A guide to grammar and punctuation

… for people who hate grammar and punctuation

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INTRODUCTION

Let me quote Sir Ernest Gowers, GCB GBE, author of the seminal *Plain Words* (first published 1948):

'I am not a grammarian.'

Me neither.

But, like Sir Ernest, I have a desire for simplicity in life, love and language. I can't help you with the first two, but this little booklet endeavours to assist you in the third.

Barring any startling advances in neurosurgery, the best way to get a complex set of ideas or instructions out of your head and into someone else's is to write it down.

Because we humans are simple creatures who crave the path of least resistance, the simpler and clearer you can make your message, the more successful it is likely to be.

Grammar is a tool to help you convey your message as clearly as possible.

As much as it helps you to do that, it's useful.

This booklet is intended as a guide to help you solve some of the most common problems encountered in grammar and punctuation. In that sense, it's a reference book. But you might derive greater benefit just by sitting down (in a comfortable chair) and reading it.

If the composition of a piece of writing—whether as brief as an email or as long as a report—fills you with dread, the Red Pony grammar guide might offer you a new perspective that helps you see language in a different way.

Andrew Eather

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What is a sentence?

Most simple sentences consist of a **subject**, a **verb** and an **object**. Strictly speaking, a sentence need only contain a subject and a finite verb. But when I mention finite verbs, eyes begin to glaze over. So let's keep it simple.

More complicated sentences will feature modifiers, phrases, dependent clauses and other adornments. But they all flow from the three basic elements: **subject-verb-object**. If any one of them is missing, you probably don't have a complete sentence.

Start by identifying the **verb**, which is the action word of the sentence, sometimes described as a 'doing' or 'being' word.

What describes the action? The **verb**.

Who or what performs the action? The **subject**.

Who or what receives the action? The **object**.

Bill	*hit*	*the ball*
{subject}	{verb}	{object}

It's OK to end the sentence right there. Once you've got those three key ingredients, everything else needs to justify its presence.

> *Often the problem with sentences that don't make sense is that writers don't know when to stop and so they keep stringing thoughts together to make sentences that go on for line after line with no end in sight, indulging in pointless redundancies and repetitions to reiterate points that were made already at the beginning of the sentence and so the author keeps going in the hope that the sentence will resolve itself without any interference from them. It won't.*

One point per sentence.

If a related point occurs to you, start another sentence.

When you have a different point to make,
start another paragraph.

Simple.

Consider this remedy for the run-on sentence in italics above:

> *The problem with sentences that don't make sense is that writers don't know when to stop. They keep stringing thoughts together, making sentences that go on with no end in sight. They repeat themselves. And authors continue writing in the hope that the sentence will resolve itself without any interference from them. It won't.*

Sometimes it can be difficult to work out what's gone wrong with a sentence and so it can be helpful to consult a checklist. Like this one, for instance:

1. Does it have a subject, a verb and an object?
2. Is the sentence longer than 25 words? Does it have to be?
3. Where is the verb? Is it a long way from the subject? If so, bring it closer.
4. Is the writer talking about more than one thing? Can those other things be transferred into other sentences?

Remember, start with the basics: find the subject, verb and object. Once you've got those, every other element in the sentence has to justify its presence. Don't be afraid to cut things out to create shorter sentences.

By the way, you'll notice in the corrected passage above that I have started a sentence with 'And'. This is not against the law. People sometimes think that just because 'and' is most commonly used as a conjunction to join two words, phrases or clauses, it can't be used to commence a sentence. But it can.

Nouns

Nouns are things. That's all you need to know. Is it a thing? Then it's a noun.

And by the way, nouns aren't just physical things. They can be abstract things too, like ideas and feelings—happiness, anger, philosophy, tension.

But let's not overcomplicate this. Nouns are things.

Pronouns

Pronouns stand in place of a noun. He, she, they, it, mine, yours and theirs are all personal pronouns. Who, whom, whose, which and that are also pronouns (called 'relative pronouns'). They can be other things too, but when they are standing in for a noun ... they're pronouns.

Verbs

Verbs are doing or being words.

Run, exist, talk, finalise, be, are, is and complete are all verbs. There are a few hundred thousand others too, so you've got plenty of choice when you're looking for a verb in the English language.

Verbing nouns and nouning verbs

Beware the current tendency to turn verbs into nouns:

> *All parties were in agreement.*

What's wrong with 'All parties agreed'? Or even 'We agreed'?

It goes the other way too, when nouns are turned into verbs:

> *I was tasked with delivering the mail.*

How about: 'My task is to deliver the mail'?

Forming sentences like this will only obscure and weaken your message by making you use the passive voice (we'll come to this shortly) more often. It's indirect and impotent.

So why do we do it so much? We do it because we think it makes us sound important and knowledgeable when we use lots of long words. It doesn't. It only makes us sound wordy and pretentious. We communicate most successfully when we are clearly understood.

We know it's better to use lots of strong, simple verbs, but that doesn't mean our writing will be more powerful if we go around inventing our own verbs. Leave that to Shakespeare.

Adjectives and adverbs

An **adjective** 'modifies' or adds meaning to a noun.

> *We own a beautiful piano.*

Beautiful (adjective) is adding information about the piano (noun).

An **adverb** does the same thing for a verb.

> *She described the scene vividly.*

Vividly (adverb) tells you how she described (verb) the scene.

Easy on the adjectives

Excessive description is a common obstacle to comprehension: too many adjectives.

When we're unsure of the strength of our argument, we often stuff our writing full of these 'modifiers' to try to make it more forceful.

It can be instructive to go back over your writing and remove all of the adjectives. Did the meaning suffer? If not, leave them out.

Also, word order causes a lot of problems. Solve them by putting the descriptive word or phrase as close as you can to the thing it's describing.

Adverbs as diagnostic tools

Adverbs can be very useful tools when it comes to editing.

If you see one, remove it.

An adverb is sometimes a signal that you have chosen the wrong verb and you are trying to give it support by buttressing it with an adverb. Find a stronger verb instead.

Instead of:

> *He ran quickly for the bus.*

try:

> *He sprinted for the bus.*

Active and passive voice

Most editors, not to mention Microsoft Word's grammar check function, hate the **passive voice**. Why? If the passive voice is so frowned upon, what's it doing in the English language in the first place?

The passive voice does have a purpose. In fact, in some situations it's absurd not to use it. However, it is very often misused rather than used as it should be—sparingly.

But first things first—what is 'voice' anyway?

Voice

Voice refers to the perspective of the subject of a sentence.

Consider the following sentences:

1. *The teacher corrected the exams.*
   {active voice}

2. *The exams were corrected by the teacher.*
   {passive voice}

In Sentence 1, the teacher (the subject of the sentence) is performing the action. In Sentence 2, the exams (the subject) are being acted upon.

Sentence 1, using the **active voice**, is a much clearer, more direct way of conveying the information.

When to use the passive voice

So when would you use the passive voice in preference to the active?

Special emphasis

Perhaps you might want to place special emphasis on the receiver of the action when the receiver has been the central topic of the discussion thus far and that's where you want to keep the focus.

In Sentence 2 from the previous example, this construction might be useful if the preceding paragraph had been concerned with monitoring the chain of exam procedures, and the significant element lay in what happened to the exams, rather than the actions of the teacher.

Finding a milder tone

The passive voice can be useful when you're trying to persuade people to do something and you don't want to sound like you're trying to force them. You might employ this strategy when communicating with vulnerable people.

When the subject is unknown

Sometimes the subject of a sentence might be obvious, unimportant or unknown, so there is no alternative to using the passive voice:

> *The Tim Tams were stolen.*
> (When we don't know who stole the Tim Tams.)

Hiding the guilty party

The main reason authorities advise against the passive voice is because it's a good friend to those of us who may find it necessary, from time to time, to shirk responsibility for our actions.

Consider how useful it might be to be able to employ the following constructions:

> *The keys to the safe have been lost.*

> *Mistakes were made.*

Remember, nobody builds a successful career by writing down self-incriminating evidence and publishing it for all to see. There's such a thing as too much clarity.

Agreement

Agreement refers to the matching of related grammatical elements within a sentence.

Nouns with pronouns

Any pronoun in a sentence will likely refer to a noun earlier in the sentence (known as its 'antecedent'). The noun and pronoun must match or 'agree'.

Consider:

> *The magician concealed his rabbit.*
> {singular noun (magician), singular pronoun (his)}

> *The magicians concealed their rabbits.*
> {plural noun (magicians), plural pronoun (their)}

Subject with verb form

Similarly, the form of the verb you use must match its subject.

> *The office is vacant.*
> {singular subject (office), singular verb form (is)}

> *The offices are vacant.*
> {plural subject (offices), plural verb form (are)}

So far so good. But choices become a bit more difficult when we are using words that denote a grouping of some sort:

family *government* *committee* *crowd* *team*

Consider:

The family is the basic social unit.

but:

His family are not inclined to comment.

In the first sentence, 'family' is referring to a singular concept. In the second sentence, 'family' makes us think about a number of specific individuals who make up that unit, so we treat it as plural.

To help decide whether to treat the noun as **singular** or **plural** ask yourself, 'Does the meaning relate more to the group as a unit (singular) or more to the range of specific individuals within it (plural)?'

Gender

Back in the Dark Ages (pre-1970), 'gender' was only ever a problem in a discussion about a foreign language and those tricky endings you have to apply depending on whether the word is 'masculine', 'feminine' or even 'neuter'. No headaches like that for us English speakers, eh?

Not so fast, tool of the patriarchy.

If you belong to the fifty per cent of the population rarely referred to in hypotheticals and examples, you won't need me to tell you what a niggling irritant it is to be confronted constantly with instances such as 'Bill hit the ball.' Why can't Beatrice hit the ball for a change?

With a bit of thought, it's not hard to remedy the situation.

These days, many organisations and government departments have strict policies governing gender-neutral language. If you have them to hand, follow them. If you are left to your own devices, here are a few strategies you might employ …

Turn everything plural

Where you are faced with a complex sentence featuring an array of shes, hes, hises or herses, you can often get out of jail by turning them into thems and theirses. Witness:

> *An acrobat needs his muscles to be in peak condition if he is to avoid calamity when approaching the vaulting horse.*

becomes:

> *Acrobats need their muscles to be in peak condition if they are to avoid calamity when approaching the vaulting horse.*

Just delete it

Sometimes this works. Give it a try and see if it does. It works here:

> *The contractor might submit multiple invoices for the same job, but [she] can't expect to be paid more than once.*

Turn it into something else

Pronouns are just standing in for nouns anyway, so they won't take it personally if you substitute them with 'a' or 'the'.

> *The clumsy assassin dropped her rifle.*

becomes:

> *The clumsy assassin dropped the rifle.*

Using a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent

This is my favourite. Although it's ungrammatical, this strategy cuts the Gordian knot with a straightforward solution. It means attaching a plural pronoun to a singular antecedent, but it's in the service of a higher goal—gender equality and the universal harmony that flows from it:

> *Does anyone address their superior in that fashion any more?*

We don't know the gender of 'anyone' so I prefer to use 'their' rather than the clumsy 'his or her' or 'his/her'. In another ten years I don't think this will even be controversial.

Prepositions

Prepositions are the titchy little words that introduce a lot of phrases (a phrase, by the way, is a short grouping of words that doesn't contain a verb).

They include in, from, by, with, for, since, during, after, to, at, and so on and on and on.

There's nothing more that I can say about them that will be of the slightest use to you. Instead, here's a story about Winston Churchill and prepositions …

An ancient piece of nursery grammar states that one should never end a sentence on a preposition.

It's called a *pre*position after all. And if it's 'pre' (or 'before') then it should have something after it, shouldn't it?

Well, shouldn't it?

This rule can be traced back to the desire of English grammarians to apply the (admittedly very elegant) template of Latin grammar onto messy old English, with its mongrel Germanic/Anglo-Saxon/Norman roots and influences.

Sir Winston Churchill—a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, by the way—supposedly knocked this grammatical prescription into a cocked hat with this rejoinder to an overzealous editor who had clumsily corrected a sentence of Churchill's that ended on a preposition:

This is the kind of English up with which I will not put.

The benefit of most grammatical rules is in getting us to slow down and think about what we are actually trying to say to our audience and how that message might be best conveyed.

Or how it might be conveyed best.

Conjunctions

Conjunctions join two or more phrases, clauses or even sentences to form a single sentence.

They include:

and	but	because	however
or	for	yet	so

You may have noticed that some of these fellows look a little like prepositions. That's because sometimes they are. When they are **introducing** a phrase, they're prepositions. If they are **joining** phrases together, they're conjunctions.

PUNCTUATION

For a mind-bending masterclass in rigorously (some say fanatically) and consistently applied punctuation style, read a copy of the *New Yorker*. Especially with regard to commas, this publication takes a very hard line on punctuation. I find an error or ambiguity about once a year. I have learned more about the mechanics of language by puzzling out the logic behind a seemingly peculiar piece of punctuation in this magazine's august pages than from anywhere else.

But rather than drag you through a *New Yorker*-style discussion of ALL the finer points of punctuation (and there are very, very many), let me instead take you on a whirlwind tour of four of punctuation's most problematic departments.

The comma

Most writers can be neatly divided into two camps: those who use too many **commas** and those who do not use enough. I, along with the *New Yorker*, use too many.

The result in both cases is confusion. This is ironic, because confusion is just what our curly little friend is intended to avoid.

There's an almost limitless range of conditional prescriptions to dictate comma usage, but I've boiled them down to a few of the most useful.

Use a comma to:

- separate items in a list

> *Remember to bring shoes, shorts and socks.*

- mark off non-defining clauses or phrases (A defining clause contains information that is integral to the subject of the sentence. A non-defining clause contains information that isn't.)

> *All the players, who are now recovering in hospital, deny involvement in the hotel incident.*

(Consider how the meaning of this sentence would change with the commas removed.)

- eliminate possible ambiguity

> *Jeanette was not expelled, happily.*

- mark off parenthetic expressions

> *For Captain Kangaroo, despite his renowned cunning, disaster was becoming inevitable.*

Note that the Americans would include a comma after 'shorts' in the example on the previous page. I would, too, as I think it's more logical to separate all the items equally. Australian style guides, however, feel differently, so it's tough luck for me.

In fact, there are plenty of times where there can be no clear-cut judgement for or against the use of a comma—it's just a matter of personal taste. In this respect, the comma represents a rare opportunity in the drab field of punctuation for the author to show a bit of leg.

Colon and semicolon

Colon

The words after the **colon** should 'deliver the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words', according to my old friend Sir Ernest Gowers, quoting an even more venerable old bird, Henry Watson Fowler. In other words, *I've told you I'm gonna tell you something [colon] here it is.*

> *They followed the trail of saliva all the way to its disgusting source: Sir Edmund Huntington-Prendergast, DSO and bar.*

Use a colon (rather than a dash) to introduce a list.

> *She required the following items for the assassination:*
> - *six whole peppercorns*
> - *a lemon*
> - *a length of piano wire*
> - *a piano.*

Don't use it in a sentence straight after a verb.

> ✗ *The decathlon includes: the high hurdles, the 800 metres, the javelin and the pole vault.*

That should read:

> ✓ *The decathlon includes the high hurdles, the 800 metres, the javelin and the pole vault.*

Semicolon

A **semicolon** is a comma on steroids.

The late satirist Kurt Vonnegut hated semicolons. He thought they were show-offy and served no purpose that couldn't be fulfilled by a comma or a full stop. His underlying point was a very sound one—keep your writing clear and simple—but I don't think it was necessary for him to throw a subtle and elegant punctuation mark under a bus.

You don't see a lot of the semicolon these days, which is a pity; but it's remarkable how much greater clarity can be brought to a complex sentence with the judicious application of a semicolon.

When do you use it?

1. When you have a long list that contains a lot of comma-separated items that might contain further comma-separated items within those categories and you would otherwise be drowning in a confusing sea of commas.

> *Innovative popular music movements often originate in busy port cities such as Liverpool, England; Seattle, USA; and Marseilles, France.*

2. To make a break that's stronger than a comma but not as absolute as a full stop.

> *I can't foresee a resolution to this sticky situation; we've reached a stalemate.*

These could be regarded as separate sentences, but we want to preserve the logical internal link that connects them. So use a semicolon!

Apostrophes

No punctuation mark gives people a bigger headache than the **apostrophe**. So let's simplify …

There are two kinds of apostrophe:

- the **possessive apostrophe**, which denotes ownership (Betty's boyfriend, the sun's rays, Humboldt's gift)
- the **apostrophe of omission**, which marks the absence of a letter (don't, that's, won't).

But most problems associated with the apostrophe arise with plurals ending in **s** and the word **its**. Or **it's**.

With plurals

For many of us, the presence of an **s** at the end of a word triggers an uncontrollable desire to attach an apostrophe. Somewhere… anywhere!

When the noun is a normal plural (i.e. with an added **s**), no extra **s** is added in the possessive, just the apostrophe.

So:

boys' filthy habits

regional councils' decisions

Sometimes there's a bit of confusion when adding apostrophes to words or names in the singular that end in **s**:

tennis's finest hour

Jesus's mother

These may look odd and sound funny, and there are many schools of thought on such usages. Some rely on pronunciation as a guide, but different people can pronounce the same word differently. There are other rules I could confuse you with, but I won't. Just put that extra **s** in after the apostrophe!

Finally, there are times when it all seems to go pear-shaped. What's going on with these?

> *boys grammar school*
>
> *ladies golf championship*

These are **descriptive phrases**. 'Boys' is descriptive of the school rather than denoting ownership. 'Ladies' describes the participants rather than indicating possession.

Try asking yourself if the expression can be recast using 'for'. Is it the school **of** the boys or the school **for** the boys? If it's for the boys, then … no apostrophe.

A lot of the time, you could make an argument either way. Very confusing.

With its/it's

But what about **it's**? And **its**? I still stop and ask myself a question every time I use it: Do I mean to say **it is** or **it has**?

> *It's a long way to the top*
>
> *It's been a hard day's night*

If so, I stick in an apostrophe. If not, I don't.

Capitals

There's a **capital** letter at the beginning of every sentence and proper name.

Beyond this basic statement, everything's up for grabs. From one style guide to the next, capitalisation requirements differ. Generally, less is better.

There are many exceptions and variations in capitalisation that can often boil down to matters of opinion or convention. If you have a style guide, follow it.

Or follow the succinct counsel of Sir Ernest: 'Use a capital for the particular and a small letter for the general.'

> *In this case Judge Tompkinson went beyond a judge's proper functions.*

Many of the rules for capitalisation might seem arbitrary and inconsistent. If you come across a piece of writing from the eighteenth century you'll probably notice a wealth of capital letters littering the text. This is because many writers used capitals letters to commence all nouns. It can be extremely distracting to fight your Way through a Forest of capital Letters that festoon almost every Line!

These days, the style is for minimal capitalisation, but there's still plenty of holdover from the bad old days of Maximal Capitalisation. I think there is a strong psychological basis for this: people are concerned that their most important points should not be missed, so they MAKE THE LETTERS BIGGER. Of course, if you really want to make your points forcefully, you'll find much greater success if you concentrate on bolstering the strength of your argument rather than the size of your font.

FAREWELL

In the preceding thirty pages we've sailed around the tip of an enormous iceberg.

My intention hasn't been to provide all the correct answers so much as to get you asking some helpful questions. This will be more valuable to you than an exhaustive catalogue of all the quirks and exceptions of English grammar.

Failing that, I hope this guide at least provides an agreeable distraction on a rainy day. Or a sturdy support for a wonky table.

Further reading

- ***The Complete Plain Words*** by Sir Ernest Gowers
  Now cheaply available online, Sir Ernest's words of wisdom have never been out of print.
- ***Style manual for authors, editors and printers***
  This government publication is the most comprehensive Australian usage guide available.
- **'Politics and the English Language'** by George Orwell
  This indispensable essay is contained in most collections of Orwell's writing. It's also widely available online. Read it now. It'll only take you 15 minutes.

This bright recycled and environmentally responsible stock is made carbon neutral with 100% post consumer recycled waste and is FSC certified.

No-one can learn to be a great writer,
but anyone can learn to be a clear writer.

Written in a conversational tone, *A guide to grammar and punctuation* is an invaluable ongoing reference that will help the reader solve the common problems encountered in everyday writing.

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