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The Most Common Errors In English Usage And How To Avoid Them

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Fast, permanent relief from all ills due to improper language habits

A guaranteed cure for grammatical pitfalls

Katherine Hill-Miller

The Most Common Errors In English Usage And How To Avoid Them

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INTRODUCTION

"Grammar, which knows how to control even kings. . . ."

If you're reading these words, you've probably already made a preliminary commitment to improving your grammar. You may have stayed awake one night worrying that your last letter to an important client didn't present you in your best (and most articulate) light. You may have typed a crucial memo for your boss, after a 5 P.M. deadline, and agonized over the correctness of "between you and me." Or you may just be tired of wondering, every time you use "who" or "whom," whether you've done it right. You're not alone. Grammar is a problem for vast numbers of people (many more than those who admit it), and the French dramatist Molière observed that "Grammar . . . knows how to control even kings. . . ."

You can learn to control grammar, rather than letting it control you. This book can be your main weapon in fighting your grammatical difficulties. But perhaps you wonder why you should undertake the battle: What is grammar? Why is it so important? Why do people strain to make their grammar correct and worry when it's not?

Grammar is simply the set of rules and conventions that govern modern English language usage. As a set of rules, grammar tells us what is correct or incorrect about using certain words. As a set of conventions, grammar controls meaning. This is to say that grammar provides a common pattern of rules for everyone to follow and assures that people will understand each other.

People are most often aware of the first half of this definition of grammar and therefore have the habit of judging other people by how well they know grammatical rules. This widespread habit of judgment causes much anxiety among writers and speakers who aren't completely certain of correct grammatical structures. You may have been in this position yourself—worried about using the correct form of a word and leaving a bad impression if you choose the wrong form. Why make a commitment to improving your

grammar? If you do, you release yourself from all these anxieties. You can be certain your writing will leave an excellent impression, and that your prose will announce you as a person in full command of English language structures. After all, in today's verbal, information-conscious world, people often meet our writing before they meet us.

But making a good impression isn't the only reason, or even the primary reason, to commit yourself to improving your grammatical skills. The real issue is *meaning:* effective grammar conveys your message clearly and unambiguously and enables you to communicate as efficiently as possible. And efficient communication is the key to success in most daily transactions, from buying a newspaper to negotiating a corporate merger. If you improve your grammar, you can be certain your friends, fellow students, co-workers, or clients will receive the precise verbal signals you intend to send.

This book is designed, then, to help you communicate better by making your language correct and your meaning clear. It uses a functional approach—that is, it is organized in a practical manner, according to the grammatical errors people make most frequently. The text presents important grammatical rules, with examples of correct and incorrect usage, arranged to focus on grammatical practice rather than theory. In this way, the book allows you to isolate the grammatical errors that tend to trap you, locate them in your sentences, and correct them before they leave your desk.

Six Writing Principles to Remember

Chapter 1 discusses parts of speech and the components of the English sentence. It is a quick refresher course in grammatical terms. You'll find references to "conjunctions" and "predicates"—terms you probably know but possibly have forgotten through lack of use. Chapter 1 introduces the vocabulary used for discussing grammar throughout the rest of the text.

Chapters 2 through 8 are organized around six basic writing principles. Keep these principles firmly in mind. They provide the foundation on which all grammatical rules are built:

1. Make the parts of a sentence fit together—make sure words agree with each other.
2. Keep the time order of events straight.

3. Choose the active voice over the passive voice.
4. Keep related words close together.
5. Show the relationship between ideas clearly.
6. Punctuate for meaning.

Make the parts of a sentence fit together—make sure words agree with each other. In grammatical terminology, "agreement" means consistency in forms of words. Chapter 2 deals with agreement by introducing the idea of "case"—the concept that some nouns and pronouns change their form according to the role they play in a sentence (whether they act as subjects or objects). Chapter 3 examines two chief sets of agreement errors: mistakes in subject-verb agreement, and mistakes in pronoun-antecedent agreement.

Keep the time order of events straight. Chapter 4 discusses "tense," or the "time sense" of verbs. There are verb forms to capture actions taking place in every time sequence the human mind can imagine: present, past, future, future perfect, etc. Whenever you choose verbs, you must be sure their forms express the time sequence you wish to convey.

Choose the active voice over the passive voice. Chapter 5 examines mood and voice and recommends that you select active verbs over passive verbs. The first of these sentences is written in the active voice, the second in the passive: "Ed Johnson reached the client first." "The client was reached by Ed Johnson first." As you can see, the active voice is more concise, more direct, and has more energy. It places the sentence's emphasis on the *doer* of the action rather than on the *receiver* of the action.

Keep related words together. In Chapter 6 you will find rules governing the correct use of "modifiers," those words and groups of words that describe or make more exact the meanings of other words. Modifiers generally should be kept short. Further, since modifiers latch themselves onto the nearest substantive word or word group, you must place them carefully in your sentence—as close as possible to the words they modify.

Show the relationship between ideas clearly. Chapter 7 concentrates on connectives—all those miscellaneous words and phrases that make the *connections* between your ideas clear and that therefore provide the logical framework for your sentence or paragraph. Connectives pinpoint the logical relationships in your ideas. They act as the skeletal framework organizing your ideas, and they tell your reader how to connect your ideas in his mind.

Punctuate for meaning. Chapter 8 examines punctuation, with a special emphasis on the comma. The comma is deceptive: It is the most frequently used punctuation mark and the one that causes the greatest number of grammatical difficulties. This chapter focuses on the logic behind comma rules and shows the practical ways those rules control a sentence's meaning.

How to Use This Book

You can use this book in two ways: as a quick course in grammar and as a reference handbook. Keep the book on your desk or wherever you do most of your writing. If you use the text primarily as a reference handbook, simply reach for it whenever you have a question.

Here is how you can use the book for a quick course in practical grammar. If you commit yourself to improvement and devote your free time over a few days to the project, you will see quick progress in your grammatical skills. Allow yourself a week. Set aside the first two evenings (or whenever you have free time—you'll need about two hours per sitting) to zero in on your grammatical weaknesses. On the first evening, read quickly through Chapters 1 through 3; on the second evening, read Chapters 4 through 6. Skim as quickly as you can, and take brief notes on the grammatical errors you are inclined to make. Do not labor over this part of the project or take too much time: This first stage is designed to give you a fast overview and to isolate the grammatical mistakes on which you need to concentrate. At this stage, don't worry about understanding the various grammatical rules perfectly—thorough comprehension comes next.

After two evenings, you should have a few pages of notes listing the grammatical errors that trap you. This list constitutes your course outline. If you're like most people, you'll find your list is shorter than you expected: People know most of a language's grammar intuitively (though they may not be able to recite the rules that govern correct usage) and tend to make mistakes in only a few consistent areas.

Spend your next three or four evenings on stage two. Divide your course outline into three or four equal sections, and spend a few hours on each. In this second stage, thorough comprehension is your goal, and you should attain it by concentrating on each of your

grammatical weaknesses in turn. Follow these steps for each grammatical error you have on your list:

1. *Study the rule carefully.* Absorb the logic of the rule; try to grasp its commonsense basis. Ask yourself *why* this rule exists—how does it ensure clarity? Don't waste time trying to memorize the rule. You'll forget memorized material very rapidly, but you'll retain material you genuinely absorb and understand. *Think* about the rule.

2. *In your own words, write the rule out a few times,* along with your brief explanation of the reason for the rule's existence. This procedure will help you absorb the rule more thoroughly and fix it more permanently in your mind.

3. *Now turn to the example sentences for each rule.* Study the incorrect examples first. Linger over them. Focus on each error, and understand fully *why* it's an error.

4. *Next is the most important part of the procedure: Turn to the correct examples, study them carefully, and compare them to the incorrect examples.* Make sure you understand what's different about the correct examples—focus on the internal logic of the correct sentence, and on the way it fulfills the rule you studied in Steps 1 and 2. The key to success here, too, is grasping the commonsense reason that makes this form correct. *Think* about the correct sentence.

5. *Finally, write out the correct example a few times, and follow it with correct examples of your own.* You can check the structure of your sentences by comparing them to those in the book.

6. *You may want to spend some time your last evening in a general review.* Simply refer to each of the grammatical weaknesses you isolated at the beginning, and flash the correct rule into your mind. After you've completed your course in practical grammar, keep this book in a handy spot to use as a reference handbook and to jog your memory.

Good luck—and good writing!

Katherine Hill-Miller

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INTRODUCTION TO GRAMMAR

The conventional classification of parts of speech is by form: noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction. The functional classification, which we use here, groups parts of speech by use: subject, verb, complement, modifier, connective. In this section we define and illustrate these terms.

Parts of Speech

Noun

A noun is a word used to name a person, place, thing, or quality.

John, Washington, desk, truth

Pronoun

A pronoun is a word used in place of a noun. Pronouns are classified as:

PERSONAL:	I, we, you, she, him, it
RELATIVE:	who, which, that

INTERROGATIVE:	who, which, what
DEMONSTRATIVE:	this, that, these, those
INDEFINITE:	one, any, each, somebody
INTENSIVE AND REFLEXIVE:	myself, yourself, himself

Verb

A verb is a word or group of words that expresses being of the subject or action to or by the subject. The verb, together with any words that complete or modify its meaning, forms the predicate of the sentence.

walk, run, play

Adjective

An adjective is a word that describes or limits (modifies) the meaning of a noun or pronoun.

higher morale, *rolling* stone, *slower* growth

Adverb

An adverb is a word that modifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb. It answers the questions where, when, how, or how much.

write *legibly,* long *enough, very* high production

Preposition

A preposition is a word used to relate a noun or pronoun to some other word in the sentence.

at, in, by, from, toward

Conjunction

A conjunction is a word used to join words, phrases, or clauses.

and, but, nor

Clause

A clause is a group of related words containing a subject and a predicate.

An *independent* (or main) clause makes a complete statement and is not introduced by any subordinating word. When it stands alone, it is a simple sentence.

We shall print and *distribute* the book by the end of the month.

A *dependent* (or subordinate) clause cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. It depends upon some words in the independent clause to complete its meaning. Dependent clauses are classified as:

ADJECTIVE: This is the man *who wrote to us for information.*

I have the report *he is looking for.* ("that" is understood)

ADVERB: *As soon as you have finished the letter,* bring it to my office.

NOUN: *Whoever conducts the meeting* will be able to answer your questions.

Can you tell me *what the meeting will be about?*

Phrase

A phrase is a group of related words without a subject or predicate used as a noun, adjective, adverb, or verb. Phrases are classified:

PREPOSITIONAL: Put the finished letter *on my desk.*

PARTICIPIAL: The man *giving the speech* works in my office.

GERUND: *Writing this report* has been a long and difficult job.

INFINITIVE: Our purpose is *to make the instructions as useful as possible.*

Sentence Classification

To construct sentences which will effectively convey your meaning to your readers, you must be able to recognize sentence classification and to know what kind of sentence does each writing job best. There are four types of sentences:

Simple Sentence

A simple sentence contains only one clause (an independent clause). This does not mean, however, that it must be short. It may include many phrases, a compound subject or predicate, and a number of modifiers.

The book was returned.

You should set forth your proposal in writing and enclose the latest balance sheets of the corporation.

Compound Sentence

A compound sentence has two or more independent clauses. Each of these clauses could be written as a simple sentence. There are no dependent clauses in a compound sentence.

> You may discuss this problem with your teacher, or you may speak to the principal.

Complex Sentence

A complex sentence contains one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses.

> When we were reviewing the attendance reports for February and March, we noted a number of inconsistencies.

Compound-Complex Sentence

A compound-complex sentence contains at least two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses.

> Since that letter appears to answer your needs, we are enclosing a copy; we hope that it will answer all your questions fully.

Functional Classification of Sentence Parts

The parts of speech defined in this book are basic to a study of grammar. We can also group these parts according to their *use* and classify them by function as we use them elsewhere in the book.

The basic parts of the sentence are the subject, verb, and complement. Modifiers and connectives support this basic sentence, modifiers by making the meaning more exact and connectives by showing the relationship between parts.

Subject

The subject of a sentence is the word or group of words which names the thing, person, place, or idea about which the sentence makes a statement. The single words most often used as subjects are *nouns* and *pronouns.*

The *conductor* called the meeting for 3 o'clock. (noun)

He wants everybody to attend. (personal pronoun)

Two verbals—the *gerund* and, less often, the *infinitive*—may also be the subject of a sentence.

Walking is good exercise. (gerund)

To run is more tiring than to walk. (infinitive)

The *demonstrative, interrogative,* and *indefinite pronouns* are among the other parts of speech used as subjects.

That is going to be a difficult task. (demonstrative)

What are your plans for doing it? (interrogative)

Everyone is eager to have you succeed. (indefinite)

A *phrase* serving as a noun may be the subject of a sentence.

Writing that letter was the smartest thing he did.

To make this report as comprehensive as possible is our objective.

An entire *dependent clause* may be used as the subject.

Whoever answers the telephone will be able to give you the information.

Whether the report has been released or not will determine our action.

In the chapters that follow you may find these five elements referred to generally as "substantives." A substantive is a noun or a word or group of words used as a noun.

Verb

The verb tells what the subject itself does (active verb), what something else does to the subject (passive verb), or what the subject is (linking verb). Every sentence must contain a verb. Verbals, although they come from verbs, cannot serve as verbs in the predicate of a sentence.

The properties of a verb are *number, person, tense, mood,* and *voice.* To indicate these properties we either change the form of the verb itself or add, to the main verb, other verb forms called *auxiliary verbs—be, have, can, may, might, shall, will, should, would, could, must, do.*

Number tells whether the verb is singular or plural; *person* tells whether the first person (*I*), second person (*you*), or third person (*he, it, they*) is performing the action. A verb and its subject must agree in number and person. This problem of agreement is covered later.

Tense is the means by which we show the time of an action—whether it happened in the past, is happening in the present, or will happen in the future. *Mood* (indicative, imperative, subjunctive) indicates the manner of assertion—statement, command, wish, or condition.

Voice is the property of a verb that indicates whether the subject is performing or receiving the action of the verb. A verb in the *active voice* tells what the subject is doing; a verb in the *passive voice* tells what is being done to the subject.

> The technician *completed* the report on time. (The verb *completed,* in the active voice, tells what the subject, *technician,* did.)

> The report *was completed* on time. (The verb *was completed,* in the passive voice, tells what was done to the subject, *report.*)

Complement

The complement is the word or group of words that comes after the verb and completes its meaning. A complement may be (1) a direct object of the verb, (2) an indirect object of the verb, (3) a predicate nominative, or (4) a predicate adjective.

(1) *Direct object:*

She gave the *report* to her secretary. (*Report* is the direct object of the verb.)

We are trying *to find a solution to this problem.* (The infinitive phrase is the direct object of the verb.)

Give me *whatever information you have.* (The noun clause is the direct object of the verb.)

(2) *Indirect object:*

He gave (to) *her* the report. (*Her* is the indirect object of the verb; *report* is the direct object.)

Give (to) *whoever answers the door* this letter. (The noun clause is the indirect object of the verb.)

(3) *Predicate nominative:*

The predicate nominative is also called the *predicate noun, predicate complement,* or *subjective complement.* The predicate nominative follows a linking verb and renames the subject. It may be a noun, a pronoun, a verbal, a phrase, or a clause.

NOUN:	He is *chairman* of the committee
PRONOUN:	They thought the author was *he.*
GERUND:	My favorite exercise is *swimming.*
INFINITIVE PHRASE:	The purpose of this memorandum is *to clarify the matter.*
NOUN CLAUSE:	The conference leader should be *whoever is best qualified.*

(4) *Predicate adjective:*

A predicate adjective is an adjective (or adjective phrase) appearing in the predicate and modifying the subject. A predicate adjective occurs only after linking verbs and sense verbs.