

Good Grief,  
Good  
GRAMMAR

The  
Business  
Person's  
Guide  
to  
Grammar  
and  
Usage

Dianna Booher

# GOOD GRIEF, GOOD GRAMMAR

Dianna Booher



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## **Good Grief, Good Grammar**

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## A NOTE TO THE READER

If you want a “before” and “after” picture of your improvement, begin this book by turning to the Therapy section at the end of each chapter. Read the directions and try to complete each exercise; then turn to the Answers section in the back of the book and check your work.

With those “pretests” behind you, go back to Chapter 1 and slowly work your way through the explanations and examples of each chapter. When you come to the Therapy exercises, rework them with a different color ink or pencil. Check the answers in the back of the book and note your improvement as you move from chapter to chapter.

# INTRODUCTION

The room looked like a funeral parlor transplanted to the tallest Skyscraper in Houston. The executives marched in one by one, eyes downcast and briefcases swishing to the tabletop with clicking sounds as locks opened.

John Clayton, program analyst knew this meeting would be the turning point. Assuming they would come to a decision today, the outcome would effect his career, his marriage, and probably determine the day of his murder.

The Senior Vice President took his seat at the end of the conference table; and the other assorted company officers followed his led, and shuffled into place. John kept his face blank as Marys airline tickets slid to the floor with a slight flutter. He nonchalantly retrieved it and tucked it back in his coat pocket. He began to wonder, why he'd only bought her ticket and not his also. Had he subconsciously already made his decision weeks ago—before the audit, before the programmers had cracked the code, and perhaps even before buying the \$2 million shipment of size 10 negligees?

What do all these sex, money, and power details have to do with grammar? Absolutely *nothing*. But now that I have your attention, let me point out that you just read past fifteen grammatical errors in the opening scene. (See the corrected version on page 193.) If you didn't notice these errors, then you definitely need to keep reading; this book's for you. We're going to start with the basics and stay focused on the essentials.

But possibly I need to define "essentials." Some writers consider grammar-conscious bosses nitpickers. These writers fail to see the link between grammar and clarity.

For example,

We will have markers and erasers that can be picked up with the key.

What does this sentence mean? That the reader can pick up markers, erasers, and the key at the same time? That the reader has to have the key for access to the markers and erasers?

Or take another example of an ambiguous statement that appeared in the *Houston Chronicle*:

An off-duty postal worker armed with a pistol fatally wounded his estranged wife, a U.S. Marine sergeant, and then shot and killed himself in a federal office building in downtown Houston Thursday, police said.

How many people were killed—two or three? (Several paragraphs later in the news story, the reader learns that the wife was a U.S. Marine sergeant.)

Grammar is not a “minor” part of writing; proper grammar is an aid to clarity.

In addition to clarity, poor grammar affects a reader’s attitude about the ideas presented in a document. Imagine yourself seated in a restaurant. The waiter comes with your order. He has dirt caked under his fingernails, his greasy hair hangs in his eyes, and stains of the day’s specials decorate his shirt. Would his appearance affect your appetite? In much the same way, grammatical errors can sour your readers on the ideas you present in memos, letters, and reports.

In fact, many business writers have found the lack of a good foundation in grammar to be an embarrassment and a serious handicap. Despite software packages that check spelling and syntax, personal writing skills will never become obsolete.

When I lead writing workshops for corporate clients, out of a group of fifteen participants I’ll invariably have five who ask me where they can find a good, comprehensive grammar text for the business writer. That’s the “why” behind this book—help for those who missed the basics and who must be effective communicators.

Consider the first five chapters as first aid. There you'll find the basic definitions, principles, and examples that anyone must understand to be grammatically correct.

Some readers may ask, Do I need to know all the technical grammatical terms? Let me answer this way: How would you like to be the patient under anesthesia with this team of doctors?

"Do you think we ought to take out his whatchamacallit while we're in here?"

"His whatever, there next to it, seems a little inflamed, too."

"Hand me the thingamabob."

"The what?"

"Oh, you know, the dohickey. The stainless steel instrument. The thing that sounds like a thump when it hits a vein."

"This?"

"No, the sharper thing underneath it. The gizmo here doesn't look just right. You think we should remove it, too?"

Yes, you need to learn the terms given in the first few chapters. I hear people frequently comment, "I know when a sentence doesn't look right, but I don't know how to correct it." If you learn the appropriate terms and definitions, you'll be able to identify *and correct* grammatical errors.

Consider the remaining chapters, Chapters 6–12, part of your "stabilization" process; they build on the concepts explained in the first few chapters. Finally, each chapter has a Therapy section to help check your mastery of the concepts. The more exercises you work, the closer you will be to good grammatical health. For "maintenance and growth," apply the directions for the Therapy sections to one of your own documents from your job.

One more thing: This book is not exhaustive; for example, you'll notice that I've omitted the exclamation point in the punctuation chapter. My rule of thumb for keeping this book to the essentials has been to ask, "How often will the business writer need to know this?" If the answer was "once every fifth Sunday in February," then I've omitted the idea.

By the way, so that you won't go into shock when you see Chapter 12, let me explain the "why" of it. My theory is that

people who are weak in grammar are primarily visual learners; instead of excelling in those skills typically termed verbal, they excel in analytical skills. They like to see things that make sense; that is, they like to have formulas and logical answers. What's surprising to many of these "visual" people is that most grammatical rules do make sense and follow logical patterns. For writers having trouble pinpointing why a sentence is awkward or correcting a sentence they recognize as wrong, diagraming becomes a real eye-opener. Writers see the structure and understand the accompanying logic.

Therefore, for you "visual" readers, I have added Chapter 12. You can study its appropriate sections chapter by chapter, or you can examine all of Chapter 12 after you've completed the rest of the book. The diagrams in Chapter 12 will cement in your mind the concepts learned throughout the book. If you want to prove to yourself that you've really become a grammar guru, after studying Chapter 12 try to diagram some of your own sentences.

With or without the diagrams, you can become grammatically healthy if you follow the therapeutic plan outlined in this book.



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# 1

## WORDS

Think of words as bricks. You pile them together to make phrases, clauses, and then sentences. We categorize all words into eight parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. The inability to recognize these parts of speech is as much a handicap as not knowing the value of nickels, dimes, quarters, and dollars.

### NOUNS

A noun names a person, place, thing, activity, or idea. Nouns can be further divided into the categories that follow.

<i>Common</i>	<i>Proper</i>	<i>Collective</i>
desk	August	staff
payment	City Hall	audience
office	Lotus 1-2-3	personnel
eye	Phoenix, Arizona	group
women	Hortense Hoffnaggle	management
customer	Mojave Desert	team
manager	New Year's Day	committee
videotape	Lawn Avenue	jury
	Friday	

<i>Concrete</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
street	freedom
laundry	theory
computer	attitude
equipment	problem
money	politics
uniforms	philosophy
sugar	situation
brochure	protection
	annual report
	(no, just kidding)

Recognition of the various kinds of nouns is essential to correct capitalization and subject-verb agreement—matters we'll get into later.

## VERBS

A verb is a word that shows action, being, or state of being. In other words, a verb is a word that shows what something *has*, *does*, or *is*.

<i>Has</i>	<i>Does</i>	<i>Is</i>
possess	share	seem
include	calculate	appear
contain	hide	become
retain	dazzle	smell
hold	submit	taste
own	indicate	exist
lack	teach	sound

**NOTE:** Don't be confused when you see these verbs in other forms and combined with helping words to make verb phrases. (You'll hear more about verb phrases in Chapter 2.)

has been sharing	should contain	perplexed
is calculated	were	were informed
does possess	taught	can promote



smelled  
will dazzle  
can submit

built  
had been  
became

is tasting  
verify  
conduct

When you add helping words to the main verb, the form of the main verb may change. Verbs have three principal parts:

### Regular Verbs

<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i> (formed by adding <i>-d</i> or <i>-ed</i> )	<i>Past Participle</i>
talk	talked	talked
hire	hired	hired
examine	examined	examined
identify	identified	identified
cover	covered	covered
mark	marked	marked
interview	interviewed	interviewed
call	called	called

### Irregular Verbs

<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Past Participle</i>
write	wrote	written
begin	began	begun
do	did	done
set	set	set
sit	sat	sat
am	was	been
break	broke	broken
choose	chose	chosen
teach	taught	taught
go	went	gone
drive	drove	driven
draw	drew	drawn
fly	flew	flown
sell	sold	sold
grow	grew	grown
speak	spoke	spoken