups can distract the eye and ear when we are trying to ensure agreement between subject and verb:

No: A package of pens, printer paper, staples and paper clips were on my desk.
There is only one package (subject), irrespective of how many objects it contains, so the verb must be singular.

Yes: A package of pens, printer paper, staples and paper clips was on my desk.

No: The work team members, together with their team leader, was angry at the announced salary cut.
The real subject (team members) is plural, so the verb must be plural.

Yes: The work team members, together with their team leader, were angry at the announced salary cut.

You? Thou? Youse? You-all?

If we are considering subject–verb agreement, why then do we not say *you is* (singular pronoun–singular verb) when we are speaking to one person only? About 800 years ago, in what is usually called the Middle English era *you* in fact was plural, while *thou* was singular. *Thou* gradually fell out of use, which both simplified and complicated matters of agreement. It is one of the 'missing niches' of English, presenting usage problems, like *whose*, formally classified as the possessive form of *who*, but is paradoxically applied to animate ('the girl whose ears were big') and inanimate ('the building whose windows were broken') references, and the violation of agreement in subjunctive mood ('if you [singular] were [plural] able to . . .').

It is interesting to note that throughout the English-speaking world, users of non-standard vernacular or dialect language have devised 'unofficial' terms to express plurality in second-person pronouns:

Common usage new plural	Geographical location
Y'all/you-all	US: Mainly southern, African–American vernacular English
You guys	US: Midwest, Northeast, West Coast US
Youse	Scotland, Northern England, Australia, New Zealand

Sources: Adapted from Jochnowitz 1983 and Rios 2004.

Verbs again: transitive and intransitive verbs

Take a simple word such as *breathe*. Consider these sentences:

Now I can breathe.

I just want to breathe some fresh air.

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Object of a verb	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

The first sentence is fine the way it is: we do not need to know what is being breathed to complete the meaning of the sentence. In the second sentence the meaning is completed by knowing what is being breathed. The phrase 'some fresh air' is called the **direct object**.

Direct object: a word or group of words that receives the action of a verb

Verbs that need a direct object to complete their meaning are called **transitive verbs** (the word *transitive* means *passing over*, and is related to the words *transit* and *transient*). Verbs that do not need a direct object to complete their meaning are called **intransitive verbs**.

Transitive verb: a verb that needs a direct object to complete its meaning

Some verbs are purely transitive and some are purely intransitive, while others can be both (table 1.5).

Intransitive verb: a verb that does not need a direct object to complete its meaning

Table 1.5: Verbs: transitive and intransitive

Intransitive only	Transitive only	Both transitive and intransitive
complain	mortgage	breathe
disappear	betray	read
arrive	describe	run
rise	blame	shoot
faint	resent	leave
fast	bring	build
fall	break	rotate
die	control	change
apologise	curtail	arrange
struggle	harass	write

Note that only transitive verbs can show active or passive voice (see p. 1.22).

The concepts of transitive and intransitive verbs and direct objects help us to expand our understanding of the idea of the subject and predicate making up a sentence:

Subject	**Predicate**	
	Transitive verb	**Direct object**
He	broke	it.
Jenna	controlled	the situation.
I	resented	her interference.
The children	blamed	their parents.

Subject	**Predicate**	
	Intransitive verb	
Ben	rose	late.
She	apologised	for their behaviour.
I	faint	at the sight of blood.
Wilde	died	in poverty.

Notice that with transitive verbs, action occurs to something or someone: it is possible to break, control, resent and blame something or someone. In contrast, it is not possible to rise, apologise, faint or die (as opposed to dye) something or someone. The test is to take the action of the verb and place it in a question with *what* or *who*:

Verb	**Who/what question**	**Meaningful answer**	**Answer**	**Verb type**
broke	broke what/who?	yes	it	VT
rose	rose who/what?	no	—	VI
controlled	controlled who/what?	yes	the situation	VT
apologised	apologised who/what?	no	—	VI
resented	resented who/what?	yes	interference	VT
faint	faint who/what?	no	—	VI
blamed	blamed who/what?	yes	their parents	VT
died	died who/what?	no	—	VI

ASSESS YOURSELF

Classify these verbs into transitive (VT), intransitive (VI), or both transitive and intransitive (VI/VT). Use a dictionary if needed.

complete type discover strive exist conceal

choke fix create capitulate argue

T	VI	VT/VI

Linking and auxiliary verbs

We have been dealing with action verbs. What about 'being' verbs? 'Being' verbs are the forms of the verb 'to be':

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
The auxiliary verb is usually followed by a participle, not am.	Rule Ignore Rule Change

is am be was were been being are shall be will be shall have been will have been

However, 'being' verbs also include:

remain seem become smell grow taste sound make

'Being' verbs cannot have a direct object – there is nothing to 'carry over' to something else. Therefore, they cannot be transitive.

'Being' verbs also cannot form a predicate on their own – other words are required. Consequently, 'being' verbs play the role of **linking verbs**. Such linking verbs (also known as copulative verbs) serve to rename or describe the subject of a sentence by linking it with a noun or adjective in the predicate.

Linking verb: verbs that rename or describe a sentence subject by linking it with a noun or adjective in the predicate

Such a noun or adjective is known as a subject complement:

Subject	Predicate		
Subject	**Linking verb**	**Subject complement**	**Subject complement type**
She	was	supervisor.	Predicate noun
She	was	angry.	Predicate adjective
The building	became	rubble.	Predicate noun
The building	looked	attractive.	Predicate adjective
Spot the dog	remained	the leader.	Predicate noun
Spot the dog	remained	hungry.	Predicate adjective

Auxiliary verb: a verb that works with other verbs to show variations in tense or time and to form questions

Another group of verbs, different from finite, non-finite and linking verbs are known as **auxiliary** or helping verbs. These include the verb *to be*, and other verbs that include:

shall should will would can could do did may must might have has had

These verbs work with other verbs to show variations in tense or time and to form questions.

I should reject their offer when it comes.

Should I reject their offer when it comes?

He could have gone later.

Maria might have only scratched it.

In such sentences, the verb being helped by the auxiliary or helping verb is known as the main verb.

Indirect objects and object complements

We have learned earlier about transitive verbs and direct objects, and linking (being) verbs and subject complements, and their role in forming sentences. We need now to acquaint ourselves with some other parts of the sentence, namely indirect objects and object complements.

Indirect objects

We have learned so far that basic sentences are structured to form:

I read books.

I = subject

read = verb

books = direct object

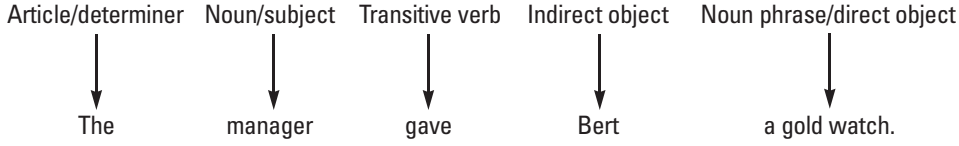
read books = predicate.

Read, in this instance, is behaving as a transitive verb (a transitive verb is a verb that has a direct impact upon a person or thing in the predicate, whereas an intransitive verb does not have a direct impact upon a person or thing in the predicate).

Now consider this sentence:

The manager gave Bert a gold watch.

Manager is the subject, *gave* is the verb, *a gold watch* is the direct object, the predicate is *gave Bert a gold watch*, but what function does Bert perform? The proper noun 'Bert' is here an indirect object:



The direct object completes the meaning of a transitive verb – it tells us what about the verb.

Gave what? – a gold watch.

The indirect object names the person or thing affected by the action of the verb (it answers the question *to whom?* or the question *for whom?* about the verb).

Gave the gold watch to whom? – *to Bert.*

Let's look at some other examples of this type of sentence:

Subject	Predicate		
	Verb	**Indirect object (answers question 'to/for whom?')**	**Direct object (answers question 'what?')**
She	gave	the old man	directions.
I	told	her	the truth.
The heroic general	gave	his troops	his opinion.

Object complements

When we were considering transitive verbs earlier, we looked at direct objects. We should now be familiar with both direct objects and indirect objects in sentences.

We know that there are verbs of action and being, and transitive and intransitive verbs are action verbs.

When we were looking at being verbs earlier, we saw that such verbs: *be, remain, seem, sound*, and so on, cannot form predicates on their own, because they cannot be transitive (they cannot have a direct object). Such verbs act as linking verbs with subject complements that link sentence subjects to the description following:

Subject	Predicate		
	Linking verb	Subject complement	Subject complement type
She	was	supervisor.	Predicate noun
She	was	angry.	Predicate adjective

The direct object of an action verb can also take a complement, which is known as an object complement. This object complement can complete the meaning of the direct object.

Subject	Predicate		
	Transitive verb	Direct object	Object complement
She	considered	the exam	useless.
The people	elected	him	president.
Christmas time	makes	children	happy.

ASSESS YOURSELF

Sentence parts:

Consider the sentences below and identify the italicised words as: direct object (DO), indirect object (IO), subject complement (SC), or object complement (OC).

1. She was *unhappy.*
2. I considered her *a friend.*
3. She offered him *a promotion.*
4. She offered *him* a promotion.

Verbs: mood

When most of us use the word 'mood' we usually mean a state of mind or an emotion. The same word also has a technical meaning in grammar, describing attitudes towards action or intention.

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Use the subjunctive	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

Mood: a characteristic of verbs, showing attitudes towards action or intention. There are three moods: indicative, subjunctive and imperative.

There are three **moods** as shown in table 1.6:

Table 1.6: Mood and verbs

Mood	Indicative	Imperative	Subjunctive
Function	Used to make a statement or ask a question	Used to give commands and make requests	Used to express a desire, wish or plan that may be unlikely or at least conditional
Features	This is the most common mood.	Active voice verbs prominent	Subject–verb agreement patterns changed
Examples	I typed the letter. Are you speaking?	Type that letter now. Please speak at the meeting. Speak!	If I were you, I would type it up before she arrives. The board has asked that he speak to the members.

Mood is an important concept in many languages, but over time it has become less important in English. No great breakdowns in communication will occur if you do not grasp the intricacies of mood, so it is not as important as some of the concepts we are considering in this chapter. Mood, however, can be useful for creating subtleties in our communication. For example:

- an overly aggressive person may overuse the imperative, and perhaps should consider using the indicative or subjunctive more often in order to appear less abrasive.
- an overly passive person who fears confrontation, and is not assertive enough, may overuse the subjunctive, and perhaps should consider using the indicative or even the imperative to make a point.
- a person wishing to persuade others of a difficult course of action should perhaps consider using the subjunctive to present a 'softer' style of expression (compare with the 'tactful passive' on page 1.23).

Verbs: finite and non-finite

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Usually followed by a gerund (*-ing* form) not an infinitive	Rule Ignore Rule Change

When is a verb not a verb? When it is an adjective or a noun. How is this possible? Well, to start with, consider the following groups of words:

I cook
I cooked
I have cooked
cooked meals
I am cooking
cooking class
cooking is fun
To cook is a real skill.

I write
I wrote
I have written
written remarks
I was writing
writing assignment
Do you find writing difficult?
They want you to write.

The 'cook' and 'write' sequences are examples of the two major verb structures in English: *regular* and *irregular*. Irregular verbs, such as *write*, are also known as strong verbs. These are verbs that show changes in form by vowel changes, and are remnants of the Germanic origins of English. There are about 250 irregular verbs in English. Regular verbs, also known as weak verbs, such as *cook*, use suffixes like *ed* or *ing* to change in form.

Why is English so logical and so illogical?

English is historically the language of England. England was originally Celtic in culture and language. Britain was invaded by the Romans in 55 BC, and by the time the Romans left in AD 410 there was considerable Latin influence in the language and culture. Germanic tribes (Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians) invaded from AD 450, and Christians under St Augustine arrived in AD 597. Scandinavian tribes invaded from AD 750, and the descendants of Scandinavians living in the north of France (Normans = Norsemen) invaded in 1066. English is thus an amalgam of different language traditions.

This is how English changed, for example, between AD 1000 and AD 1750 (samples of the Bible, Luke 2:10) (adapted from Clarke 1967, pp. 14–15)

Anglo-Saxon (AD 1000)	Middle English (AD 1380)	Modern English (AD 1750)
And so engel him to cwaeth, Nelle ge eow adraedan; sothlice nu! Ic eow bodie mycelne gefean, se bith eallum folce.	And the aungel seide to hem, Nyle ye drede; lo! sothli I euangelise to you a grete ioye, that schal be to al peple.	And the angel said to them: Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy that shall be to all the people.

Early English was an inflected language; for example, tense or time variation was shown through vowel changes (*ring, rang, rung*), and case (see p. 1.31) was important. This meant that word order was not crucial, as word endings would determine just what was happening in a sentence. Case, mood and grammatical gender decayed over time, simplifying the language, but bringing with it problems such as ambiguity caused by pronoun reference (see p. 1.35) and subject–verb agreement (see p. 1.11).

Modern-day spelling is sometimes difficult to understand for people learning English, as words do not always appear to be phonetic; that is, words are sometimes pronounced differently from what their spellings might suggest. This is sometimes because words are living fossils, preserving original pronunciations and/or spellings, but obscuring the meaning. For example, *Wednesday* preserves a meaning from the Scandinavian period of *Woden's Day*, Woden being an Anglo-Saxon variant of Odin, the Scandinavian supreme god. Over time, the full pronunciation of *Woden's Day* has been smoothed back to the sound we know today, but the written record still preserves the original value (see Crystal 2003; Bragg 2003).

Modern variations in spelling (e.g. US versus British spellings) can also be partly explained by looking at the history of the language. (See online chapter 2, page 2.38.)

Finite verb: the form of the verb that is limited in number, person and tense

The simple, base, plain or dictionary forms of the verbs are *cook* and *write*. These are also known as **finite verbs**. This form will always be the first entry in the dictionary definition of a particular verb.

Simple/base form	I cook	I write
Past tense	I cooked	I wrote

The simple form is known as a finite (or 'finished') verb because it is limited or finite in relation to person, number and tense (or time). This simply means that the verb changes according to the subject it is relating to.

Non-finite verb: the form of the verb that is not limited in number, person and tense

The fact that finite verbs have subjects differentiates them from **non-finite verbs** (also known as verbals or unfinished verbs), which do not. There are five types of non-finite verb: past participle, perfect participle, present participle, gerund and infinitive.

These are called non-finite verbs because they are not limited by subject, person, number or tense. In fact, unless they are given some help, they are not true verbs at all. Non-finite verbs can be part of the subject or predicate of a sentence or clause. To repeat, non-finite verbs do not have a subject.

Inflections: suffixes and vowel changes that add grammatical restrictions to word classes such as nouns and verbs

This distinction is sometimes difficult to grasp, but keep in mind this simple rule: finite verbs carry **inflections**; for example, they can take an *s* to show agreement with a subject in the third person singular in the present tense: *I walk* (first person), *you walk* (second person), *she walks* (third person). Inflections add grammatical restrictions to word classes such as nouns and verbs. Non-finite verbs or verbals do not carry inflections.

Table 1.7: Non-finite verbs or verbals

	Examples	
Past participle + auxiliary	I have cooked	I have written
Past participle	cooked meals	written remarks
Perfect participle	Having cooked	Having written
Present participle	cooking class	writing assignment
Present participle + auxiliary	I am cooking	I was writing
Gerund	Cooking is fun	Do you find writing difficult?
Infinitive	To cook is a real skill	They want you to write

A participle is a form of a verb that requires an auxiliary or helping verb (e.g. *shall*, *can*, *could*, *have*) to form particular tenses, and by itself usually functions as an adjective. For example, cooked in cooked meals is an adjective, not a verb:

cooked (adjective) meals (noun)

The past participle needs an auxiliary or helping verb to form passive voice constructions. The perfect participle is formed by simply combining with the past participle:

Having typed the letter, she went home.

Having spoken her mind, she felt more at ease.

Perfect participles usually appear in longer phrases, and behave like adjectives, modifying or telling us about the subject of the sentence.

The present participle is formed by adding the suffix *ing* to the plain or base form of the verb:

Her *cooking* class was full of interesting people.

The *writing* assignment was due on Friday.

The present participle functions as an adjective. It can only become a verb with the assistance of an auxiliary or helping verb, and when this occurs, it forms the progressive forms of the tenses (*was cooking*, *am cooking*, *will be cooking*, etc.).

The gerund is merely the present participle taking off its adjective hat and putting on its noun hat:

> *Cooking* is something I really should study more.
>
> *Writing* is an art I am gradually mastering.

The infinitive is formed by adding *to* to the plain or base form of the verb:

> To *cook* is a real skill.
>
> They want you to *write*.

Non-finite and finite verbs are vital to our understanding of just what is a phrase, a clause, a sentence and a sentence fragment.

Finite or non-finite? How can you tell?
You can tell the status of a verb-like construction by applying two tests (see Fowler & Aaron 2007, p. 248):

Test 1: Does the word require a change in form when a third-person subject changes from singular to plural?
Yes = finite verb: she *writes*, they *write*.
No = non-finite verb: woman *writing*, women *writing*.

Test 2: Does the word require a change in form to show the difference in present, past and future?
Yes = finite verb: she *writes*, she *wrote*, she *will write*.
No = non-finite verb: the woman *writing* is/was/will be an awkward stylist.

So what's a split infinitive, and why is it such a big deal?

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Try to avoid splitting the infinitive	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

The infinitive, as we have just seen, is a non-finite verb form or verbal. It is the *to* form of a verb, for example *to go*, *to think*, *to be*. To split an infinitive is to put one or more modifiers between the *to* and the verb:

> To further complicate matters, she arrived soon after.
>
> I want you to completely and unflinchingly eliminate these pests.
>
> I will tell her to not go.

Some language stylists argue that infinitives should never be split, but that is probably an extreme view. English language expert W. M. Fowler describes the dilemma this way:

> The English-speaking world may be divided into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know and condemn; (4) those who know and approve; and (5) those who know and distinguish . . . Those who neither know nor care are the vast majority, and are a happy folk, to be envied by most of the minority classes . . . We will split infinitives rather than be ambiguous or artificial. (Fowler 1990 [1926], p. 579)

Split infinitive: an infinitive construction with a modifier placed between the *to* stem and the verb (e.g. *to boldly go*)

Split infinitives rarely result in ambiguities, but they can sometimes make your sentences sound clumsy. In some sentences, however, it may be better to leave the infinitive split rather than create a clumsy rhythm or an ambiguity:

> I want you to strenuously pursue the option of meditating.

If we place the adverb *strenuously* after the infinitive, it sounds clumsy, and if we place it after the gerund, it sounds ambiguous. Consider also:

> We hope to aggressively lobby uncommitted delegates entering the room.

If we try to reposition *aggressively*, we change the meaning of the sentence.

Problems can also arise if a very long modifying sequence of words is placed between the *to* and the verb:

> I want you to without any delay and any kind of lily-livered second-guessing or beating about the bush or quibbling over trivialities inform the writers of their responsibilities.

Here, the reader or listener may well become confused about what the real meaning is, and it is therefore justifiable to recast the sentence to avoid a split infinitive.

More verbs: active and passive voice

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Passive voice — consider revising	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

Consider these two sentences:

> Gerry faxed the data.
>
> The data was faxed by Gerry.

Voice: a property of verbs that shows us if the subject of a sentence is acting (**active voice**) or is acted upon (**passive voice**). Transitive verbs show voice, but intransitive verbs do not.

The first sentence features a verb in the active **voice**, while the second features a verb in the passive voice.

A verb in the active voice is one whose subject performs the action in a sentence. A verb in the passive voice is one whose subject is *acted upon*, or receives the action done by the verb.

Only transitive verbs (those taking a direct object) can be changed from active to passive voice. In passive voice sentences the person or thing performing the action often appears as the object of the preposition *by*, but is sometimes omitted altogether in the impersonal or agentless passive. Passive voice sentences use a form of *be* with the past participle of the main verb.

Table 1.8: Active and passive voice

Passive voice	Impersonal or agentless passive	Active voice
Your car will be repaired by our mechanics.	Your car will be repaired.	Our mechanics will repair your car.
The reply will be written by Barry.	The reply will be written.	Barry will write the reply.
The passive voice should be used by you sparingly.	The passive voice should be used sparingly.	You should use the passive voice sparingly.

There are a few particular circumstances where the passive voice is preferable to the active voice. It is useful, for example, when the actor or subject of a sentence is unknown, or is relatively unimportant:

The dinosaurs were eliminated from the face of the earth.

These cartons are delivered daily.

The 'tactful passive' can also be used where a speaker or writer decides that an active voice may be too confrontational in a particular situation:

Tactful passive	Confrontational active
This letter will (may) need to be revised (by you).	You will need to revise this letter.

From a style consideration, the passive voice is sometimes preferred in academic and scientific or technical prose, although conventions are changing all the time (see online chapter 6).

In most circumstances, however, it is preferable to use the active rather than the passive voice. Active voice sentences are shorter, more direct and more personal.

There is also the perception that use of passive voice, particularly the impersonal passive, is in fact use of the 'pussyfooting passive' or 'evasive passive'; that is, that the passive voice suggests that the truth is being concealed and accountability is being avoided:

Evasive passive	Direct active
Mistakes have been made/appear to have been made with your account.	We have made mistakes with your account.
A lie has not been told. It was chopped down with my/an axe.	I cannot tell a lie. I chopped it down with my axe.

ASSESS YOURSELF

Change these passive voice sentences into active voice, and active voice sentences into passive voice.

(a) My job has been quitted by me.
(b) You must treat this client with kid gloves.
(c) It is believed to be the truth.
(d) You should try to reach a conclusion sooner in this document.
(e) All contestants should be told of these dangers.

Phrases, clauses, sentences, sentence fragments and appositives

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Sentence fragment	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

To understand what a sentence fragment is, we need to know what a sentence is. To know what a sentence is, we need to know about phrases and clauses. Words, phrases, clauses and sentences are related in an inverse pyramid fashion (figure 1.2).

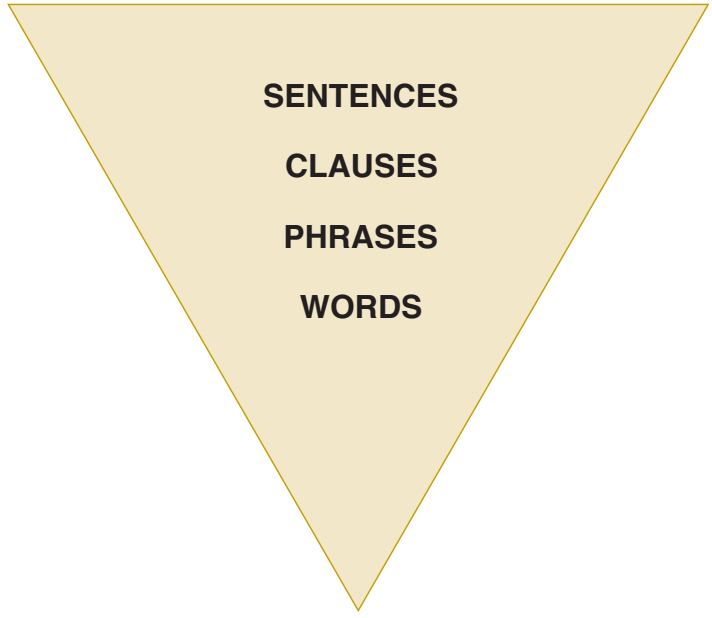


Figure 1.2: Relationships between words, phrases, clauses and sentences

Phrases, clauses, sentences, sentence fragments and appositives are examined on the following pages.

Phrases

Phrase: a group of two or more related words that lacks either a subject or a predicate or both

A **phrase** is a group of two or more related words that lacks either a subject or a predicate or both. A phrase may contain a verb, but the verb will be a non-finite one (infinitive, gerund, present participle, past participle).

Table 1.9: Phrase types

Phrase type	Example	Composition	Analysis
Noun	*The child's bicycle* lay on the ground.	Noun (can also take an article/determiner and an adjective)	Functions as the subject of a verb. Some grammarians classify a single-word noun or pronoun as a noun phrase.

Phrase type	Example	Composition	Analysis
Noun	On the ground lay *the child's bicycle*.	Noun (can also take an article/determiner and an adjective)	Functions as the object of a verb. Some grammarians classify a single-word noun or pronoun as a noun phrase.
Verb	I *can climb* that tree.	Verb (can also take an auxiliary verb)	Functions as main part of sentence predicate. Some grammarians classify a single-word verb as a verb phrase.
Prepositional	I cooked *on that hotplate*.	Preposition plus object plus any modifiers	Functions as an adverb, modifying verbs, adjectives or adverbs (here, *cooked)*
	I like the hotplate *above the oven*.	Preposition plus object plus any modifiers	Functions as an adjective, modifying nouns or pronouns (here, *hotplate*)
Participial	*Swimming in the deep end*, he felt nervous.	Present participle (*ing* form of verb) plus its modifiers and/or its object	Functions as an adjective, modifying nouns or pronouns (here, *he*, the sentence subject)
	Written in pencil, the warning went unheeded.	Past participle (*ed* form of regular verbs; various forms of irregular verbs) plus modifiers and/or its object)	Functions as an adjective, modifying nouns or pronouns (here, *warning*, the sentence subject)
Gerund	*Cooking on the barbecue* is his favourite pastime.	Gerund *(ing* form of verb) plus its modifiers and/or its object	Functions as a noun (here, subject of the verb *is*)
	His favourite pastime is *cooking on the barbecue*.		Functions as a noun (here, object of the verb *is*)
Infinitive	*To fly to Mars* is my dream.	Infinitive plus modifiers and/or its object	Functions as a noun (here, subject of the verb *is*)
Absolute	*Cooking oils at the ready*, she launched into preparing the new recipe.	Noun or pronoun plus participle plus modifiers	Modifies entire sentence; contains a subject (here, *oils*)

Clauses

We know now that a phrase is a group of two or more related words that lacks either a subject or a predicate or both. A phrase may contain a verb, but the verb will be a non-finite one (infinitive, gerund, present participle, past participle).

Clause: a group of two or more related words that contains both a subject and a predicate

A **clause** is the next most complex building block used when constructing sentences. A clause is a group of two or more related words that contains both a subject and a predicate. A clause contains a finite verb.

There are two types of clauses: *independent* clauses and *dependent* clauses. An independent or main clause is a self-contained unit of meaning:

I like rock

You prefer jazz

An independent clause can stand as a sentence by itself. Independent clauses can also be linked by conjunctions (e.g. *and*, *but*) to form sentences:

I like rock, but you prefer jazz.

The structure of this sentence is fairly clear:

Subject	Predicate		Conjunction	Subject	Predicate	
	finite verb	*object*			*finite verb*	*object*
I	like	rock,	but	you	prefer	jazz.

The independent clauses are sentences within the sentence, or *embedded* sentences.

A dependent clause or subordinate clause, on the other hand, is not self-contained because it is not 'finished':

Although you can't stand that type of music

To work properly within a sentence, a dependent clause needs an independent clause:

I like rock, although you can't stand that type of music.

We can often tell whether a clause is a particular type of dependent clause, or indeed whether it is an independent clause, by the words used to link it to other parts of a sentence (table 1.10).

Table 1.10: Connecting words

Connector type	Examples	Function	Examples in sentences
Coordinating conjunctions	For, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (FANBOYS)	Join two or more grammatically equivalent units	
	and, but, nor, or, yet	Join any two or more grammatically equivalent units	Jack and Jill on your feet or on your knees working with them yet despising them

Connector type	Examples	Function	Examples in sentences
Correlative conjunctions	Both . . . and either . . . or neither . . . nor not only . . . but also	Join two grammatically equivalent units; work in pairs	both black and white neither up nor down She was not only working with him but also seeing him socially.
Subordinate conjunctions	after, although, as, because, before, even if, provided that, since, though, unless, until, when, while	Begin certain (adverbial) dependent clauses	although you can't stand that type of music unless you finish
Relative pronouns	who, whose, whom, whoever, whomever, which, that, what, whatever	Begin certain dependent clauses	who are absent which is part of the higher rental rate
Conjunctive adverbs	accordingly, also, anyhow, anyway, besides, consequently, furthermore, hence, however, indeed, meanwhile, similarly, still, therefore, thus	Link independent clauses only Usually follow a semicolon	His plans for the robbery were now clear; therefore, we had no choice but to arrest him.

Such linking words can help us identify what kind of dependent clauses we are dealing with. Two types of dependent clauses are adverb and adjective clauses.

Table 1.11: Some types of dependent clauses

Dependent clause type	Example	Composition	Analysis
Adverb clause			Modifies verbs, adverbs, adjectives, independent clauses Tells us when, where, why, how, under what conditions, with what result, etc.
	They danced *while the band played*.	Begins with subordinate conjunction	Modifies verb *danced*
	Turn it up *when I say so*.	Begins with subordinate conjunction	Modifies adverb *up*
	She was angry *because he was laughing*.	Begins with subordinate conjunction	Modifies adjective *angry*
	Although he didn't like jazz, he listened to her records.	Begins with subordinate conjunction	Modifies entire independent clause *he listened to her records*.

Table 1.11 *(continued)*

Dependent clause type	Example	Composition	Analysis
Adjective clause			Modifies nouns, pronouns tells us who or what
	The boy whose *name was called* stepped forward.	Begins with relative pronoun, which relates to antecedent in independent clause	Modifies noun *boy*
	I'll unmask her, *whoever she is*.	Begins with relative pronoun, which relates to antecedent in independent clause	Modifies pronoun *her*

Sentences and sentence fragments

In online chapter 3, we will consider three different models of sentences:

1. simple/compound/complex/compound-complex
2. declarative/interrogative/imperative/exclamative
3. left-branching/mid-branching/balanced/right branching.

For the moment, however, it is enough to consolidate what we have learned so far and define what a sentence is and what a sentence is not.

Sentence: a group of words that has a subject and a finite verb. It is punctuated by a capital letter at its beginning and by some form of end punctuation.

A **sentence** is a group of words that:

- has a subject
- has a finite verb
- is punctuated with an initial capital letter and some form of end punctuation (see online chapter 2).

A sentence is sometimes also defined as comprising a complete thought.

Sentence fragment: a group of words that does not comprise a complete sentence

If a group of words does not meet these criteria, but is punctuated as if it were a complete sentence, then it is a **sentence fragment**. Let's consider some of these sentence fragments and some possible ways to overcome their shortcomings. Fragments, faults and possible revisions are shown in table 1.12.

Table 1.12: Sentence fragments

Sentence fragment	Fault	Possible revision
Cooked the meal.	No subject	I cooked the meal.
Cooking the food.	Participial phrase only; finite verb is needed	I was cooking the food.
To cook a meal.	Infinitive phrase only; finite verb is needed	We decided to cook a meal.
She was able to impress him with her versatility. *By cooking a meal.*	Prepositional phrase only; finite verb and subject are needed	By cooking a meal, she was able to impress him with her versatility.

Sentence fragment	Fault	Possible revision
He was able to judge that the herbs were stale. *Because he actually ate the food.*	Dependent clause only because it begins with a subordinate conjunction; independent clause or link with an independent clause needed	Because he actually ate the food, he was able to judge that the herbs were stale.
He came into the restaurant and took a bow. *The chef who was filling in temporarily that night.*	Most of fragment is a dependent clause only because it begins with a relative pronoun; independent clause needed	The chef who was filling in temporarily that night came into the restaurant and took a bow.

Sentence fragments can sometimes be used, particularly for informal speech. They can also be used in writing, particularly when you are striving to achieve a stylistic effect. As Safire notes:

> *Not all sentence fragments are to be avoided. Why not? Because of their rhetorical effect.* (The last two non-sentences are fragments that make my point. Is this always a good pedagogical technique? Not always.) (Safire 2005, p. 10)

Fowler and Gower suggest that sentences without verbs can be used to break the rules, albeit used sparingly in transitional phrasings (*True, no doubt. So far, so good*), afterthoughts (*He thought as much as he observed. More in fact.*), dramatic climaxes (*We shall always face difficulties as we have always done. As a united nation.*), comment remarks (*We solved the whole thing by appointing a Royal Commission. A neat solution. Clever us.*), and pictorial evocations (*Eel Pie Island is like the Deep South. The same feeling of soft dereliction*). (Fowler, revised Gower 1990, p. 675).

Like Safire, they note the thin line that separates grammar from usage, but warn of linguistic chaos if the device is over-used:

> Since the verbless sentence is freely employed by some good writers (as well as extravagantly by many less good ones) it must be classed as modern English usage. That grammarians may deny it the right to be called a sentence has nothing to do with its merits. It must be judged by its success in affecting the reader in the way the writer intended. Used sparingly and with discrimination, the device can no doubt be an effective medium of emphasis, intimacy, and rhetoric. Overdone, as it is in the sprightlier sort of modern journalism, it gets on a reader's nerves, offending against the principle of good writing immortalized in Flaubert's aphorism 'L'auteur, dans son œuvre, doit etre comme Dieu dans l'univers, present partout et visible nulle part' ('The writer, in his work, must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere'). (Fowler, revised Gower 1990, pp. 675–6)

It would be most unwise, for example, to pepper business documents with sentence fragments, as that requires a style or register that is more formal; however, sentence fragments could also easily be over-used in fiction writing. Bear in mind that if the rest of your writing is not grammatically flawless, or at least of a high standard, your reader may simply infer that your writing and, perhaps, your mind and your worth are third-rate. They may not be able to tell you technically what a sentence fragment is, but they will recognise choppy, dislocated and rhythmically clumsy patterns in your writing.

On the other hand, if the rest of your writing is grammatically flawless, or at least of a high standard, your reader will probably infer that you have earned the right to break or bend the rules by adding stylistic flourishes.

The definition of a sentence shows to what extent grammar and punctuation work together to produce (or obscure) meaning. In this regard, note the phenomena of comma splices and run-on or fused sentences, explored in greater detail in online chapter 2.

ASSESS YOURSELF

Reconstruct the following sentences, removing fragments.

Walking down by the seaside.
It was obvious to me. Because I could see all the errors.
To use the photocopier.
It had to be shot. The horse that had fallen at the hurdle.
Finished writing the report.

Appositives

Appositive: a word or group of words — usually a noun or noun phrase — that renames or amplifies the meaning of another word in a sentence

An **appositive** is a word or group of words – usually a noun or noun phrase – that renames or amplifies the meaning of another word in a sentence (see table 1.13).

Table 1.13: Types of appositives

Sentence featuring appositive	Nature of appositive
The newcomer, a tall stranger, stood at the back of the hall.	Noun phrase set off with commas
The six Stooges — Larry, Moe, Shemp, Curly, Joe and Curly Joe — presented a style of humour that was an acquired taste.	Noun phrase or series set off with dashes, with internal comma punctuation
Reporter Clark Kent often seemed to be missing at the scene of big stories.	Restrictive appositive *Clark Kent* identifies the noun immediately prior; noun is not preceded by *a* or *the*
A *Daily Planet* reporter, Clark Kent, often seemed to be missing at the scene of big stories.	Non-restrictive appositive *Clark Kent* identifies the noun phrase immediately preceding it; noun phrase is preceded by article
This movement is then followed by the *scherzo*: that is, a lively movement, often in $\frac{3}{4}$ time.	An explanatory phrase or clause, usually preceded by *that is*, *for example*, *such as*, *in other words* or *namely*
Her scoring rate was attributable to one factor: her height.	Explanatory phrase occurring after a colon

Note that appositives are sometimes left unattached to their antecedents, and thus can be sentence fragments.

Case: to whom it may concern, and for whom the bell tolls

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Case — object pronoun needed	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

Consider these sentences:

Who/whom does this belong to?

He gave the papers to John and I/me?

Which of the alternatives – who/whom, I/me – is correct?

To answer this question, we need to know more about the case of nouns and pronouns. The **case** of a word lets us know what role the word is playing in a sentence. Is it an object or subject? Is it being used to show ownership or possession of something?

Case: a characteristic of nouns and pronouns showing the role they play in sentences

There are three cases that are used in English, although other languages use more. The three cases are subjective (or nominative), objective (or accusative) and possessive (or genitive). Let's look at the way they work in table 1.14.

Historically, case was a vital part of sentence formation in English, but it is much less important now. Nevertheless, there are some basic rules regarding case you need to know about.

Table 1.14: Case in nouns and pronouns

	Subjective	Objective	Possessive
Nouns			
Singular	boy	boy	boy's
	child	child	child's
Plural	boys	boys	boys'
	children	children	children's
Personal pronouns			
Singular			
1st person	I	me	mine
2nd person	you	you	your, yours
3rd person	he	him	his
	she	her	hers
	it	It	Its
Plural			
1st person	we	us	our, ours
2nd person	you	you	your, yours
3rd person	they	them	their, theirs

Table 1.14 *(continued)*

	Subjective	Objective	Possessive
Relative and interrogative pronouns			
Singular, plural	who	whom	whose
	whoever	whomever	—
	which, that, what	which, that, what	—
Indefinite pronouns	somebody	somebody	somebody's

If a pronoun works as the subject of a sentence, then it takes the subjective case:

He sent it to me.

I sent it to him.

If possession or ownership needs to be shown, then pronouns in the possessive case are used.

Her car was brand new.

The car was hers.

The rewards for finishing the project on time were all ours.

The rewards are theirs, and theirs alone.

Pronouns in the possessive case are already indicating possession, and thus do not need to take an apostrophe:

Correct	Incorrect
Yours (singular and plural)	your's, yours'
Hers	her's, hers'
His	his', his's
Its	it's, its'
Ours	our's, ours'
Theirs	their's, theirs'

Note, however, the use of possessive case for indefinite pronouns (see table 1.14 and online chapter 2, p. 2.15). Nouns take apostrophes to indicate possession. An apostrophe is used in *it's* to indicate a contraction from a longer form (*it is*) rather than possession (see online chapter 2).

Compound structures

Compound structures (those using the conjunctions *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*) sometimes cause confusion where case is concerned. For example, which are the correct pronouns in the following sentences?

Her/she and me/I decided to do a joint presentation on the project.

They congratulated her/she and me/I on our presentation.

The solution is straightforward enough. Rewrite each sentence as if only one person was involved, not two, and test the variations against your ear (i.e. how does it sound?).

Variation	Yes/No?
Her decided to do . . .	No
She decided to do . . .	Yes
Me decided to do . . .	No
I decided to do . . .	Yes
They congratulated she . . .	No
They congratulated her . . .	Yes
They congratulated I . . .	No
They congratulated me . . .	Yes

Having worked out what the constituent parts of the compound construction are, we can now simply put those parts together again:

She and I decided to do a joint presentation on the project.

They congratulated her and me on our presentation.

We/us and nouns

A similar approach can be taken when the first person plural pronouns are used with nouns:

We/us accountants deserve more money.

The boss told we/us accountants that we wouldn't get another penny.

Variation	Yes/No?
Us deserve . . .	No
We deserve . . .	Yes
The boss told we . . .	No
The boss told us . . .	Yes

Who/whom: to whom it may concern

The relative and interrogative pronouns *who* and *whoever* are in the subjective case, and *whom* and *whomever* are in the objective case. Problems sometimes arise when these words occur in independent or subordinate clauses and in questions.

When such a pronoun occurs in an independent clause, for example, we have to look at the function of that pronoun within the clause, irrespective of the clause's function within the larger sentence. Consider, for example, these sentences:

Seek opinions from whoever/whomever has expertise.

It hasn't been decided who/whom they should promote.

Let's look at the first sentence. At first glance, it would appear that the dependent clause *whoever/whomever has expertise* is the object of the preposition *from* and therefore the objective case *whomever* would be correct. In fact, however, we have to look at the dependent clause by itself, and then we see that *whoever* is the subject of *has expertise*. The correct word is thus *whoever*, not *whomever*.

In the second sentence, it may not be immediately clear what is happening in the dependent clause *who/whom they should promote*. In situations like this, rewrite the clause as a separate sentence, replacing the relative pronoun with a personal pronoun:

Variation	Yes/No?
They should promote she.	No
They should promote her.	Yes

Because the objective case *her* sounds better, we know that the correct relative pronoun will be the objective case *whom*:

It hasn't been decided whom they should promote.

Confusion can also arise in questions. Consider, for example, the questions:

Who/whom made the presentation?

Who/whom did they ask for?

Answer the questions, and listen for the correct answer:

Variation	Yes/No?
Her made the presentation.	No
She made the presentation.	Yes
They asked for she.	No
They asked for her.	Yes

We can now determine the correct usage in the sentences:

Who made the presentation? (subjective case)

Whom did they ask for? (objective case)

Whom doomed

'Who' versus 'whom' is a source of great anxiety for many. Nevertheless, we must remember that the role of case in English has shrunk dramatically over the years in comparison to the role it plays in other languages – in some respects that is a good thing.

Apart from causing pronoun reference problems, the cognitive load of remembering case, and the sheer number of brain cells we use up in 'parking' such information is considerable. As considerable, for example, as that used to remember grammatical gender rules (which English has now completely dropped – *La* plume de ma tante est sur *le* bureau de mon oncle in French = the pen of my aunt is on the bureau of my uncle, even though there is no intrinsic reason why a pen should be attributed with feminine qualities or bureaus with masculine qualities).

Thus, English without such rules, or with only small remnants of them, might be better off without them, heretical though this may appear to some. Consider the apostrophe (see online chapter 2), as we may need to ask the uncomfortable question: if a large, if not overwhelming majority of people do not understand the correct usage of something, should we care about it any more? Grammar is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Seligman (1995) suggests, for example, that there is so much confusion about correct usage of who and whom that it really doesn't matter if it is dropped or not.

The key is to apply a commonsense test: is meaning distorted if 'improper usage' occurs? If not, then consider that we may be in an age of transition, where *whom* passes into history, where the split infinitive is not so zealously hunted down, where some, or perhaps all, uses of the apostrophe disappear (online chapter 2), and where readers and listeners will no longer tut-tut when an elegant sentence is 'marred' by ending in a preposition (Fowler revised Gower, 1990, pp. 429, 473–5).

This places us in the territory of the debate between the descriptivists ('grammar is the system of communication that people in the real world use, sometimes independent of or completely the opposite to a system of logical rules and historical precedent') and the prescriptivists ('grammar is what logical rules and historical precedent tell us it is'). Are you a descriptivist, a prescriptivist, or somewhere in between?

ASSESS YOURSELF

Correct the following:
(a) That book is her's, not your's.
(b) Him and me will work on that report today.
(c) To who it may concern.
(d) They treat we football fans badly.

Pronoun reference

An old but still amusing example of ambiguous sentence construction is:

I'll hold the nail, and when I nod my head,
you hit it with the hammer.

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Check pronoun use	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

Pronoun reference: an aspect of the relationship between a pronoun and its antecedent in a sentence. Unless care is taken in phrasing, pronoun reference can lead to ambiguity.

Ambiguity or confusion arises because of unclear **pronoun reference**. What does the pronoun *it* refer to: the nail or my head? Logic would suggest the former rather than the latter, but the world is full of illogical people, and the consequences of misunderstanding, in this situation and in others, might be painful.

Pronouns, as we have seen, are words that stand in the place of nouns and other pronouns. They include these words:

Personal pronouns
I/my/mine/me, you/your/yours (singular and plural), he/his/him, she/her/hers/her, it/its, we/our/ours/us, they/their/theirs/them

Relative pronouns
who/whose/whom, whoever/whomever, which, that, what, whatever

Indefinite pronouns
all, any, anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, none, no one, nothing, one, some, somebody, someone, something

The noun or pronoun that a pronoun refers to is known as the *antecedent*, which means it goes before. Precision in using a pronoun means placing it close to an antecedent and ensuring it refers to only one antecedent. Additional precision is gained by ensuring that pronouns and antecedents agree in person and number.
Consider the sentence:

> John said to Bryan that his customers were annoyed.

Whose customers are annoyed? If we have to depend on just the one sentence, we cannot know. The English language has this problem owing to the decline of case endings, but the ambiguities can be easily resolved. Here are some solutions:

Restatement of noun
John said to Bryan that Bryan's customers were annoyed.
John said to Bryan that John's customers were annoyed.

Place antecedent in parenthesis
John said to Bryan that his (Bryan's) customers were annoyed.
John said to Bryan that his (John's) customers were annoyed.

Use direct speech
John said to Bryan, 'Your customers are annoyed'.
John said to Bryan, 'My customers are annoyed'.

Recast and expand sentence to clarify
John felt that Bryan's customers were annoyed, and decided to tell him about the problem.
John felt that his customers were annoyed, and decided to tell Bryan about the problem.

Let's return to our sentence about nails and heads:

> I'll hold the nail, and when I nod my head, you hit it with the hammer.

We can restructure this sentence in a number of ways to make our meaning clearer:

> I'll hold the nail, and when I nod my head, you hit it (the nail) with the hammer.
>
> I'll hold the nail, and you hit it with the hammer when I nod my head.
>
> When I nod my head, hit the nail that I'm holding with a hammer.

The first, parenthetical, solution is not ideal. The third solution is not acceptable either, as it introduces a new ambiguity. The second solution is the 'least worst'. We have moved the pronoun closer to its antecedent within the sentence. Alternatively, we could simply use major instead of minor surgery and recast the sentence, eliminating pronouns altogether:

> Hit this nail when I nod my head.

Be careful of placement of pronouns in longer passages:

> When the colour fax machine finally arrived, there was much excitement. People came from several floors away, and soon a crowd of people were in the room, chattering away. There was much speculation about colour trueness, running costs, and the idealness or otherwise of the location — between the computer terminal and the drink machine. Suddenly, it beeped.

There is a problem here with more than one possible antecedent, but there is also a problem with the distance between the pronoun and its real antecedent. In a long passage such as this one, it is better to restate the antecedent, either totally or in part:

> Suddenly, the fax machine beeped.

That, *which*, *this* and *it* – ambiguity trouble spots

Pronouns can cause problems in referring to single words, but pronouns such as *which*, *that*, *this* and *it* are particularly prone to cause ambiguity in clauses or sentences.

Consider this sentence:

> I had to raise $20 to buy this birthday cake, which was hard.

We might resolve ambiguity here by renaming the antecedent:

> I had to raise $20 to buy this birthday cake, a task that was hard.

A slightly less effective way of resolving ambiguity is by changing ambiguous modifiers:

> I had to raise $20 to buy this birthday cake, which was difficult.

Consider this:

> The desks for the temporary staff will need to be repaired, and their computers will have to be here by next week. This is a very trying problem for us.

The reader or listener is unsure of whether this refers to a problem of furniture, equipment or both. A preferable version would be:

> The desks for the temporary staff will need to be repaired, and their computers will have to be here by next week. These equipment and furniture problems are very trying.

Ensure that antecedents are clear, not simply implied

An antecedent needs to be a definite noun or pronoun, rather than something implied in a possessive, a modifier, another noun or pronoun, or a phrase or clause.

Consider this:

> You say that an angry customer is not a problem, but I wouldn't want to try to defuse it.

'It' is referring to a noun – *anger* – that is only implied in a *modifier* – angry. Some recasting will be necessary:

> You say this customer's anger is not a problem, but I wouldn't want to try to defuse it.

Consider this also:

> She has described this before, but it wasn't circulated widely.

A noun such as *report* is needed here to make the sentence less confusing:

> She has described this before in a report, but it wasn't circulated widely.
>
> She has described this before, but the report wasn't circulated widely.

Use *it*, *they* and *you* carefully

It is fairly common to hear people say things like:

> It says here that you can't connect that wire to that plug.
>
> They say in the papers that it will be fine today.
>
> On Mars, you need a pressurised suit just to survive.

All these uses of pronouns are vague. The third sentence, involving *you*, obviously is not referring to the reader or listener in a real situation at all. Such pronoun reference is adequate in speech, but writers need to be more precise. If we recast the sentences above, we can make them more precise:

> The writers of this manual state that you can't connect that wire to that plug.
>
> The newspaper weather forecast predicts that it will be fine today.
>
> On Mars, humans need pressurised suits just to survive.

Use *that*, *which* and *who* correctly

Who is used to refer to people, but occasionally is used to refer to animals with names:

> Jonathan is the person who has all that information.

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Use *that* instead of *which*	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

Skippy the bush kangaroo is a television character
who is popular in many countries.

That and *which* refer to things and animals, and sometimes to people viewed collectively or anonymously:

The chair, which collapsed, is in the corner.

The team that performed best this year got the prize.

Choice of pronouns can also be affected by whether the clauses they appear in are restrictive or non-restrictive (see online chapter 2). *That* is used in restrictive clauses, or those clauses that are integral to the sentence's meaning, and that therefore cannot be dropped without making the sentence meaningless. *Which* is used in non-restrictive clauses, or those clauses that are not integral to the sentence's meaning, and that therefore can be dropped without making the sentence meaningless:

Computers that are sold cheap tend to be slow.

(Restrictive: *that* introduces vital information about the sentence subject.)

Computers, which are seen in most workplaces now, tend to be slow if they are cheap.

(Non-restrictive: *which* introduces information that could be deleted without damaging the sentence or distorting its meaning.)

ASSESS YOURSELF

Correct any errors in the following:
(a) Geraldine said to Melissa that she should go home.
(b) I finally had to intervene in the situation, which was annoying.
(c) In a work environment like that, you need to have special training.
(d) Tai is the woman that you need to talk to about that.

Modifiers

Modifier: words or groups of words that act as adjectives or adverbs, modifying another word or group of words

A **modifier** is a word or group of words that modifies another word or group of words. The most common types of modifiers are adjectives and adverbs.

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Normally an adjective doesn't modify a verb. Try the adverb form.	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

Adjectives and adverbs do quite separate jobs, and they should not be confused. Firstly, they modify different parts of speech and constructions.

Table 1.15: Types of modifiers

	Word/group of words	Example
Adjectives modify	Nouns	bad man
	Pronouns	He was bad
Adverbs modify	Verbs	drives badly
	Adverbs	extremely quickly
	Adjectives	very happy
	Phrases	almost off the roof
	Clauses	precisely where she landed
	Sentences	Naturally, I'll be there.

Adjectives and adverbs also answer different questions.

Table 1.16: Functions performed by modifiers

	Questions
Adjectives answer these questions	What kind?
	Which one?
	How many?
	Whose
Adverbs answer these questions	Where?
	When?
	How
	How often?
	To what extent or degree?

Many adverbs are formed by adding *ly* to adjectives. However, this is not a foolproof way of identifying adverbs: some adverbs do not have *ly* endings, and some adjectives do. It all depends on the task any given word is performing; that is, what part of speech or construction it is modifying, and what question it is answering.

	***LY* ENDINGS**	**NON-*LY* ENDINGS**
Adjectives	lovely, lonely, ghastly, friendly, motherly	quick, slow, loud, notorious, bad, fast
Adverbs	quickly, slowly, loudly, notoriously, badly	around, up, often, there, fast

Remember the functions of the two different parts of speech, and ensure that you don't confuse them. Such confusions happen often enough, particularly in spoken rather than written language:

No: He spoke real proper.

Yes: He spoke really (or quite) properly.

No: That drink goes down easy.

Yes: That drink goes down easily.

The adjective *good* and the adverb *well* are also often confused.

No: He dances good.

Yes: He dances well.

Note that *well* can be an adjective when referring to health, but in all other contexts it is an adverb.

Comparative and superlative forms of adverbs and adjectives

Checker check: what does this message mean?

GRAMMAR CHECK	
Comparative or superlative: using *most* with *biggest* is redundant, awkward or incorrect.	Rule
	Ignore Rule
	Change

Modifiers such as adjectives and adverbs are particularly useful when comparing the quantity or quality of people, animals or things. Table 1.17 gives us a framework for making such comparisons.

- When *no* comparisons are being made, the adjective or adverb used is said to be in its positive form.
- When *two* things are being compared, the adjective or adverb being used is known as the comparative.
- When *three or more things* are being compared, the adjective or adverb being used is known as the superlative.

Just to complicate matters, comparisons can be negative, showing a diminution of quality or quantity.

- When two things are being negatively compared, the adjective or adverb being used is known as the negative comparative.
- When three or more things are being negatively compared, the adjective or adverb being used is known as the negative superlative.

Generally speaking, adjectives and adverbs of one syllable form their comparative forms by adding *-er*, and form their superlative forms by adding *-est*. With most adverbs of two or more syllables, the comparative is formed by adding the prefix word *more*, while the superlative is formed using *most*. With some adjectives of two syllables, the *-er/-est* is system is used, while for others, the *more/most* system is used. Indeed, some two-syllable adjectives (lazy, fancy, steady) can take either system. If unsure which system prevails for a particular adjective, consult a dictionary. For adjectives of three or more syllables, use the *more/most* system.

Table 1.17: Forms of adverbs and adjectives

Negative superlative	Negative comparative	Positive	Comparative	Superlative
least white	less white	white	whiter	whitest
least effective	less effective	effective	more effective	most effective
least near	less near	near	nearer	nearest
least quickly	less quickly	quickly	more quickly	most quickly
		many, much, some	more	most
		good, well	better	best
worst	worse	bad, badly		
least	less	little		

Certain adjectives and adverbs (bad, badly, many, much, some, good, well, little) take comparative and superlative forms in irregular ways.

The comparative forms are used when two things are being compared:

> She was the *better* of the two women swimmers.

If we are considering general analytical skills of the two candidates, he is clearly the *less* talented.

The superlative forms are used when three or more things are being compared:

> It was the *best* thing I had ever seen.
>
> He was the *least* capable student in the class.

The *-er/-est* and *more/most* systems should never be combined, because that would create redundant expressions.

> No: He was the *more quicker* of the two.
>
> Yes: He was the *quicker* of the two.
>
> No: He was the *most biggest* person I had ever seen.
>
> Yes: He was the *biggest* person I had ever seen.

For further information on redundant expressions, see online chapter 4, 'Plain English' (tautologies).

Note also that some things are absolute in condition, and cannot be modified by more or most:

> perfect dead round empty central unique straight impossible favourite infinite

However, modifiers like *nearly* or *almost* can be used with these.

Note that *less* and *fewer* do not mean the same thing, just as *many* and *much* do not mean the same thing. *Less, much* and *some* modify ***mass nouns*** (many abstract things, such as *happiness*, *serenity*, and quantitative variation of substances, such *string, milk, water*) and *fewer, more* and *a/an/the* modify ***count nouns*** (many concrete things, such as *girl* and *rock*, quantitative variations of individual parts of a mass, such as *bit* and *remnant*, and units of measurement, such as *hour* and *peso*).

Mass noun: a noun that describes many abstract things, and quantitative variation of substances

Count noun: a noun that describes many concrete things, quantitative variations of individual parts of a mass, and units of measurement

Thus

> We need *fewer* bricks and *less* mortar for this job.
>
> They had eaten *many* ice creams that day, and so they didn't really feel like eating *much* of the tub of toffee liquorice whirl ice cream left over from our dessert.
>
> *Some* happiness had been in her past life, but lately she could not remember *a* single happy event.

Note the function of modifiers in the formation of comparatives and superlatives (see online chapter 2).

Double negatives

A double negative construction is one where two negative modifiers are used: either one is redundant, or one cancels the other out, making the statement a positive one (which is probably not what the writer or speaker wished to convey):

> No: Although the rain was falling hard, I never felt nothing.
>
> Yes: Although the rain was falling hard, I never felt anything.
>
> Yes: Although the rain was falling hard, I felt nothing.

Placement of modifiers

Limiting modifiers (*only*, *scarcely*, *just*, *hardly*, *almost*, *even*) need to be positioned carefully. Consider, for example, the variations in meaning in the following sentences that result from changing the position of the word *only*:

> Only I walked down the road.
>
> I only walked down the road.
>
> I walked only down the road.
>
> I walked down the only road.
>
> I walked down the road only.

Careful placement is needed also with modifiers such as *other* and *another*. It is fairly common, for example, to see and hear sentences similar to these:

> He was replaced by another woman.
>
> I met her and four other men.
>
> We will undertake liaison with industry and other vocational schools.

The adjectives *other/another* fall between nouns or pronouns (or modified nouns): *He/woman, her/men, industry/vocational schools*. These sentences would be more clear if the adjectives *other/another* were to modify generic nouns:

He was replaced by another person.

I met her and four other people.

We will undertake liaison with industry and other groups/interested parties, etc.

The speakers or writers of ambiguous sentences, however, usually wish to emphasise specific, not generic nouns – in which case they should drop the adjectives altogether.

Ambiguity can also be created when adjectives are placed so as to modify more than one word. A sentence like this is clear enough:

I was criticised by angry friends and relatives.

It is reasonable to assume that both friends and relatives are angry. But what about sentences like these?

I was surrounded by barking dogs and cats.

We flew over frozen tundra and lakes.

In both of these sentences, it is just not clear where the modifier stops modifying. To remove ambiguity, we need to either insert other, specific modifiers (yowling/spitting cats, tranquil/choppy/melting/unfrozen lakes), or to recast the sentences, so that the modifier modifies only what it is meant to be modifying:

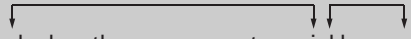
I was surrounded by cats and barking dogs.

We flew over lakes and frozen tundra.

Squinting modifiers

A squinting modifier creates ambiguity by having the potential to modify what precedes it as well as what follows it. The dilemma is usually concerning which verb is being modified by the adverb.

Example 1	The people who were renting the house temporarily vacated it.		
Potential ambiguities	1. Temporarily renting? 2. Temporarily vacating?		
Possible solutions	Move adverb to left of verb — *temporarily renting* Recast, using adjectival construction — *the temporary tenants vacated the house.* Move adverb to the right of verb phrase — *vacated it temporarily.* Recast, using prepositional phrase — *vacated it for a week.*		
Example 2	The soldiers who trained often complained about the tough course.		
Potential ambiguities?	trained often? often complained?		

Possible solutions	Move adverb to left of verb — *often trained* Recast into independent clauses — *The soldiers trained often, and they decided to complain about the toughness of the course.* Move adverb to the right of second verb — *complained often* ('frequently' might sound better) Recast to complex sentence — *Although the soldiers trained conscientiously, they were often heard complaining about the toughness of the course.*
Example 3	 May worked on the new computer quickly acquiring new skills.
Potential ambiguities?	Worked . . . quickly? quickly acquiring
Possible solutions	Move adverb to left of first verb — *quickly worked* Move adverb to right of first verb — *worked quickly* Use punctuation, separating into main clause and modifying phrase — *May worked on the new computer quickly, acquiring new skills* Move adverb to right of verb — *acquiring quickly* (clumsy?) Move adverb to right of participial phrase — *acquiring new skills quickly* Use punctuation, separating into main clause and modifying phrase — *May worked on the new computer, quickly acquiring new skills*

The problem of creating clarity of meaning in the case of squinting modifiers is that it cannot be solved by simply placing a comma before or after the ambiguous adverb:

No: The people who were renting the house, temporarily vacated it.

No: The people who were renting the house temporarily, vacated it.

Dangling modifiers

A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that causes ambiguity because the word that should be modified is not present, or is there only by implication. Dangling modifiers usually occur in prepositional phrases, participial phrases and infinitive phrases. Let's consider some examples now:

Table 1.18: Types of modifiers

Dangling modifier	Example	Ambiguity
Prepositional phrase	After eating our meal, the horses were saddled.	Who/what eats?
Infinitive phrase	To win that contest, talent will need to combine with relentless training.	Who/what wins?
Participial phrase	Running into the street, the bus narrowly missed me. Obviously intoxicated, we helped him to his feet.	Who/what misses? Who is intoxicated?

All these modifiers precede the independent clause in their respective sentences. The subject is unclear, with part of the problem being the use of the passive voice. Ambiguities can be resolved by a number of means: inserting a subject, inserting a subject and verb, and/or converting a passive voice construction to an active voice construction.

No	Yes
After eating our meal, the horses were saddled.	After eating our meal, we saddled our horses. When we had eaten our meal, the horses were saddled.
To win that contest, talent will need to combine with relentless training.	To win that contest, you will need to combine talent with relentless training. If you are to win that contest, talent will need to combine with relentless training.
Running into the street, the bus narrowly missed me.	Running into the street, I was narrowly missed by a bus. As I was running into the street, the bus narrowly missed me.
Obviously intoxicated, we helped him to his feet.	Obviously intoxicated, he needed to be helped to his feet by us. As he was obviously intoxicated, we helped him to his feet.

ASSESS YOURSELF

Correct the following:
(a) You did good on that test.
(b) The inspection team of Matthew Morris and four other women will be here at 8:00 a.m.
(c) The drizzling rain and heat had exhausted us.
(d) Our team will start their innings hopefully immediately after tea.
(e) While considering the problem, the truck's brakes failed and it crashed into a wall.

Summary

In this chapter we considered the adequacy and inadequacy of software grammar and spell-checkers, and used typical messages from grammar checkers to explore various aspects of grammar. We looked at the eight different parts of speech (nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and interjections) and considered articles and determiners. We saw that a word's part of speech is determined by the function of that word in a sentence. We saw that sentences are comprised of subjects and predicates. We looked at subject-verb agreement and the problems that can arise when such relationships are not observed. We considered different aspects of verbs, such as transitive and intransitive status; mood (indicative, imperative and subjunctive); and finite and non-finite verbs (past participles, perfect participles, present participles, gerunds and infinitives). We examined split infinitives and active

and passive voice in verbs, and considered the roles of linking and auxiliary verbs, direct and indirect objects, and object complements.

Building upon the parts of speech and the nature of verbs, we proceeded to differentiate different types of phrases (noun, verb, prepositional, participial, gerund, infinitive, absolute), and independent or main clauses and dependent or subordinate clauses. Using the definitions of phrases and clauses, we were able to define sentences and sentence fragments. A sentence is a group of words that has a subject and a finite verb and is punctuated with an initial capital letter and some form of end punctuation. A sentence is also sometimes defined as comprising a complete thought.

We then considered noun and pronoun case, and looked at pronoun reference problems. We also considered comparative and superlative forms of modifiers and mass and count nouns and then examined modifier problems. We found that analysing pronoun reference and modifiers helps us to create more descriptive and less ambiguous sentences.

Student study guide

KEY TERMS

active voice *p. 1.22*
adjective *p. 1.6*
adverb *p. 1.6*
appositive *p. 1.30*
article *p. 1.9*
auxiliary verb *p. 1.15*
case *p. 1.31*
clause *p. 1.26*
conjunction *p. 1.6*
count noun *p. 1.43*
descriptivism *p. 1.5*
determiner *p. 1.9*
direct object *p. 1.12*
finite verb *p. 1.19*
grammar *p. 1.4*
homonyms *p. 1.9*
inflections *p. 1.20*
interjection *p. 1.6*
intransitive verb *p. 1.12*
linking verb *p. 1.14*
mass noun *p. 1.43*
modifiers *p. 1.39*
mood *p. 1.18*
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noun *p. 1.6*
passive voice *p. 1.22*
person *p. 1.11*
phrase *p. 1.24*
predicate *p. 1.10*
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pronoun reference *p. 1.36*
sentence *p. 1.28*
sentence fragment *p. 1.28*
split infinitive *p. 1.21*
subject *p. 1.10*
syntax *p. 1.4*
transitive verb *p. 1.12*
verb *p. 1.6*

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the eight parts of speech or word classes?
2. What other parts of speech or classes might there be?
3. If the key part of a sentence subject is a noun or pronoun, what is the key part of a predicate?
4. What test can we apply to determine whether a verb is finite or non-finite?
5. Transitive verbs can be expressed in passive and active voice, but intransitive verbs cannot. Why?

6. What is the difference between a phrase and a clause?
7. Why can a phrase not be a sentence?
8. A clause can be a sentence, but only a certain type of clause. Which type?
9. How can we tell a sentence from a sentence fragment?
10. Why do pronoun reference problems occur?
11. What is the relationship between case and punctuation?
12. What is a squinting modifier and how can one be corrected?

APPLIED ACTIVITIES

1. Make several copies of the table on page 1.49.
2. Use the table to analyse the following word sets:

Still
They made the whisky in a plastic still.
A mysterious force seemed to still the turbulent waters.
Still waters run deep.
Stand still, will you?
He behaved disgustingly; still, what can you expect from someone like that?

More
The more I see you, the more I want you.
You want eggs? There's more inside.
More wine, please.
You will have to be more assertive with her.
More!

3. Make more copies of the table. Using one or more dictionaries, try to find as many different parts of speech examples for the following words:

while *off* *such* *up* *fore* *so* *as* *past* *well*

4. Compete against another individual, or form a group with others and compete against other groups. Set a time period for the competition (30, 40, or 60 minutes). The object of the competition is to try to find as many words that fit into three or more classes.

Note: To assist you with completing activities 1 to 4, and if you are unsure of a particular part of speech for a key word, look up the word in question in a dictionary. Rather than using online dictionaries, use large-size dictionaries, as it is much simpler to find target words. If possible, use more than one dictionary. You may also find that different dictionaries disagree on certain definitions. Crystal (2003) suggests that parts of speech or word classes are sometimes not as precise and as clearly separated as we might want them to be. Dictionaries, however, do not disagree: people who write dictionaries disagree. Don't despair at this, however, see such disagreement as an opportunity to explore the definitions of the parts of speech: What is the essence of a noun? What function should a verb really perform? and so on.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

You have developed a reputation at your workplace as being someone who can write clearly and with correct grammar. Among other duties, you edit the company newsletter and the annual general report. Your boss, Arthur, the general manager, seems to resent your abilities in this area, especially when you pointed out to him (tactfully enough, you thought) that one

Word	Sentence	Noun	Pronoun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb	Preposition	Conjunction	Interjection

of his general announcement emails had several errors in it. He had reacted badly to that, protesting that he had used a grammar checker on it before sending it. He became quite upset when you tried to explain that software grammar checkers don't always work that well. Other staff overheard your rather heated discussions on the matter, and later that day an enlarged photocopy of his email appeared on a notice board with the mistakes marked up in red and the words 'Not good enough. Do it again!' written on it. Arthur was furious about this, and tore it down, but not before most of the staff had seen it and joked about it.

You are currently preparing this year's annual general report, and have edited all copy except for the manager's report. Finally, Arthur has submitted it by email, and not before time – the printer's deadline is 30 hours from now. You open the email, and read the main text: 'Here's my report. Don't go monkeying with it, because I want the shareholders to get my words directly. They told me at the last annual general meeting that they appreciate my no-nonsense style.' You open the attached file, and see to your horror that it is shot through with grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors. Not knowing where to start, you are distracted by a slamming door. Looking up, you see that Arthur – looking quite angry – is leaving, wearing an overcoat and carrying a case, off to an overseas meeting with clients.

1. Should you try to communicate with Arthur now, when you are certain you can at least talk to him, try to contact him overseas, simply print his copy as is, or print it, with your corrections?
2. If you try to communicate with him, here or overseas, or print it with corrections, how might you most tactfully explain what needs to be done, and why?

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