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## Improve Your Writing... Understand Grammar

**A**n interesting and perhaps unanticipated result of the growth in social media for marketing is an increased need for good writing skills. Blogs, drip marketing, opt-in electronic newsletters, and other “new media” require both useful content and good writing to attract and keep readers.

The elements of good writing are simple: grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. By mastering the rules and conventions, you will make your writing easier to understand and more enjoyable to your readers.

### Grammar

Grammar explains the forms and structure of words (called *morphology*) and how they are arranged in sentences (called *syntax*). In other words, grammar provides the rules for speaking and writing that give us a common way of using language so we can more easily understand each other.

The building blocks of grammar are the eight parts of speech:

- *Verbs* express actions, events, or states of being.
- *Nouns* name a person, animal, place, thing, and abstract idea.
- *Pronouns* take the place of nouns or another pronoun.
- *Adjectives* modify nouns or pronouns by describing, identifying, or quantifying them. An adjective usually precedes the noun or the pronoun which it modifies.



- *Adverbs* modify a verb, adjective, another adverb, a phrase, or a clause and indicates manner, time, place, cause, or degree. Adverbs can be recognized because they answer the question *how*, *when*, *where*, or *how much*. Adverbs often end in *ly*.
- *Prepositions* link nouns, pronouns, and phrases to other words in a sentence and usually indicate a relationship of time, space, or logic.
- *Conjunctions* link words, phrases, and clauses.
- *Interjections* are added to a sentence to convey emotion and are usually followed by an exclamation point.

Every complete sentence has two parts: a *subject* (who or what the sentence is about) and a *predicate* (what the subject is doing). The subject is a noun or a pronoun; the predicate is a verb. To identify the subject of a sentence, find the verb and ask *who* or *what*. The answer is the subject.

## Improve Your Writing... Understand Grammar (continued)

*“To grab a reader’s attention, use a short, simple sentence.”*

Modifiers, phrases and clauses add information about the subject and predicate and make the writing more interesting and clear. A single word acting as an adjective or adverb is called a *modifier*; two or more words without a subject and predicate acting as an adjective or adverb is called a *phrase*; and two or more words acting as an adjective or adverb and having a subject and predicate is a *clause*.

Whether single words, phrases, or clauses, modifiers should appear close to the word or words they modify, especially if the reader might mistake what is being modified. Here is an example of a misplaced modifier:

John could read the sign easily written in French.

In this example, it is unclear whether the adverb *easily* is meant to modify the way John reads the sign or how it is written. By moving the modifier closer to the word it is modifying, the meaning becomes clear:

John could easily read the sign written in French.

Clauses are the basic building blocks of sentences. When a sentence is formed by a single clause, it is known as a *simple sentence*. Simple sentences are the most common type for spoken language but can make writing seem childish. Simple sentences can be made more interesting and informative by adding modifiers, and can be effective for attracting the reader’s attention when used sparingly.

Two or more clauses that are joined by a conjunction like *and*, *but*, and *or* form a *compound sentence*. Compound sentences create balance or contrast between thoughts, ideas, or information of equal importance:

*Simple sentence:* Molly and Emily live near each other. They are best friends.

*Compound sentence:* Molly and Emily live near each other, and they are best friends.

A *complex sentence* contains an independent clause

and one or more dependent clauses that are not equal. A complex sentence is different than a simple sentence or compound sentence because it develops a central idea, provides background information, and clearly identifies the most important thought.

*Complex sentence:* Even if Molly and Emily did not live near each other, they would still be best friends because they have so many common interests.

Improve your writing by varying the types of sentences you use. To grab a reader’s attention, use a short, simple sentence. To emphasize balance and equal thoughts, use a compound sentence. To show the relationship between information, use a complex sentence.

### Spelling

The availability of spell checkers in word processing programs greatly reduces the likelihood of spelling errors – except for homonyms. A *homonym* is a word that is pronounced the same as another but spelled differently and having a different meaning. Here are some examples of homonyms:

- affect (to change) and effect (result)
- capital (seat of government) and capitol (a building)
- its (possessive pronoun) and it’s (contraction of *it is*)
- principal (head of school) and principle (a truth, law, rule, standard or assumption)
- their (belonging to them) and there (a place) and they’re (contraction of *they are*)
- who’s (contraction of *who is*) and whose (belonging to whom)

### Punctuation

Punctuation helps convey the precise meaning of a sentence – and in fact can even change the meaning, as in this well-known example:

A woman, without her man, is nothing.

A woman: without her, man is nothing.

*“To emphasize balance and equal thoughts, use a compound sentence.”*

*“To show the relationship between information, use a complex sentence.”*

## Improve Your Writing... Understand Grammar (continued)

Here is a brief description of how punctuation is used:

- A *comma* tells the reader to pause and assimilate information. They are also used to separate the items in a series.
- A *semi-colon* links independent clauses that are closely related in meaning when they are not linked by a conjunction.
- A *colon* introduces a list or a summation. It can also be used to link an idea that has been introduced in an independent clause.
- *End punctuation* – period, question mark, and exclamation mark – denote the end of a sentence.
- *Parentheses* enclose words that are not directly related to the main thought of the sentence but provide important information, or to provide examples.
- A *dash* signals a sudden change of thought or break in a sentence. Dashes can also be used in place of parentheses to emphasize information.
- *Quotation marks* indicate direct speech. All punctuation marks are enclosed within the quotation marks except for semi-colons, colons, and question marks when they are not part of the quotation.

- An *apostrophe* indicates that letters are missing from a contraction, or shows possession (i.e., that one thing belongs to another). The word *its* spelled without an apostrophe is a possessive; spelled with an apostrophe (*it's*) is a contraction of *it is*. Similarly, *whose* is a possessive pronoun and *who's* is a contraction of *who is*. Do not use an apostrophe to form the plural of numbers or letters (the 1990s, a box of PCs).

### Capitalization

Like punctuation, capitalization helps convey information. The first word of every sentence is capitalized, signaling that a new sentence has begun. Proper nouns – the name of a particular person, place, or thing – are capitalized to indicate uniqueness. However, it is not correct to use capitalization merely to make a word look or seem important.

### The Importance of Grammar

Grammar is important because it provides information that helps the reader's comprehension. It is the structure that conveys precise meaning from the writer to the audience. Eliminate grammatical errors from your writing and reward your readers with clear communication.

*“Eliminate grammatical errors from your writing and reward your readers with clear communication.”*

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*“The Elements of Style remains the most popular and often-required guide to popular use of American English.”*

## The Elements of Style

The best-known guide to American English writing is *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. Known as *Strunk and White*, the book was first written in 1918 by Cornell University professor William Strunk, Jr. In a mere 43 pages, Professor Strunk presented guidelines for what he termed “cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English”: eight elementary rules of usage, ten elementary principles for composition, “a few matters of form”, and a list of commonly misused words and expressions.

Upon Strunk’s death in 1946, Macmillan and Company commissioned the American writer, poet, and *New Yorker* columnist E.B. White to revise the book. His first revision was published in 1959; it updated and extended Strunk’s

original sections and added an essay and a concluding chapter called *An Approach to Style*.

White published two more revisions, in 1972 and 1979. The fourth edition in 1999 included a forward by White’s stepson Roger Angell; a glossary; and an index as well as editing by an anonymous editor. The most recent release (2005) is based on the 1999 text with added design and illustration, all contained in only 105 pages. A Fiftieth Anniversary Edition was published in 2009.

*The Elements of Style* remains the most popular and often-required guide to popular use of American English. It is readily available in bookstores and online.