

Knowledge of Language

**A basic guide to parts of speech, punctuation,
grammar and syntax, tricky spellings and
common confusions**

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Parts of speech

Check your knowledge of nouns, verbs, adjectives and other common parts of speech.

Nouns

Four basic types

Nouns are fairly straightforward in English. They are sorted into four basic types.

Common nouns

The simplest of all nouns. These name the aspects of our world that we can access by our senses:

man, girl, table, place, town...

Proper nouns

These name particular examples of common nouns. They always have a capital letter:

John, Anne, Strathclyde University, Edinburgh...

Abstract nouns

These name such things as feelings, ideas, attitudes, qualities and the like:

fear, happiness, interest, strength...

Collective nouns

These name groups:

team, committee, group, flock...

Singular and plural

Singular

Singular simply describes how we show that a noun names one person, place, animal or thing.

boy, girl, child, man, mouse...

Plural

A plural noun is one that names **more than one** person, place, animal or thing.

Plurals are formed by:

- Adding letters to the singular usually, but not always, -s:
boys, girls, children...

- Changing the letters of the singular:
man/men, mouse/mice...

Possesives

The possessive version of a noun is the one that shows the noun 'owns' something.

We make the possessive form of a noun by using an apostrophe:

- John's bike
- My daughter's exam results
- The pupils' pencils

The rule about how to do this is one of the most misunderstood in the English language. You will find more information on using apostrophes in the punctuation section of this guide.

Pronouns

Pronouns can take the place of nouns in various ways, depending on the sentence in which they are used.

There are six main types of pronoun:

Personal pronouns

Personal pronouns are replacements for nouns used for people, eg 'John' becomes 'he'.

I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they, me, them, her, him...

Possessive pronouns

Possessive pronouns are replacements for the possessive version of a noun, in which we are being told the person or thing 'owns' something, eg 'Anne's' becomes 'hers'.

mine, yours, hers, ours, his...

Relative pronouns

Relative pronouns take the place of any noun but also introduce a connected clause.

who, what, that...

Indefinite pronouns

Indefinite pronouns are replacements for what would be a very long list of possible nouns.

anyone, everybody, something...

Interrogative pronouns

Interrogative pronouns are replacements for possible nouns in a question.

who, which, whose...

Demonstrative pronouns

Demonstrative pronouns are simple replacements for any noun, usually suggesting more precisely how many or where.

this, that, these, those...

Adjectives

An adjective gives more information about a noun or pronoun, eg,

blue, funny...

Indicative

These simply give more information about a noun or pronoun, eg,

tall...

Comparative

These allow us to compare what the adjective is suggesting about two different nouns. They give the idea of 'more', eg taller.

They are formed in two ways:

- by adding '-er' to the adjective
bigger, faster...
- by adding the word 'more'
more intelligent, more interesting...

Superlative

These adjectives, sometimes known these days as intensifying adjectives, suggest the idea of 'most', eg tallest. Superlatives should only be used for three or more things. If there were only two sisters, one would be the 'elder'. If there were three or more, one would be the 'eldest'.

These are also formed in two ways:

- by adding '-est' to the adjective
clearest, gentlest...
- by adding the word 'most'
most dangerous, most argumentative...

Types

Adjectives can be further divided into two types.

Possessive adjectives

These can be a little confusing as they are sometimes known as possessive pronouns. However, if we keep thinking about adjectives as giving more information about nouns and pronouns, the following words do that job, telling us who owns the noun.

my, his, her, your, their...

Adjective phrases

These are simply phrases that do the job usually done by a single word.

The woman ***with blonde hair*** was ***very heavily pregnant***.

Verbs

A verb gives information about:

- an action – **to run, to complete...**
- a state – **to be, to feel, to seem...**
- a change – **to become, to develop...**

Structure

Verbs are the most complex words in our language. We can make very small, subtle changes to them to affect their meaning and their effect.

Infinitive

This is the most basic form of a verb, from which you can build any of the more complex forms. It begins with 'to':

to play, to run, to seem...

(See below for split infinitives.)

Inflections

These make changes to a verb to affect its meaning.

- We can add letters: '-ed', '-s', '-ing', etc to convey information about tense
- We can change letters: 'run' becomes 'ran', 'fly' becomes 'flew' to convey information about tense.

Modals

These are auxiliary or helper words we can add to a basic verb to affect its meaning.

We can add words (have, is, did, could, may) to convey information about tense or voice.

Split infinitives and the Starship Enterprise

Remember the famous introduction to *Star Trek*? The task of the crew was 'to boldly go where no man has gone before'. Strict grammarians sneer at the split infinitive, but in fact an infinitive may be split for emphasis, as in this case. It is becoming increasingly common, and acceptable, to split infinitives.

What do we mean by splitting an infinitive? It just means putting another word between the 'to' and the rest of the verb,

eg 'to loudly sing'.

Finite verbs

A sentence must contain a subject and a finite verb. Finite here means 'finished' or 'complete'. A finite verb gives enough information to make sense, ie

- the tense
- the person
- whether it is singular (about one thing/person) or plural (about more than one thing/person)

Examples of finite verbs are:

I go, you sing, she thinks, we know (present tense)...

he thought, we were looking, you knew, they ran (past tense)...

we will see, they will go (future tense)...

Non-finite verbs do not tell us the tense, the person or whether they are singular or plural.

Examples of non-finite verbs:

All infinitives, eg,

to go, to sing, to look...

Participles, eg,

going, singing, looking...

Tense

Tense is the term we use to describe how we convey information about how time is shown in a verb.

We use tenses to talk about the past, the present and the future.

Past and present

Past and present are shown by inflections and by adding modals. You know the past tenses, even if you don't know (or need to know) what a modal or inflection is.

- She finished**ed** (past)
- She **has** finished**ed** (past)
- She finishes**es** (present).

Future

Future is shown by adding modals:

She **will** finish.

Each of these tenses can be divided into many different types or aspects, eg,

she had finished, she had been finishing, she was finishing, she will be finishing...

These all have different names, but it will be sufficient to think just of past, present and future.

See the Verb tenses page for more detailed examples.

Voice

There are two voices in English:

Active voice

The person or thing is doing something. You will recognise this as the way in which we usually use verbs to convey information:

The striker **kicked** the defender.

The sun **shone**.

Both the striker and the sun are doing something.

Passive voice

Something is being done to the person or thing. The passive voice makes what we are saying less personal, as often required in scientific report writing:

The defender **was kicked** by the striker.

The solution **was turned blue** by the addition of...

The sun **was covered** by clouds.

Here the emphasis is on the action, but less on who did it.

First, second and third person

Most speech and writing is in either the first or the third person. Normally, only instructions or directions are in the second person.

There are more details about this in the section on Verbs - first, second and third person.

Verb tenses

Tenses are about time. A native speaker of English can usually use most tenses accurately, without knowing the names of them. They are more problematic when people learn English, or another language, as an additional language.

There are many different tenses which show slight differences in time but these are the most common ones.

Present tenses

<p>Past simple</p> <p><i>I teach</i> in Roberston High School.</p> <p><i>She teaches</i> Shakespeare every day.</p> <p><i>I like</i> chocolate.</p>	<p>Used for actions that happen regularly (even if they are not happening right now) and for things that are generally true.</p>
<p>Present continuous</p> <p><i>I am teaching.</i></p> <p><i>She is teaching</i> Shakespeare just now.</p>	<p>Used for actions that are going on now but which may be temporary.</p>

Past tenses

<p>Past simple</p> <p><i>I taught.</i></p> <p><i>She taught</i> until she retired.</p>	<p>Used for actions in the past which are finished.</p>
<p>Present perfect</p> <p><i>I have taught.</i></p> <p><i>She has taught</i> here for seven years.</p> <p><i>I have seen</i> this film before.</p>	<p>Used for actions which started in the past which are still going on or which were completed in the past but are still directly relevant in the present.</p> <p>(Note this is a past tense although it contains the word 'present'.)</p>
<p>Past perfect</p> <p><i>I had taught.</i></p> <p>When she checked her records she found that <i>she had taught</i> tenses already.</p>	<p>Used for actions which happened before an event that is already in the past. (This tense used to be called the pluperfect.)</p>

(Checked is past simple.)

Future tense

Future simple

I will teach.

She will teach Shakespeare next period.

Used for things that will happen in the future – even if it is just a few minutes in the future.

Verbs – first, second and third person

First person

This is where the text uses 'I', 'we' and 'our'.

First person is used to write or talk about a personal experience. In a novel, of course, the main character, who is obviously not a real person, may be narrating the story in the first person, as if it were a personal experience.

Writers may use the first person as they reflect upon an issue, though it is more common to use third person for this sort of writing.

I was brought up in a Scottish fishing town, where the smell of the fish smoking over the oak chips filled the air whenever we wandered around our local harbour.

(Personal experience)

It is difficult to know to what extent we should mollycoddle our children. My own childhood was very free but nowadays I am reluctant to let my children play outside on their own. How can we find the correct balance?

(Reflection on an issue)

Second person

This is where the text uses 'you', which can be singular or plural – about one person or more than one. (Actually the Scots plural form 'yous' is very sensible.) The word 'your' is also used in the second person.

Second person is used in instruction manuals, recipes etc. In some cases the word 'you' is not actually there, but is understood. Very occasionally, a writer will use second person to give a sense of immediacy.

You go down this road as far as the traffic lights and then you turn left.

Mix the yellow paint with the blue and then put it in that part of your painting.

(Here 'you' is understood.)

You hear your name called out. You go down the corridor with your heart in your mouth. Slowly, you open the door.

(Here second person is used to give a sense of immediacy.)

Third person

This is where the text uses 'she', 'he', 'it', 'they', 'her', 'his' and 'their'. Third person is used where the writer or speaker is describing someone else, and not their own personal experience.

One point to notice, however, is that text in the third person can include direct speech in the first or second person. The text is still said to be in the third person.

For many years Ian had had a dream of owning a house somewhere in the sun. Finally, after he retired from teaching, he achieved this.

'Would you like to come and visit me?' he asked his friends. They were only too happy to agree. (This is still in the third person even though the direct speech is in the first person.)

It is difficult to know to what extent children should be mollycoddled. Many who are now parents themselves had a very free childhood, but they are reluctant to let their own children play outside on their own. (Third person used to reflect on an issue.)

Adverbs

The main purpose of an adverb is to give more information than the verb has told us. It usually gives information about when, where, why, how or the extent to which something is done, what state it is in, or what changes are happening to it (ie the verbs that describe action, state or change).

Health warning

Many adverbs end in '-ly', like **quickly, slowly, angrily**. However, many do not, like **well, soon, or here**. Also, there are many words in English that end in '-ly' that are not adverbs, like **holly, jelly and family**. It's never simple!

There are essentially five types of adverb in English:

Circumstance

These tell us about the particular circumstances in which the action or the state or the change took place. These are the most obvious and common ways of giving more information about a verb.

- **How** – *quickly, slowly, angrily...* (This is the most common type of circumstance adverb.)
- **Where** – *there, down, up...*
- **When** – *yesterday, later...*
- **How often** – *often, regularly, rarely...*
- **To what extent** – *more, less...*

Note that the actual words 'how', 'where' and 'when' are interrogative adverbs. Circumstance adverbs are the words which give us the answers to these questions.

Attitude

These adverbs give us more information about the writer's view of, or attitude towards, what the verb has told us about.

fortunately, significantly, surprisingly...

Connective

These are common and helpful words which may seem the most confusing of all, as they seem totally unconnected with verbs. Their job is to suggest more precisely connections between sentences or clauses.

Teachers often use the phrase 'linking words' to explain them.

however, nevertheless, although...

Phrases

Sometimes referred to as adverbial phrases.

These are groups of words which give the same information about verbs as single adverbs do. They often consist of a simple adverb, 'well' for example, made more emphatic or intense by other intensifying adverbs such as 'very', 'indeed', 'such', 'so':

after dinner, very well indeed, so quickly...

Interrogative

These enable us to ask questions about the action or state or change, for example:

- Why?
- How?
- When?
- Where?

Connectives

Connectives are sometimes known as conjunctions. The word 'connective' just explains more simply that these words link or connect other words, phrases or clauses.

There are two main types:

Co-ordinating connectives

These link words, phrases or clauses which are of equal importance. These connectives include words such as 'but', 'and', 'so'.

Romeo **and** Juliet both died at the end of the play. (The connective links words.)

It was very important **but** not very interesting. (The connective links phrases.)

They met up in town **and** went for a meal. (The connective links clauses.)

Subordinating connectives

These link a main clause with a subordinate (or dependent) clause. These connectives include words such as 'if', 'although', 'when', 'while', 'since', 'because'.

Before leaving the restaurant, John paid the bill.

We decided to go home **because** there was a queue outside.

Definite and indefinite articles

An article comes before a noun.

There are three articles:

the, a, an...

'**The**' is a definite article which denotes a specific thing.

The book was interesting to read.
She made an appointment to meet **the** headteacher.

'**A**' and '**an**' are indefinite articles which don't denote any particular thing.

'A' and 'an' are used in the same way except that 'an' is used before a vowel or a word beginning with 'h' if the 'h' is silent.

I will get **a** book to read while I wait.
I would like **an** egg for breakfast.
Although we had to wait an hour for the train, it was **an** honour to spend it in your company.

Prepositions

Prepositions link words and phrases in a sentence to other words and phrases. They show the relationship between them and often (though not always) indicate if the relationship is to do with location or with time.

Prepositions about location (place) include:

on, in, under, over, above, between, among, beneath, against, towards, beside, across, off, on, within...

Prepositions about time include:

during, before, after, throughout, since...

Other prepositions include:

for, of, except...

You will see that the same words may be prepositions or connectives. You can tell if the word is a preposition because it will come before a noun, whereas a subordinating connective introduces a subordinate clause.

The book was ***on*** the table.
 The pupils were ***in*** the library.
 He knew he was ***among*** friends and so he spoke freely.

Note about between and among

'Between' is used for two things/people and 'among' for more than two things/people.

Complex prepositions

A complex preposition is where a group of words act as a single preposition, eg ***'in front of'***.

He was getting ***towards the end of*** the race course when he tripped over a fallen branch.
 The new crossing was ***in front of*** the school gate.
On the way to school he walked between two friends.

Punctuation

Punctuation allows us to break up language in writing the same way we do in speech. Find out how and why common punctuation marks are used.

Apostrophe

The apostrophe has two uses:

- to show that a word has been shortened or abbreviated
- to show the idea of ownership or belonging (possession).

Abbreviation

To show that a word has been shortened, simply insert the apostrophe where the letters are missing:

- **can't** for cannot
- **could've** for could have
- **it's** for it is.

Note: these kinds of abbreviation should really only be used in writing when you are using direct speech, ie words actually said by someone.

Ownership, belonging, possession

Horrible but true – and wrong!

A brightly lit neon sign at a holiday camp:

Telephone's ✘

Sign in shop:

Turnip's for sale ✘

And worst of all...

Robert **Burn's** ✘

The problem is the **s**, isn't it? See an **s** and hit it with an apostrophe. Please don't!

What's the answer?

If all you want to do is show that there is more than one thing (a plural) just add an **s**, not an apostrophe.

One turnip

Two turnips

One telephone

Three telephones

Apostrophes are only used when there is an **s** that shows something belongs to someone.

Where to put apostrophes

Singular and plural words

Many people know vaguely that the apostrophe goes after the **s** for a plural (more than one) but then wonder about unusual plural words like children or men which do not have an **s**.

A simple trick for all apostrophes (singular and plural words)

- Don't think about singular and plural.
- To find out where the apostrophe goes turn the sentence or relevant part of the sentence around in your head.
- The trick is to note the **last letter** of the **last word** of the turned-round sentence and put the apostrophe after it.

Example 1:

The girls top was red (note it says 'was' so there is only one top and one girl in it.)

Turned round: The top belonging to the girl.

The trick: the last letter of the last word is **l** – so put the apostrophe after the **l**.

The answer: The girl's top was red.

Example 2:

The two girls tops were red.

Turned round: The tops belonging to the two girls.

The trick: the last letter of the last word is **s** – so put the apostrophe after the **s**.

The answer: The two girls' tops were red.

Example 3:

I collected the childrens books.

Turned round: I collected the books belonging to the children.

The trick: the last letter of the last word is **n** – so put the apostrophe after the **n**.

The answer: I collected the children's books.

Names and adjectives

What about names which end in **s**? Do you add another **s**?

The good news is that it is acceptable to write names either way. One syllable names sound better without the extra **s**

Burns' poetry

The poetry belonging to Burns. It needs an apostrophe because it's not just his name.

Two syllable words can take an extra **s** or not:

Silas' book or **Silas's** book.

Another oddity – adjectives that end in s

Some words end in **s** and might look as if they should have an apostrophe, but actually they are being used as an adjective to describe something.

For example:

Burns Supper

The supper doesn't belong to Burns so it does not need an apostrophe. The word Burns describes what sort of supper it is. This makes it different from Burns' poetry because the poetry does belong to Burns.

It's and its

Sometimes its has an apostrophe and sometimes it doesn't.

When **it's** is short for it is, there is an apostrophe.

It's a cold day.

When **its** is used for ownership, belonging or possession, there is no apostrophe – so it breaks all the rules you have just learned!

The cat licked **its** paws.

Who's and whose

This is similar to it's and its.

Who's is short for who is, so there is an apostrophe to replace the missing letter.

Who's going to the match?

Whose is used for ownership. There is no apostrophe.

Whose book is this?

They're, their and there

They're is short for 'They are'.

They're going to secondary school in August.

Their means that someone owns something.

Their uniforms are ready for them.

There is a place. Think of here and there to remember the spelling. There is also used before parts of the verb 'to be', eg it is used before 'is', 'are', 'was', 'were', 'will be'.

When they go to France, I hope they enjoy their time *there*.

There were ten candles on the cake.

There is going to be a storm.

You're and your

You're is short for 'You are'.

You're going to be rich now that you've won the lottery.

You're only sixteen. There's plenty of time to decide what career you want to follow.

Your means that someone owns something.

Give me *your* hand and I'll tell your fortune.

Your birthday is on the 5th of November, isn't it?

Brackets

Brackets are used to separate phrases that have been inserted into a sentence to explain, comment on or give some more information about something.

He pulled out the gold cigarette case (his only real treasure) and opened it carefully.

Parentheses is a name for the signs – either brackets or dashes – which are used to separate the extra information. The singular is 'parenthesis'.

this, that, these, those...

Colon

It's easiest to think about a colon as a punctuation mark that introduces something.

Health warning:

Punctuation is like any other aspect of language. The ways in which people use it change over time. Nowadays semi-colons and colons are increasingly being used interchangeably. That's not wrong; it's just how language works.

Nowadays, there are four main uses of a colon.

The first two are fairly straightforward. The next two can cause problems because the colon is being used in place of a full stop. It is not wrong to use a full stop instead, but when a colon is used like this there must be a very close connection between the two sentences. It would, however, be completely wrong to use a comma here. If in doubt, use a full stop. See common mistakes in sentences.

To introduce a quotation

It can be used to introduce a quotation when you are writing about literature. Generally, it is used for a long quotation, or when you wish to set the quotation out on a new line to reflect the original verse:

Norman MacCaig suggests that the November mist is foul smelling, sneaky and threatening in the lines:

The brown air fumes at the shop windows,
Tries the doors, and sidles past.

To introduce a list

It can be used to introduce a list which contains lengthy items.

The School Board made the following decisions: to extend the school day to 6pm; to introduce water fountains to each classroom; and to encourage pupils to eat healthier options in the school canteen.

To introduce an explanation

It can be used to introduce an explanation of what has been said.

We went out for dinner last night: my parents had come up from England for my birthday.

NOTE: Do you see that what comes after the colon explains why they went out? It's not just more information but an explanation.

To introduce an antithesis

It can be used to introduce an antithesis, which is a statement which shows a balanced contrast.

Colons are fairly easy to grasp: semi-colons are a bit trickier.

Comma

Commas are used to separate in five different ways.

To separate short items on a list

We went shopping and bought food, wine, some gifts, twelve cards and a Christmas tree.

To separate items of extra information from the rest of a sentence

Andrew, my cousin, came to visit us last summer.

To separate subordinate clauses from the main clause in a sentence

The main clause here is shown in bold:

Having begun to watch the match, **we decided not to go out for dinner.**

With her head held high, her face still beaming, **Angela accepted her gold medal.**

To separate direct speech from the rest of a sentence

When the direct speech comes first, put the comma within the speech marks.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' he shouted.

When the direct speech comes after other parts of the sentence, you put the comma before the speech marks.

He shouted, 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

To separate connective adverbs from the rest of a sentence

Nevertheless, it is important that you continue to exercise.

However, I have decided to accept your offer of compensation.

Dash

Dashes are used singly and in pairs for several purposes.

To replace a colon

A single dash can be used to replace a colon when it introduces an explanation of what has been said. Be careful though. A full stop would also be acceptable but a comma would not.

I find grammar difficult – there are just too many rules.

To introduce a key idea or to sum up

A single dash can be used to introduce a key idea which may sum up what you want to say, or leave the reader with a key idea to think about. Here again a full stop would be acceptable but a comma would not.

Grammar is just too complicated and there are too many rules – let's just forget it!

In the same way as brackets

Double dashes can be used for parenthesis in exactly the same way brackets are. That means they are used to mark words you have inserted into a sentence but which you want to keep separate for some reason.

For extra information, rather like a comma:

My cousin – who had just arrived from Canada – entered the room, with two suitcases, an umbrella and a big smile on his face.

For humorous comment:

My cousin is an interesting man – he eats raw snails, for goodness sake – but he is difficult to get along with.

Ellipsis

An ellipsis indicates that a word or words have been left out.

It is used to:

- show that you have stopped in the middle of what you were writing, leaving the reader to guess or infer what you might have been going on to say, eg

There are certain things that I would like to say but...

- show that, having given a few examples of what you mean, you do not need to add any more because the reader could think of many more, eg

Just bring the usual supplies, like soft drinks, sandwiches, fruit...

Exclamation mark

An exclamation mark is used at the end of an exclamatory sentence, ie a sentence that expresses strong emotion.

How dare you!

Full stop

A full stop is used to show that you have come to the end of a sentence.

You can also use them to show that you have shortened or abbreviated words. There are two types of abbreviations that use full stops.

You can put a full stop after the first letter of each abbreviated word.

R.A.C. – Royal Automobile Club
B.B.C. – British Broadcasting Corporation

You can put a full stop after a selected group of letters from a word.

St. – Street
Rd. – Road
Mr. – Mister
Etc. – et cetera

Nowadays, it is becoming very common not to bother using full stops for this purposes, so you will see RAC, AA, BBC, Mr, Mrs, etc.

Hyphen

Hyphens are used to make new words out of two existing words or parts of words.

It's worth noting that, nowadays, the hyphens in many words are just missed out. Head-ache is now headache, and city-centre is now city centre.

There are three main uses of a hyphen.

- It is used to make adjectives and groups of words that act as adjectives:

a well-known footballer
a five-year-old pupil

These adjectives are only hyphenated when they appear immediately before the noun.

For example:

The footballer was well known.

- It is used to make nouns by adding small words to the end of an existing word:

kick-off
break-in
hanger-on

- It is used to make various kinds of words by adding small words to the start of an existing word:

ex-pupil
non-attender
co-operation (although you'll know that even that word is now used without the hyphen too – cooperation)

Question mark

A question mark is used to request information or answers. Sentences that end with question marks are sometimes called interrogative sentences.

Where are the biscuits?

What shall we do now?

How does it work?

Semi-colon

Health warning

Punctuation is like any other aspect of language; the ways in which people use it change over time. Nowadays semi-colons and colons are increasingly being used interchangeably. That's not wrong; it's just how language works.

There are three common uses of a semi-colon.

The first use (in a list) is very straightforward.

The next two can cause problems because the semi-colon is being used in place of a full stop. It is not wrong to use a full stop instead. When a semi-colon is used like this there must be a very close connection between the two sentences. It would, however, be completely wrong to use a comma here. If in doubt, use a full stop. See common mistakes in sentences for more information.

To separate lengthy items in a list

The Governors made the following decisions: to extend the school-day to 6pm; to introduce water fountains to each classroom; and to encourage pupils to eat healthier options in the school canteen.

To separate parts of a sentence

When sentences are becoming too long and there are already lots of commas you can use a semi-colon. You could argue that if you have to do this, the sentence may be getting too clumsy anyway and should be broken down into two separate ones!

However, if that were to be the case, and even if there is a problem with resources, as well as staffing issues, the most important consideration has to be the needs of the children; they have to come first. *(Note the close connection – 'children' and 'they'.)*

To introduce additional information

They can be used for additional information or for further detail about what has been said where there is a close connection between the two parts. Here the semi-colon introduces a close, but opposing idea:

I enjoy learning about grammar; most people feel very uncomfortable about it.

Speech marks

Speech marks – which are also known as inverted commas – simply separate the words someone in a sentence actually says from the rest of the sentence. These words are called direct speech.

"I'll be back home soon," Jim shouted to his mum.

There are some simple rules to follow:

- Put every word that was said inside speech marks.
- Always use a capital letter for the first word of each sentence inside the speech marks:

"I'm going out now. Is that OK?" he asked.
Mum said quietly, "Please sit down."

- Separate the direct speech from the rest of the sentence, usually using a comma:

Mum said quietly, "Please sit down."
"Please sit down," Mum said quietly.

Sometimes we can break the direct speech up by inserting information about who is speaking. This is the only time when you do not use a capital letter for the first word inside the speech marks. This is because the part that starts 'you had better' is still part of the same sentence that started before the interruption of 'she said'.

"If you think you can speak to me like that," she said, "you had better think again!"

In the following example, what she says is in two separate sentences and so we need a comma and a full stop as well as a capital letter when she starts to speak again.

"Don't speak to me like that," she said. "Go up to your room."

Grammar and syntax

Grammar and syntax enable us to organise words into meaningful groupings.

Subject

Verbs have subjects. There are three types of verbs, which give information about an action, a state or a change. A subject tells you:

- Who or what did the action the verb told you about, eg,

The boy cried.
The rain poured.

OR

- Who or what was in the state the verb told you about, eg,

The boy felt ill.
The atmosphere seemed tense.

OR

- Who or what was changed by what the verb told you about, eg,

The girl grew tall.
The tension became unbearable.

You will always be able to work out the subject of a verb by putting **who** or **what** in front of that verb to form a question. The answer to that question will be the subject of that verb.

The full-back hammered the ball over the roof of the stand.

- The verb in the sentence is hammered.
- Who/what hammered? – the full-back did.
- This means that the subject of the verb is 'the full-back'.

In any sentence, there will be as many subjects as there are verbs.

subject	verb	subject	verb	subject	verb
Alan	walked away,	Joan	stood in shock and	Steven	sniggered quietly.

Object

Some verbs have objects, in particular verbs of action. An object tells you who or what was affected by that verb, who or what had the action done to them.

You can usually work out the object of a verb by putting who or what after the verb to form a question. The answer to that question will be the object of that verb.

This is how to find the object in this sentence:

The full-back hammered the ball over the roof of the stand.

First, identify the verb - **hammered**.

So who or what was hammered? Which means the object of the sentence is **the ball**.

Types

There are two types of object. (You may still have nightmares about them from when you learned French in school!)

Direct object

Direct objects tell you exactly who or what is affected by the verb.

My brother broke **the window**.
Melanie crossed **the road**.

Indirect object

Indirect objects are a little more complicated and only certain verbs can have them. The indirect object is not directly affected by the verb.

It can be the thing or person that receives the direct object. An indirect object tells you to whom, or for whom a direct object applies.

subject	verb	direct object	indirect object
I	gave	my keys	to you.
I	bought	cakes	for you.

It can be shortened by leaving out the preposition. The indirect object then appears before the direct object. It can be the thing or person that has the action done for it/him/her.

subject	verb	direct object	indirect object
I	gave	you	my keys.
I	bought	you	cakes.

In the second example, I did not buy you, I bought the cakes (direct object) for you (indirect object).

The most common verbs that take indirect objects are:

ask, give, teach, pour, tell, throw, send, lend, owe, promise, read...

Phrases

A phrase is group of words that does not make complete sense on its own.

We may understand what is meant, but there is no finite verb, so a phrase cannot make full sense by itself.

over there...
the small boy...

Clauses

Clauses are the basic building blocks that make up sentences. There are two main types.

Main clauses

The main clause is the group of words within a sentence that makes sense on its own. It tells us the main piece of information in that sentence. Any simple sentence will have only one clause.

Steven opened the door.

It is usually quite easy, however, to pull out the main clause even from a complex sentence. Just ask yourself what the main piece of information is in the sentence.

Having finished his dinner, **John put the dishes in the sink.**
Claire, who was feeling unwell, **went home for the evening.**

Subordinate clauses

A subordinate clause is a group of words in a sentence, with a verb in it, which usually does not make sense on its own. It depends on the main clause for its sense.

Having finished his dinner, George put the dishes in the sink.
Claire, **who was feeling unwell**, went home for the evening.

These clauses can be made as complicated as you want to make them. Just be wary of using too many of them as the meaning of the sentence can be lost.

Sentences

Everyone knows what a sentence is. It can be difficult, however, to define one exactly.

The simplest rule about a sentence is that it can stand on its own and make sense. It should have a subject and a finite verb. A sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop.

Structure

In any language, we make sense by putting words into a particular order.

David asked Anne to the party.

It's the structure of the sentence (the order in which the words are put together) that makes them make sense. The same words in a different order would give a different meaning.

Anne asked David to the party.

The structure – or syntax – can become very complex, but in English there is a fairly basic, simple structure for making a sentence.

The main building blocks are:

subject verb object

We can build any kind of sentence by using combinations of these building blocks.

subject	verb
The angry customer	left.

subject	verb	object
The angry customer	slammed	the door.

Types

We can sub-divide sentences into a range of types:

Major sentences

Major sentences are the ones you would usually recognise most easily – the stand-alone, sense-making sentences, with a finite verb in them which seems to hold the sense together.

We went out to the cinema last night.
The lead-singer of the band smashed his guitar on the stage.

Minor sentences

Minor sentences do make sense on their own but they often break the rules as far as having a verb in them is concerned.

No entry.
Hello.

Others make sense only because of what went before, or what comes after, or perhaps because of the context in which we find them.

Enough!
Yes.
Not today, thanks.

Statement sentences

Statement sentences are the most common type that we use. They 'make a statement' or tell us something.

Paul failed his driving test.
 You are a very good cook.
 The day began with a huge breakfast which kept us going until dinner time.

Questioning sentences

Questioning sentences are used when we are looking for information or answers. (These are sometimes called interrogative sentences.) They end in a question mark.

Why did you do that?
 What time is it?
 Where did you put the car keys?

Exclamatory sentences

Exclamatory sentences express strong feelings. They usually end with an exclamation mark.

What a superb meal that was!
 How I wish we were going on holiday!
 How dare you!

Commanding sentences

Commanding sentences are used to give instructions.

Go to the headteacher's office now, please.
 Open your books at page 24.

Paragraphs

A paragraph is a section of text, usually consisting of several sentences, which addresses a particular topic or aspect of a subject. A paragraph may occasionally be one sentence - or even one word long - to make a particular effect.

One way to decide if a paragraph is needed is to consider if there is a change in time or place in the passage, or if different people are introduced.

If a written text is clearly about different aspects of a subject, it is clear where there needs to be a new paragraph. See Example 1: Dogs (below) for this. Here each paragraph is about a different way in which dogs can support humans. Example 1 also shows how to use an introduction, a topic sentence, links and a conclusion.

It is harder to decide where a paragraph goes where the text is all about the same subject, but is still long enough to divide up into paragraphs. See Example 2: The Olympic Games (below).

Layout

In a handwritten text each paragraph should be indented. This means that the first line should not be right against the margin but should start a short space in from it. In a word-processed text it is normal to show a new paragraph by pressing 'return' or 'enter' twice to leave a space between the lines.

The structure of a written text

A long piece of text will generally start with an **introduction**, which will be a paragraph by itself. The **main part** of the text will be divided into several paragraphs. It will end with a **conclusion** which will be one paragraph.

Introduction

This paragraph will state the main point or purpose of the text.

It should:

- be clear about the main focus of the text
- give some indication of how this main focus will be addressed, eg it might give a very brief breakdown of what will be covered in each section.

It should not:

- give any specific detail
- use quotations
- make a personal statement such as, 'I am going to write about...'
- use the words, 'This essay', eg 'This essay is going to be about...'

Main body

Structure of a paragraph

- Each paragraph should normally contain a topic sentence which will make clear what the main point of the paragraph is. It will often, though not always, be the first sentence of the paragraph. This sentence should not say 'This paragraph will be about.'
- The paragraph will give details, eg facts and figures, quotations, evidence, examples.
- Good writers will link their paragraphs to each other.

Conclusion

This paragraph will bring together or sum up the main points of the text.

It should:

- be fairly short
- be clear about the main result(s), finding(s), idea(s) conclusion(s).

It should not:

- add any new information
- repeat exactly the same words as the introduction.

Linking

Linking words and phrases

There are different sorts of links.

Links to show that additional information is coming up:

- In addition...
- Moreover...
- Another...
- Furthermore...
- As well as this...

- Also...

Avoid using **also** to start a sentence. It's not grammatically wrong but an unsophisticated link. Use it later in the sentence (eg They also think...) but do not overuse it as a link.

Links to show that an opposite point of view or a turning point is coming up:

- In spite of this...
- Nevertheless...
- Notwithstanding...
- However...
- Yet...

Links to show that a summary or conclusion is coming up:

- In conclusion...
- Consequently...
- Therefore...
- In summary...
- Because of all this...

Other information

Paragraphs which are one sentence or one word long

These would normally be used in creative or personal writing or occasionally in discursive writing, but not in functional writing.

The purpose of a one-word or one-sentence paragraph is to make it stand out dramatically.

Types of writing

- Creative writing means a fictional piece like a story, a novel or a play.
- Personal writing is about something that has actually happened to the writer.
- Discursive writing is where the writer explores opinions about an issue.
- Functional writing gives information, including reports and summaries.

Paragraphs – Example 1 – Dogs

Text	Commentary
<p>Dogs are very important as pets, but many people are unaware of the extent to which working dogs can help humans in everyday life. There are several ways in which dogs do this, the most well-known being the support that guide dogs give the visually impaired. There are, however, many other examples of how dogs can assist us through, for example, the 'Pets as Therapy Scheme' or by providing early warnings for epilepsy sufferers.</p>	<p>Introduction</p> <p>States main focus ie dogs help humans.</p> <p>Gives brief breakdown of what will be covered, ie guide dogs, Pets as Therapy, epilepsy assistance dogs.</p>
<p><i>Most of us are familiar with the work done by guide dogs but may not know the details of how the system works.</i> Suitable dogs attend one of the four training centres in Britain where they learn basic</p>	<p>Sentence in italics is the topic sentence</p> <p>Rest of paragraph gives the details of how system</p>

<p>skills before being paired with their new owner. He or she will normally undertake a residential training course, while getting to know how to work with the dog. There is a charge of 50p to the new owner to ensure that everyone can have access to a dog.</p> <p>Dogs are usually six months to a year old and will work for seven or eight years. Their owners may decide to keep them, but there are always many people keen to re-home a retired dog. This is just one way in which dogs can help people.</p>	<p>works</p>
<p><i>In addition</i> dogs registered with the PAT association can support people who are ill or elderly. Many residents in nursing homes and hospitals benefit from visits from ‘Pets as Therapy’ dogs. This charity, founded in 1983, enlists volunteers with quiet, calm dogs. They are given advice about how to approach patients who may have a variety of difficulties such as impairments in hearing, vision or mobility.</p> <p>There are currently 4500 registered dogs and over 130,000 people a week receive visits. Seeing or stroking the dogs can help people to relax, to feel more at home and can even, in some cases, reduce their blood pressure.</p>	<p>Linking phrase in bold</p> <p>Topic sentence is in italics</p> <p>Rest of paragraph gives details about PAT dogs and the work they do</p>
<p><i>Another</i> way in which dogs can support humans is to warn epilepsy sufferers that they are about to experience an attack. Evidence of this is sketchy but it does seem that some dogs may be aware of an impending attack up to half an hour before the person has any indication. This allows them to go to a place of safety before the fit starts. It costs about £10,000 to train a dog and to ensure that support is given to the dog and its owner.</p>	<p>Linking word in bold</p> <p>Topic sentence is in italics</p> <p>Rest of paragraph gives more details about ‘epileptic’ dogs</p>
<p>It is clear that there are many ways in which humans can benefit from dogs. As well as being friendly companions, they have a big role to play in supporting those with various types of disabilities.</p>	<p>Conclusion</p> <p>Sums up main idea: dogs provide a lot of support</p>

Paragraphs – Example 2 – The Olympic Games

These paragraphs are all about the Olympic Games and so there has to be another way to decide where a new paragraph goes. Each is about an aspect of the games, as detailed in the commentary:

Number	Paragraph	Commentary
1	The Olympic Games started in 776 BC and were so named because they were held in Olympia in Greece. At that time they were closely connected with the worship of the Greek gods and statues and temples were erected near the site of the games to honour them.	1. Time and place they started
2	Initially there was only one sport but others soon followed. At first competitors only took part in a 200 yard race called a stade. It is clear where the modern day name for the competition ground comes from. Later on more races were added, as well as the pentathlon, boxing and wrestling.	2. Early sports
3	The games continued in some form for about 1200 years until they were banned by a Roman emperor in 393 CE. He thought that they encouraged people to worship pagan gods such as Zeus and, as a Christian, he disapproved.	3. Games banned
4	In 1894, however, a Frenchman, Pierre de Coubertin established the International Olympic Committee in order to revive the Olympic Games. They have continued almost without interruption since then, with changes taking place as necessary. One of the most significant of these changes was the recognition that sports involving ice and snow were just as important as athletics.	4. Games re-established
5	Consequently, the winter games were started and are now held every four years, with a two-year gap between the summer and winter events. Athletes who excel in sports such as ski-ing, skating and the bob sleigh now have their talents recognised.	5. Winter games

Common mistakes in sentences

Sometimes it is difficult to know where to put a full stop and we like to hedge our bets by putting a comma instead. Sorry to tell you – but this won't work! If you are hesitating about using a comma or a full stop, go for a full stop. You are more likely to be correct.

Handy hints

Can you use a comma instead of a full stop?

Often it is because sentences are very short that we think a comma makes more sense. Sometimes people see a close connection between the sentences and therefore link them with a comma. Neither of these ideas is correct.

It was wet, I put up my umbrella. ✘

The first sentence is so short and so closely connected to the second that it is tempting to put a comma. The correct version, however, is:

It was wet. I put up my umbrella.

The lead-singer of the band smashed his guitar on the stage, it was broken into small pieces. ✘

This might at first seem correct because the ideas in the two sentences are closely linked, but, to be grammatically correct, it should read:

The lead-singer of the band smashed his guitar on the stage. It was broken into small pieces.

Then

'Then' always starts a new sentence unless it has a connective such as 'and', 'but' or 'so' in front of it. 'Then' should not be overused as it is not a sophisticated linking word.

I got into school at 8.45 and then I went to my registration class.
I got into school at 8.45. Then I went to my registration class.

However

'However' is not a connective. It is part of a new sentence. If you want to be very correct, it should not be the first word in the sentence, although this is accepted nowadays.

Many children are driven to school. A recent report, *however*, shows that the majority walk or cycle.
Emma's skills in listening and talking are developing. *However*, she needs to keep practising her reading at home.

Because

Yes, in spite of what your pupils will tell you, you can start a sentence with 'because'. Just make sure that you have an end to it and it is not left hanging loose! The end is shown in bold.

Because it was raining, *I bought a new umbrella when I was out.*
Because many teachers were rather uncertain about some aspects of grammar, *this online module has been put together to support them.*

Incorrect example – not a sentence

Because there were many new courses on offer in the school to ensure that young people had a lot of choice. ✘

You could change this to the correct version:

Because there were many new courses on offer in the school to ensure that young people had a lot of choice, *the school got an excellent report.*

Although

'Although' works in the same way as 'because'. It can start a sentence, but must have an end, so it is not hanging loose.

Although most of the pupils had learned to tie their laces, a few still had problems.
Although it was raining, the boys were determined to go out to play football.

Incorrect example – here the 'although' part should be the end of the previous sentence.

Smoking has been banned in public places for some time now and this has helped some people to stop. Although other people still find it hard to give up. ✘

'King Kong' was created using layers of cotton, rubber and fur which were fixed to a metal frame.

Although several models were used in the film. ✘

Tricky spellings

Some words are commonly misspelled and/or easily confused.

It's easy to prevent these common mistakes.

Argue/arguing/argument	It is argue but arguing and argument drop the 'e'.
Benefited	Benefited has only one 't' normally, though two 't's are now accepted.
Commitment/committed/committing	Commitment has only one 't'. Committed has two 't's'. Committing has two 't's'.
Affect/effect	Affect is a verb. Effect is a noun. (For more information see the Common confusions section.)
Focused or focussed; focusing or focussing	It can be spelled both ways, though one 's' is more common.
Independent	Remember that all the vowels are 'e'.
Lead/led	Led (pronounced to rhyme with 'Ted') is the past tense of ' to lead ' (pronounced to rhyme with 'need') He is often led astray by others. He leads others astray. Lead is the metal (obviously pronounced 'led' to rhyme with 'Ted!') The pupils learned about lead in their science class.
A lot	Should always be two separate words.
Practice/practise	Practice is a noun. Practise is a verb. (For more information see the Common confusions section.)
Separate	There is 'a rat' in the middle of separate ... There isn't in desperate (but you would never use this in a report, would you?).

You can always check spellings with online dictionaries such as [Chambers](#).

Common confusions

Help with some of the words in English which often confuse people.

There are some words which people often find confusing. They are not inter-changeable, but mean completely different things. The examples here are: imply and infer; uninterested and disinterested; two, too and to.

Some words, however, such as practice/practise, affect/effect, who/whom mean similar things but have a different spelling depending on how they are used in the sentence.

There is also help with the difference between words such as 'less' and 'fewer', and 'between' and 'among'.

Affect and effect

Affect

'Affect' is almost always a verb (something does something to something else). It means to act upon something or to influence something.

- The wet weather will **affect** the flower show.
- Many issues **affect** how well young people learn.
- My performance in the exam was **affected** by my cold.

Effect

'Effect' is most often used as a noun (a thing).

- The **effect** of the rain will be to spoil the flowers at the show.
- Problems outwith school can have a serious **effect** on how well young people learn.
- My cold had a big **effect** on my exam performance.

The exception

'Effect' can be used as a verb too, though here it means 'to bring about' or 'to produce' something, so it has a different meaning from 'affect'.

- The new headteacher will **effect** many changes.
- He **effected** a change in the reporting system.

I came, I went, I saw, I did

The way we speak in Scots is different from the way we would write in Standard English.

Scots is a language and there's more information about it elsewhere on the National Improvement Hub.

In parts of Scotland, you will hear people use the Scots form so often that you may not realise it is not Standard English.

Common Scots Usage

- I've came here a lot.
- I've saw many mistakes in children's jotters.
- The bell's went.
- I done my homework.

How are these sentences put together?

You will notice that the first three examples above all involve abbreviations of 'have' or 'has'. This is the clue to understanding the Standard English form. For some odd reason the vernacular expression 'I done' is the opposite of the others. It should have 'have' before it.

Standard English Usage

If the verb contains 'have' or 'has' then say 'come', 'seen' or 'gone'.

I come	I came	I have come	I've come
I see	I saw	I have seen	I've seen
I go	I went	I have gone	I've gone
The bell goes	The bell went	The bell has gone	The bell's gone
I do	I did	I have done	I've done

Imply and infer

Imply

To imply means to suggest something without stating it clearly or obviously. It is just being hinted at.

- John **implied** that he was not entirely happy with his new manager, though he did not make any direct criticisms.
- He said that the actor's performance in the play was reasonable and energetic. By choosing these words, however, he seemed to be **implying** that it was not the best he had seen.
- My friend made comments about her son's girlfriend that **implied** that she was not impressed by her.

Infer

To infer means to work out something from the evidence available.

- From the comments my friend made about her son's new girlfriend I **inferred** that she was not impressed by her.
- More people are passing the test first time. From this one may **infer** either that the test is easier or that the teaching has improved.
- When my friend told me his new car was 'pre-owned', I **inferred** that he was slightly embarrassed about buying a second-hand one.

Be careful

Sometimes people, in a slightly annoyed way, when they think they are being criticised, use the sentence, 'What are you inferring?' This is not a correct use. It should be, 'What are you implying?'

Less or fewer

Supermarket tills used to have signs saying 'Five items or less'. Why did they change? To be grammatical, of course!

Fewer

Use fewer if you can count the things, eg, items bought in the supermarket, marbles, ideas.

- If you have **fewer** than six items you can use this till.
- Yvonne had **fewer** ideas than Kay in the group discussion.

Less

Use less if the thing cannot be counted, eg, sugar. (You wouldn't say 'I want fewer sugar', would you?)

- To get **less** sand in the car, leave your children behind at the beach!
- There is **less** rain in Arbroath than there is in Glasgow.

Practice or practise

Why are these words spelled differently?

'**Practice**' is a noun (a thing).

'**Practise**' is a verb (an action).

And no – there is no logic to the way the English language works!

Handy hint – To help you remember, compare the spelling of 'advice' and 'advise'. They have the advantage that you pronounce them differently and so they are easier to remember.

- I may give **advice** to someone. Because I am giving them a 'thing' the word 'advice' is a noun and has a 'c'.
- I would **advise** someone to read these notes carefully. In this case I am doing something so 'advise' is a verb.

It is the same with practice (noun) and practise (verb).

Working the other way around - words ending in ICE usually means the word is a noun, like ICE; and words ending in ISE usually means the word is a verb.

The word 'practising' always has an 's' because it is always a verb.

We often get caught out when writing reports for parents. These examples may help you to avoid the pitfalls.

- With **practice**, he will improve his ball control.
- If he **practises** with ball control, his skills will increase.
- Harry should prepare for his exam by using his book of past papers as **practice**. (Here practice is being used as a noun – a thing.)
- Harry should prepare for his exam by using his book of past papers to **practise**. (Here Harry is being told to do something – a verb.)
- Jane should **practise** sketching at home, using the pad she has been given.
- We have been **practising** for our dance show in every spare moment.

Two, too and to

Two

This is the easy one. It's the number 2.

- The car had **two** faulty lights.
- **Two** boys were late.

Too

This means 'as well as', 'also'. It is also used for 'too much' or an excess of something.

- It was **too** hot to play the game properly.
- When Jenny's parents bought her birthday presents, they got a small present for her younger sister **too**.

To

This is used at all other times, usually when doing something is involved.

It is part of a verb, eg to sing, to walk.

It is a preposition, eg 'I gave a book to my sister'.

- The majority of children walk or cycle **to** school.
- **To** keep fit, exercise at least three times a week.

And all three

- I gave Christmas cards **to** everyone in my class and **two** presents to my lovely teacher **too**.

Uninterested and disinterested

Uninterested

Uninterested means that you don't care about the issue, point, person or event. It is generally used in a negative way because to be uninterested is a bad thing.

- One of the jury kept yawning and looking out of the window. He was clearly **uninterested** in the proceedings.
- When Tom reached his teenage years he became completely **uninterested** in his younger brother.

Disinterested

Disinterested means that you are impartial. You do not give greater support to one side as opposed to the other. It is generally used in positive way because to be disinterested is a good thing.

- The judge summarised both sides of the argument for the jury, explaining the evidence which suggested the man was guilty and that which might show his innocence. He was clearly **disinterested**.
- The best diplomats, and the ones most likely to bring about peace, are those who are completely **disinterested** in their approach to the warring countries.

Who or whom

Sometimes people think that they should use 'whom' because it sounds more formal, but 'who' and 'whom' have different purposes.

To make life more complicated though, sometimes nowadays 'who' is accepted where 'whom' is actually grammatically correct. There are other times when you really have to use 'whom'.

- 'Who' and 'whom' can only be used for people, not things.
- They are both pronouns but 'who' stands for the subject in a sentence and 'whom' stands for the object in a sentence.

There is more about subjects and objects in other parts of this module, but you don't need to be fully familiar with subjects and objects to use 'who' and 'whom' properly.

Who

Use 'who' if it is about something which could be indicated by the pronouns: I; he; she; we; they.

To check, ask a question to see if one of these pronouns is in the answer.

- **Who** is going to the party? **We** are going to the party.

'We' is the subject of the sentence.

- **Who** was arrested? **He** was arrested.

'He' is the subject of the sentence.

More complicated examples

- James is the person who won the competition.

To check if 'who' is correct, ask the question 'Who won the competition?'

The answer is, 'He did'.

'He' is one of the pronouns above, so we know that 'who' is correct in this sentence. 'He' is the subject of the sentence.

- We need to confirm who is coming to the conference.

To check if 'who' is correct, ask the question, 'Who is coming to the conference?'

The answer is, 'They are'.

'They' is one of the pronouns above, so we know that 'who' is correct in this sentence. 'They' is the subject of the sentence.

Whom

When do you really have to use whom?

Whom, rather than who, always follows: to; for; with; after.

Remember it's only when you are talking about people, not things.

- My parents are the people to **whom** I owe most thanks.

- Teachers are people for **whom** I have the greatest admiration.
- This is the man with **whom** I want to spend the rest of my life.
- He was the last great explorer, after **whom** no-one will ever be as renowned.

Grammar geeks' use of 'whom'

Use 'whom' if it is about something which could be indicated by the pronouns: me; him; her; us; them.

In other words, if it stands for the object of the sentence.

To check, ask a question to see if one of these pronouns is the answer.

- **Whom** did you see at the party? I saw **her**.

'Her' is one of the pronouns above, so we know that 'whom' is correct in this sentence. 'Her' is the object of the sentence.

But, nowadays, people will often just use 'Who did you see?' and it is acceptable to do so.

A more complicated example

- The rugby players **whom** I saw at the airport had just won the World Cup.

To check if 'whom' is correct, ask a question, 'Who did I see at the airport?'

The answer is, 'I saw them.'

'Them' is one of the pronouns above, so we know that 'whom' is correct in this sentence. 'Them' is the subject of the sentence.

Between and among

'Between' is used for two things or people.

- On the way to school he walked **between** two friends.

'Among' is used for more than two things or people.

- He knew he was **among** friends and so he spoke freely.

May and might

May

'May' is used when it is possible that something has happened, but it's not clear yet.

- She **may** have got the job, but she has not heard yet.

Might

'Might' is used when something might possibly have happened but did not.

- When the avalanche fell I **might** have been killed.

This is correct because the person was not in fact killed.

Other common confusions

It's also easy to also get confused about using words like:

- it's/its
- who's/whose
- they're/their/there
- you're/your

See the Apostrophe page in the Punctuation section for more information about these.

Test yourself

Find out how much you've learned about English.

Where does the full stop go?

Read each of the sentences carefully. Choose the sentence with full stops in the correct position.

1. a) I am going to the supermarket then I will meet my friends for lunch.
 b) I am going. To the supermarket then I will meet my friends for lunch.
 c) I am going to the supermarket. Then I will meet my friends for lunch.
2. a) She knows that her boyfriend likes action films however, she has brought a romance for them to watch on Valentine's Day.
 b) She knows that her boyfriend likes action films however. She has brought a romance for them to watch on Valentine's Day.
 c) She knows that her boyfriend likes action films. However, she has brought a romance for them to watch on Valentine's Day.
3. a) Because of the storm warning, Jane decided to stay at home that night.
 b) Because of the storm warning, Jane decided to stay. At home that night.
 c) Because of the storm warning. Jane decided to stay at home that night.
4. a) Although the grass needed cut. The lure of the football match on TV was much more attractive to Jim.
 b) Although the grass needed cut, the lure of the football match on TV was much more attractive to Jim.
 c) Although the grass needed cut, the lure of the football match. On TV was much more attractive to Jim.
5. a) Because she had worked overtime, she was able to take the day off. She used it to go to the gym and the garden centre.
 b) Because she had worked overtime. She was able to take the day off. She used it to go to the gym and the garden centre.
 c) Because she had worked overtime. She was able to take the day off. She used it to go to the gym and the garden centre.
6. a) I climbed the hill slowly I was out of breath. Finally I got to the top.
 b) I climbed the hill slowly. I was out of breath. Finally I got to the top.
 c) I climbed the hill slowly I was out of breath finally I got to the top.
7. a) Prices were low and there were many bargains to be had the good weather had kept people away from the shops.

- b) Prices were low and there were many bargains to be had. The good weather had kept people away from the shops.
- c) Prices were low. And there were many bargains to be had. The good weather had kept people away from the shops.
8. a) Mary looked at cars for sale online. And then went to the garage nearest to her house it had a large choice.
- b) Mary looked at cars for sale online and then went to the garage nearest to her house. It had a large choice.
- c) Mary looked at cars for sale online and then went to the garage. Nearest to her house it had a large choice.
9. a) Angela and Helen met for lunch, hoping to have a long chat Dianne, however, appeared without warning and monopolised the conversation.
- b) Angela and Helen met for lunch. Hoping to have a long chat Dianne, however, appeared without warning and monopolised the conversation.
- c) Angela and Helen met for lunch, hoping to have a long chat. Dianne, however, appeared without warning and monopolised the conversation.
10. a) Soap operas are one of the most successful forms of entertainment. Many actors start their career in them. Then move on to other roles.
- b) Soap operas are one of the most successful forms of entertainment. Many actors start their career in them, then move on to other roles.
- c) Soap operas are one of the most successful forms of entertainment many actors start their career in them, then move on to other roles.

Where does the apostrophe go?

Read each of the sentences carefully. Choose the sentence with the apostrophes in the right places.

1. a) Janes' scarf was bright blue.
- b) Jane's scarf was bright blue.

2. a) Holly's netball teams' new goalkeeper was very tall.
b) Holly's netball team's new goalkeeper was very tall.
3. a) Both boys' shoes were very muddy.
b) Both boy's shoes were very muddy.
4. a) The clouds were gathering in the sky, so I borrowed my mothers' umbrella.
b) The clouds were gathering in the sky, so I borrowed my mother's umbrella.
5. a) Mary's suitcase was very small but she borrowed her friend's so she could fit more clothes into it.
b) Mary's suitcase was very small but she borrowed her friends' so she could fit more clothes into it.
6. a) The dog barked as it tried to bite the cat's tail.
b) The dog barked as it tried to bite the cats' tail.
7. a) A moments' pause for thought should help you to decide where to put apostrophes.
b) A moment's pause for thought should help you to decide where to put apostrophes.
8. a) Keat's poetry includes 'Ode to Autumn'.
b) Keats' poetry includes 'Ode to Autumn'.
9. a) You're going to be late for work.
b) Your'e going to be late for work.
10. a) The use of emails has speeded up communication enormously, but this increases peoples' workload.
b) The use of emails has speeded up communication enormously, but this increases people's workload.
11. a) The artist's most famous work's were painted in the 1970s.
b) The artist's most famous works were painted in the 1970s.
12. a) As we lay sunbathing, I could hear the sounds of the waves washing on the beach's sandy shore.
b) As we lay sunbathing, I could hear the sounds of the waves washing on the beaches' sandy shore.
13. a) My sons dont yet know who's been selected for the team.
b) My sons don't yet know who's been selected for the team.
14. a) Susan's collection of CDs is much bigger than mine.
b) Susan's collection of CD's is much bigger than mine.
15. a) Its hard to keep track of all the rules of apostrophe's.
b) It's hard to keep track of all the rules of apostrophes.

Is it a sentence?

There are ten lines given below. Identify which of them are sentences and which are not. Select Yes (it is a sentence) or No (it's not).

1. Because the leaves were lying on the ground and there had been a lot of rain while the children were walking to school.
2. Go home.
3. Because so many people wanted to find out about the latest developments in literacy across learning, the conference was over-subscribed.
4. Then we found out.
5. Although the new curtains were very expensive and matched the carpet which was an unusual shade of green.
6. Wind whistling through the trees, clouds rapidly flitting over the moon and shadows flickering spookily around them as they walked.
7. They wanted to find a new house in Perthshire and, in addition, to buy a holiday home somewhere in Spain so that they could escape from the cold of the winter.
8. Run, Tom.
9. Definitely not.
10. Although it was only September, Marion had started to buy her Christmas presents, as she had so many children and grandchildren.

Identifying parts of speech - starter level

Label these words with the correct part of speech – noun, pronoun, adjective, verb, adverb or connective. Your choice should be based on the way the word in bold is used in the passage. For example the same word can be both a noun and a verb so be careful.

1. Picture the scene. Your **toddler starts** to shout and scream in the supermarket and every time you try to hold him **gently** to calm him down, he runs away **and** shouts even louder. Badly brought up? A **normal** tantrum from one of the terrible twos?
 - a) toddler
 - b) starts
 - c) gently
 - d) and
 - e) normal

2. No, **wee** Jamie is on the autistic spectrum. **He** cannot cope with the size and noise of larger shops, the **bustle** of crowds or even with his mother's touch.
- wee
 - He
 - bustle
3. Jess, a **gorgeous** chocolate brown **Labrador**, makes sure that Jamie walks **safely**.
- gorgeous
 - Labrador
 - safely
4. **She** **carefully** keeps him away from the road and his sense of calm when he **is** with **her** ensures that he does not bolt away from his parents.
- She
 - carefully
 - is
 - her

Identifying parts of speech - advanced level

Label these words with the correct part of speech – common noun, possessive noun, collective noun, possessive pronoun, comparative adjective, superlative adjective, active verb, passive verb, connective adverb, attitude adverb, determiner or subordinating connective. Your choice should be based on the way the word in bold is used in the passage.

- Your toddler starts to shout and **scream** in the **supermarket** and every time you try to hold him gently to calm him down, he runs away and shouts even louder.
 - scream
 - supermarket
- No, wee Jamie is on the autistic spectrum and cannot cope with the size and noise of **larger** shops, the bustle of crowds or even with his **mother's** touch. Walking on the pavement by a busy road, passing a **group** of youngsters going to a park – **each** of these are activities which are challenging for Jamie.
 - larger
 - mother's

- c) group
- d) each
3. **However**, he can not only cope with **his** new dog, but actively enjoys being with her. **Fortunately**, he will accept **being led** by a dog, if not by his mother.
- a) However
- b) his
- c) Fortunately
- d) being led
4. **Since** Jess's arrival, everyone in the family is the **happiest** they have even been.
- a) Since
- b) happiest

Grammar and syntax - starter level

Read the passage then answer the questions.

Little did Carys Thompson's parents know that when their older daughter called her new baby 'Tiny', or 'Tanni' as she pronounced it, the name would become famous as that of one of Britain's most successful sportswomen. 'Aim high!' was their constant advice. Winning eleven gold medals is no mean feat for anyone, but eleven golds for a woman who suffers from spina bifida is indeed notable. In fact, it is practically unique. However, Tanni is celebrated for her sporting prowess, not her disability. When she was born Tanni was able to walk, but it became increasingly difficult for her, and eventually she had to use a wheelchair. Far from seeing this as negative, she felt that it gave her freedom because walking had been so difficult for her. She competed in five Paralympic Games and broke 35 world records. In 2004 she was made a dame. And now? Now that she has retired, Tanni has a new career as a motivational speaker.

1. Decide whether this sentence is a statement, commanding or minor.
'Aim high!'
2. Decide whether this sentence is a statement, commanding or minor.
'Winning eleven gold medals is no mean feat for anyone, but eleven golds for a woman who suffers from spina bifida is indeed notable.'
3. Decide whether this sentence is a statement, commanding or minor.
'In fact, it is practically unique.'

4. Decide whether this sentence is a statement, commanding or minor.
‘And now?’
5. Decide whether the following is a phrase of a clause.
‘the name would become famous’
6. Decide whether the following is a phrase of a clause.
‘not for her disability’
7. Decide whether the following is a phrase of a clause.
‘when she was born’
8. Decide whether the following is a phrase of a clause.
‘now that she has retired’
9. Decide whether the words in bold are the subject or object of the sentence.
Winning eleven gold medals is no mean feat for anyone.
10. Decide whether the words in bold are the subject or object of the sentence.
Tanni is celebrated for her sporting prowess, not for her disability.
11. Decide whether the words in bold are the subject or object of the sentence.
She had to use **a wheelchair**.
12. Decide whether the words in bold are the subject or object of the sentence.
Far from seeing this as a negative, she felt that it gave her **freedom**.

Grammar and syntax - advanced level

Read the passage above and answer the questions.

1. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.
‘When their older daughter called her new baby “Tiny”’
2. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.
‘as she pronounced it’
3. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.
‘Winning eleven gold medals is no mean feat for anyone’
4. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.
‘it is practically unique’
5. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.
‘Tanni is celebrated for her sporting prowess’

6. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.

'she had to use a wheelchair'

7. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.

'Far from seeing this as a negative'

8. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.

'she competed in five Paralympic Games'

9. Decide whether each of these is a main or subordinate clause.

'Now that she has retired'

Read the following sentences and then decide whether the statement given below is true or not.

10. When she was born, **Tanni** was able to walk but it became increasingly difficult for her and eventually she had to use a wheelchair.

'Tanni' is a subject. True or false?

11. **When she was born**, Tanni was able to walk but it became increasingly difficult for her and eventually she had to use a wheelchair.

'When she was born' is a main clause. True or false?

12. When she was born, Tanni was able to walk but it became increasingly difficult for her and eventually she had to use a **wheelchair**.

'Wheelchair' is an indirect object. True or false?

13. When she was born, Tanni was able **to walk** but it became increasingly difficult for her and eventually she had to use a wheelchair.

'To walk' is a finite verb. True or false?

14. Far from seeing this as negative, **she** felt it gave her freedom, because walking had been so difficult for her.

'She' is a direct object. True or false?

15. Far from **seeing** this as negative, she felt it gave her freedom, because walking had been so difficult for her.

'Seeing' is a finite verb. True or false.

16. Far from seeing this as negative, she **felt** it gave her freedom, because walking had been so difficult for her.
 'Felt' is a finite verb. True or false?
17. Far from seeing this as negative, she felt it gave her **freedom**, because walking had been so difficult for her.
 'Freedom' is a direct object. True or false.
18. Far from seeing this as negative, she felt it gave her freedom, **because walking had been so difficult for her**.
 'Because walking had been so difficult for her' is a subordinate clause. True or false?
19. Now that she has retired, Tanni has a new **career** as a motivational speaker.
 'Career' is a subject. True or false?
20. Now that she has retired, **Tanni** has a new career as a motivational speaker.
 'Tanni' is a subject. True or false?
21. **Now that she has retired**, Tanni has a new career as a motivational speaker.
 'Now that she has retired' is a subordinate clause. True or false?
22. Now that she has retired, Tanni has a new career **as a motivational speaker**.
 'As a motivational speaker' is a main clause. True or false?

Practice or practise?

Fill in the blanks with the correct word – practice or practise.

1. With at home, his reading will improve.
2. I am going over to my friend's house to my French vocabulary.
3. When John meets up with Jack, they spend all their time playing their guitars.
4. Sheila was really keen to her spelling with her mother.
5. The new computing system needed a lot of to get the best out of it.
6. For a university student, teaching in different schools is hard work, tiring but – mostly – rewarding.
7. Peter had to his still life drawing many times before his practical exam.
8. Jane's mother told her that she should her singing so that she did well in the audition.
9. It is good to give feedback to learners about their work.
10. With, anyone can get better at using the noun practice and the verb practise!

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