ALL-IN-ONE

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Geraldine Woods
Grammarian

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by Geraldine Woods

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Introduction

Does this resemble the inside of your head when you're preparing to talk with an authority figure?

> *Glad to have met . . . to be meeting . . .* Uh-oh. Maybe just *Hi! How's it going?* No, that's too friendly. New direction: *You asked to see whoever . . . whomever . . . wrote the report.* Or is it *had written?*

If you answered yes, you're in the right place. *English Grammar All-in-One For Dummies* helps you navigate the sea of grammar without wrecking your grades, your career, or your mind. I mention grades and career because the ability to speak and write according to the rules of Standard English gives you an advantage in school and in the working world. This book presents the latest guidelines for Standard English. Yes, latest. When an English teacher is pounding them into your head, the rules of Standard English usage seem set in stone. But language is anything but static. It moves along just as people do — sometimes quickly and something at the speed of a tired snail. To keep you sharp in every 21st century situation, *English Grammar All-in-One For Dummies* gives you information and then practice with the current, commonly accepted language of texts, tweets, presentation slides, emails, and more traditional forms of writing.

About This Book

In *English Grammar All-in-One For Dummies,* I address all your grammar questions about written and spoken language, including a few you didn't know you had. I do so without loading you up with obscure terminology, defining terms only when you need them to understand what you're supposed to do as well as why you're supposed to do it. I also explain which rules of formal English you can and should ignore in various situations. The goal is to ensure that the language you use conveys your ideas accurately and makes a good impression on your reader or listener.

Every chapter but one provides

- Explanations of grammar rules and common usage
- Sample questions with answers
- A slew of extra practice questions (and more online)
- Chapter quizzes with answers and explanations

Are you wondering which chapter breaks this pattern? It's the first. Instead of a quiz, Chapter 1 ends with a diagnostic tool — a chart of common grammatical dilemmas (*capital letter or lowercase? gave or had given? comma or colon?* and the like) and points you toward the chapter

addressing that topic. You can turn immediately to the chapters that meet your needs, or you can work through the book in order, moving from an overview of grammar and style to parts of speech, parts of a sentence, and onward to punctuation, capitalization, and common errors. The last unit focuses on useful information for writing at school and on the job, with special attention to electronic media.

Foolish Assumptions

I assume you're reading this book because you want one or more of the following:

- Skill in communicating exactly what you mean
- Better grades or a better job
- Speech and writing that serves you well in formal situations
- A good score on standardized exams

Of course, you may be reading this book because an authority figure has threatened to fail, fire, or ground you if you don't. Even so, I hope you'll learn something — and smile along the way.

Icons Used in This Book

Five types of icons steer your journey:


TIP

Wherever you see this icon, you'll find helpful strategies for understanding the structure of the sentence or for choosing the correct word form.


WARNING

Not every grammar point has a built-in trap, but some do. This icon tells you how to avoid common mistakes as you construct a sentence.


EXAMPLE

You can test your knowledge of a topic by trying a sample question or two, checking your answers, and reading the accompanying explanations.


YOUR TURN

Put on your thinking cap when you see this icon, because it identifies a set of practice questions. Answers and explanations appear in a separate section near the end of the chapter.


REMEMBER

This icon identifies key grammar points to deposit in your memory bank.

Beyond the Book

For additional reference material and writing tips, check out www.dummies.com to find the accompanying Cheat Sheet for this book. Just type "English Grammar All-in-One For Dummies cheat sheet" in the search box.

You can also test yourself with online quizzes oriented to a single chapter or to a heftier amount of information. To gain access to the online practice, all you have to do is register. Just follow these simple steps:

1. **Register your book or ebook at Dummies.com to get your PIN. Go to www.dummies.com/go/getaccess.**
2. **Select your product from the drop-down list on that page.**
3. **Follow the prompts to validate your product, and then check your email for a confirmation message that includes your PIN and instructions for logging in.**

If you don't receive this email within two hours, please check your Spam folder before contacting us through our Technical Support website at https://support.wiley.com or by phone at 877-762-2974.

Now you're ready to go! You can come back to the program as often as you want. Simply log in with the username and password you created during your initial login. No need to enter the access code a second time.

Where to Go from Here

To the refrigerator for a snack. Nope. Just kidding. Take the grammar diagnostic in Chapter 1, or simply think for a few moments about the aspects of writing or speaking that make you pause. Then select the chapters that meet your needs. If you're unsure whether a topic is a problem, no problem! Look for the example icons and try a couple of questions. If you get the right answer — or if you don't but the explanation cleared up your confusion — move on. If you stub your toe, work on the practice questions or take an online quiz until you master the topic. And you will!

A NOTE ABOUT PRONOUNS

Much has changed in the world of pronouns in the past few years. Change isn't always comfortable, but it's here and, I believe, necessary and good.

Let me explain. A pronoun is a word that stands in for a noun or another pronoun. Pronouns streamline language, allowing you to say "George said that he forgot his phone" instead of "George said that George forgot George's phone." A pronoun is supposed to match, or agree, with the word it refers to: Singular pairs with singular, plural with plural. Gender also matters. Some pronouns are masculine *(he, him, his);* some are feminine *(she, her, hers);* and others are neuter (*it, they* when referring to objects, ideas, or places). The rules for these pronouns have stayed the same. Ditto for gender-neutral pronouns referring to a group *(they, them, their, theirs).*

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The rules have shifted, though, when you refer to one person whose gender is unspecified — a *person* or a *senator* or an *insurance agent*, perhaps — or to a person who does not identify gender as binary (male or female) or who identifies as gender fluid. For an increasing number of grammarians and editors, *they, them, their,* and *theirs* have become the preferred pronouns for these situations. In other words, these pronouns may be either singular or plural, depending on the word they refer to. Take a look at some examples:

Someone forgot their homework; therefore, the teacher will give them a failing grade. (pairs the singular pronoun *someone* with the singular pronouns *their* and *them*)

Each applicant should explain their reasons for leaving their previous job. (The singular noun *applicant* pairs with the singular pronoun *their*.)

Alix arrived late because they were stuck in a traffic jam. (The singular noun *Alix*, the name of a person who identifies as nonbinary, pairs with the singular pronoun *they.*)

It's worth noting that this "change" in the usage of *they, them,* and *their* in the first two examples is actually a return to tradition. From the 14th century onward, ordinary people, as well as great writers (Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Austen, to name three) treated *they, them, their,* and *theirs* as flexible, gender-neutral pronouns, a grammatically correct way to refer to one person or to a group, just as the pronoun *you* does. In the 18th century, though, influential grammarians declared that the pronouns *they, them, their,* and *theirs* were correct only for references to a group. According to these grammarians, the forms *he, him,* and *his* and *she, her,* and *hers* were the only appropriate references to one person. If the gender was unknown, masculine pronouns were said to be the proper choice. In 1850, the British Parliament went so far as to enact that grammar rule into law! You can imagine how popular this decision was with supporters of women's equality. In the late 20th century, many writers reserved *they, them, their,* and *theirs* for plural references but, in an effort to be more inclusive, turned to pairs — *he or she, him or her,* and *his or her* — for singular references. That practice often results in sentences like this: "A student should ask his or her teacher about his or her pronoun policy during the first meeting with him or her." As you see, providing two choices can result in a clunky sentence! Paired pronouns also ignore people who identify as nonbinary or gender fluid.

To solve these problems, some people have invented gender-neutral pronouns, such as *ze* and *zir.* These new words may catch on, but at the moment they're not common. Much more widespread is the use of *they, them, their,* and *theirs* in both singular and plural situations. I've employed this usage in *English Grammar All-in-One For Dummies*, a decision that Wiley, the publisher of *For Dummies* books, supports.

It may take a while to get used to the singular *they.* If you're expecting one dinner guest and hear "they're on the way," you may panic and cook an extra portion of pasta before you remember that *they* is your guest's preferred pronoun and *they* would never bring a friend without asking first. You may also find yourself writing for an authority figure who insists on restricting *they, them, their,* and *theirs* to plural situations. In that situation, you have some options. You can shift from third person (talking about someone) to second person (talking to the person with the flexible pronoun *you*):

If you forget to do the homework, you will receive a failing grade.

You can also reword and avoid the pronoun entirely:

Someone forgot to do the homework and will receive a failing grade.

Each applicant should explain the reasons for leaving a previous job.

Alix arrived late because of traffic.

1 Exploring Grammar and Style

In This Unit . . .

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Distinguishing between grammar and style
- Surveying the basic elements of grammar and style
- Constructing your grammar profile

Chapter 1

Sampling the Ingredients of Grammar and Style

In the Middle Ages, *grammar* meant the study of Latin, the language of choice for educated people. The word soon came to refer to any kind of learning, the definition that applies when people of grandparent-age talk about their *grammar school,* not their elementary school. The term *grammar school* is a leftover from the old days. The very old days.

These days, the word *grammar* refers to the nuts and bolts of language — specifically, how words are put together to create meaning. Most people also apply the term to a set of rules you have to follow in order to speak and write in Standard English, what society has set as — surprise! — the standard for "correct" speech and writing. I placed *correct* in quotation marks because the way people speak and write changes according to situation, audience, and purpose. (More on this in Chapter 2.) In this chapter, I take you on a whirlwind tour of the elements of grammar and style and direct you to chapters that meet your needs.

What This Year's Sentence Is Wearing: Understanding Grammar and Style

Fresh from the shower, you're standing in front of your closet. What should you select? Some options aren't open to you. You can't show up at the office wearing nothing — not if you want to keep your job and, in addition, stay out of jail. That's a law (in the real world) and a rule (in the world of grammar). You *can* choose a bright purple jacket and a fluorescent green scarf. The fashion police may object, but real cops will leave you alone. In both the real world and Grammar Land, this sort of decision is a matter of *style.* A style point is more flexible than a grammar rule. Take that jacket-scarf selection. Your friends may suggest a subtler color combination, or praise you if your school colors are purple and green and you're cheering at a pep rally.

The grammar rules of proper English can and do change, but not often — maybe a few times every 500 years. Style, on the other hand, shifts much more frequently. A sentence from the early 20th century may look odd to 21st-century readers, and a sentence from the 19th century will seem even stranger. Style also changes with context. Science publications and literary journals, for example, capitalize titles differently. Geography matters, too. In the United States, a comma often appears before *and* in a list of three or more items. British writers generally omit that comma.


TIP

In *English Grammar All-in-One For Dummies,* I discuss the most common style points. If I tackled every situation, though, you'd be reading a thousand-page book. For your most important writing projects, you may want to consult a manual of style. Many institutions publish this sort of book, listing their preferences for punctuation, capitalization, and a whole bunch of other *-ations*. A few popular style manuals are the *Modern Language Association Handbook* (for academic writing in the humanities), *The Chicago Manual of Style* (for general writing), the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association,* and the *MIT Guide to Science and Engineering Communication* (for science writing).

These examples illustrate the difference between grammar and style:

SENTENCE: Am going basketball game I to the.

WHAT'S NOT STANDARD: The word order is scrambled.

GRAMMAR OR STYLE? Grammar.

STANDARD ENGLISH: I am going to the basketball game.

SENTENCE: She was born on March 18 2009.

WHAT'S NOT STANDARD: Most writers would insert a comma after *18.*

GRAMMAR OR STYLE? Style.

ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS: She was born on March 18, 2009. Or, She was born on 18 March 2009.

SENTENCE: Them enjoy playing baseball.

WHAT'S NOT STANDARD: The word *them* isn't appropriate for that spot in the sentence.

GRAMMAR OR STYLE: Grammar.

STANDARD ENGLISH: They enjoy playing baseball.

SENTENCE: Ann spends too much time surfing the Internet.

WHAT'S NOT STANDARD: When it was first invented, *Internet* was generally capitalized. These days, most publications prefer lowercase *(internet).*

GRAMMAR OR STYLE: Style.

NEW VERSION: Ann spends too much time surfing the internet.

TIP

Standard English isn't the "best" form of the language; nor is it the best choice in many situations. To find out more, turn to Chapter 2.

Getting to Know the Elements of Grammar and Style

When you bake a cake, you need all the right ingredients. If you forget one, the cake is tasteless. English has a number of ingredients, too. You can't ignore any if you want to express yourself correctly in Standard English. Here are the basics:

- **Parts of speech:** Words, like people, base a portion of their identity on the work they do. Words that name people or things, for example, are *nouns.* English teachers call the identity of a word the *part of speech.* Understanding how to select the appropriate part of speech is an important aspect of grammar.
- **Parts of a sentence:** Words seldom like to be alone, another quality that words and people have in common. When words join together, they form *sentences.* Complete sentences are essential in formal writing.
- **Mechanics:** Surprised? Usually, mechanics repair cars and other machines. In language, the term *mechanics* refers to the little things that help readers understand what you mean. Spelling and capitalization are included in mechanics. So is *punctuation,* the placement of periods, commas, question marks, and other symbols. With faulty mechanics, your writing may suffer.
- **Word order:** In English, location partly determines meaning. *The dog bit John* is different from *John bit the dog.* In the first version, the dog is in trouble. In the second, John has a problem. You should know the rules that govern the placement of words.
- **Word choice:** Some words sound alike (*eye* and *I,* for example). Others are nearly twins (for instance, *affect* and *effect*). Selecting the wrong word can wreck your writing.
- **Word forms:** Today *I walk.* Yesterday *I walked.* The form of the word *walk* changes to reveal the time period of the action. Knowing the correct form is essential.

These are the main ingredients that cook up proper English. The next sections examine each in turn.

Parts of speech

According to one computer analysis, the English language includes more than a million words. All those words can be sorted into one of eight boxes: the *parts of speech.* Take a look at the Big Eight:

- Nouns
- Pronouns
- Verbs
- Adjectives
- Adverbs
- Prepositions
- Conjunctions
- Interjections

Not every box has the same number of words in it. The *interjection* container is light. The *noun* and *verb* containers are huge. The other boxes fall somewhere in between.

Check out these sentences, in which the parts of speech are underlined and labeled:

Nora likes algebra. (*Nora* and *algebra* are nouns.)

I told you the story already. (*I* and *you* are pronouns.)

The baby shook the rattle. (*Shook* is a verb.)

Great speeches require intense practice. (*Great* and *intense* are adjectives.)

Glen wrote his name carefully and correctly. (*Carefully* and *correctly* are adverbs.)

A play by that author received great reviews from the critics. (*By* and *from* are prepositions.)

Nora and Fred like opera, but Sal prefers jazz. (*And* and *but* are conjunctions.)

Wow, those tickets are cheap! (*Wow* is an interjection.)

You may ask, "Why should anyone bother labeling parts of speech?" Good question! Most of the time, you think about the meaning of a word, not its part of speech. Most of the time, your writing is correct. However, some important grammar rules depend upon knowing the difference between one part of speech and another. For example, an *adjective* is a word that describes people, places, or things. An *adverb* is also a description, but it can't do an adjective's job.

Take a look at these examples. Pay close attention to the underlined words:

NONSTANDARD: Today the weather is beautifully.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Beautifully* is an adverb. You need an adjective here.

STANDARD: Today the weather is beautiful.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The adjective *beautiful* works well here.

NONSTANDARD: Bill and Tina agenda the next meeting.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Agenda* is a noun. You need an action word (a verb).

STANDARD: Bill and Tina will write the agenda for the next meeting.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The verb *will write* provides the action. *Agenda* correctly appears as a noun.

NONSTANDARD: The puppy lifted it's paw.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: You need a pronoun in this spot. *It's* means "it is."

STANDARD: The puppy lifted its paw.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *Its* is a pronoun.

NONSTANDARD: The rumor spread threw the class.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Threw* is a verb. An action word doesn't belong here.

STANDARD: The rumor spread through the class.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The verb has been replaced by a preposition, a word that relates ideas. In this sentence, it relates *spread* and *class,* showing where the rumor *spread.*

In Unit 2, you find in-depth information on every part of speech. Well, every part of speech except for interjections. An *interjection* is a word that briefly comments on the rest of the sentence. *Ouch*, *wow*, and *oh* are interjections. I don't provide in-depth commentary on interjections. They have no depth! They simply add a little interest to your conversation.


TIP

Every dictionary tells you the part of speech of the word, usually right in front of the definition. Some words may have several labels because they change their identity in different sentences. For more information on how to understand every part of a dictionary definition, see Chapter 16.

Parts of a sentence

A judge sentences criminals to prison, where inmates must follow many rules. You may feel that English sentences are prisons, too, because so many rules apply to them. But English sentences are *not* prisons; they're structures to hold your thoughts. They help your reader differentiate one idea from another. Take a peek at this paragraph:

going to the beach bad idea no pets allowed want take the dog he does not bite you know kind and friendly he is to the park instead

Oh, my! That paragraph resembles a closet with no hangers. Take another look at the same paragraph, this time with sentences:

> Going to the beach is a bad idea. No pets are allowed. I want to take the dog. He does not bite. You know how kind and friendly he is! We should go to the park instead.

This one is easier to understand, isn't it? The extra words, capital letters, and punctuation are like hangers. They organize your thoughts into complete sentences. In doing so, they sort out ideas the way hangers sort out clothing.

TIP

Complete and proper sentences aren't always necessary. When you speak with your friends, for instance, you may use half-sentences.

Read this conversation. Imagine that Joe and Barbara are speaking to or texting each other:

> Joe: Want to go to the beach?
>
> Barbara: Not without my dog.
>
> Joe: Okay, the park instead.

These comments work well because Joe and Barbara are not in a formal situation. To find out when formal English is necessary and when conversational English is acceptable, turn to Chapter 2. For more about grammar and texting, see Chapter 25.

In creating sentences that are grammatically correct in Standard English, you should pay attention to verbs, subjects, complements, and descriptions.

Verbs

Every sentence has at least one word that expresses action or being. That word is a *verb.* In these sentences, the verbs are underlined:

> Candice loves her engagement ring. (*loves* = action word)
>
> Duke ate every dog biscuit in the box. (*ate* = action word)
>
> She will be pleased with your work. (*will be* = being words)
>
> Were the lights on? (*Were* = being word)

Selecting the verb form that is correct in Standard English is important. Glance at these examples. Notice the underlined verbs:

> NONSTANDARD: You was wrong.
>
> WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: In Standard English, the verb form *was* does not pair with *you.*
>
> STANDARD: You were wrong.
>
> WHY IT'S STANDARD: *Were* is the verb form that matches *you.* (To learn more about this topic, see Chapter 5.)

NONSTANDARD: The mayor speaked to voters yesterday.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Speaked* is not correct in Standard English.

STANDARD: The mayor spoke to voters yesterday.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *Spoke* is the irregular verb form you need in this sentence. (For more information about irregular verb forms, see Chapter 12.)

NONSTANDARD: John studying for his exam.

WHY IT'S NONSTANDARD: The verb form *studying* is not complete.

STANDARD: John is studying for his exam.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: Now the verb is complete. (See Chapter 8 for more about these verb forms.)

Subjects

In a sentence, someone or something does the action or exists in the state of being. That word is the *subject.* Notice the underlined subjects in these sample sentences:

Cindy arrived at 10 o'clock. (*Cindy* = subject)

We had sandwiches for lunch. (*We* = subject)

The sandwiches were delicious. (*sandwiches* = subject)

Do you like peanut butter? (*you* = subject)

It is smooth and sticky. (*It* = subject)

Jelly and jam go well with peanut butter. (*Jelly* and *jam* = subjects)

Most times, you know who or what you're writing about. The subject, in other words, is usually easy to select. When the subject is a pronoun, errors often occur. Examine these examples. Pay special attention to the underlined words:

NONSTANDARD: Him and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Him* can't be a subject.

STANDARD: He and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *He* is a proper subject.

NONSTANDARD: Are youse ready?

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Youse* is not the plural of *you. Youse* is not a Standard English form.

STANDARD: Are you ready?

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *You* is Standard English. *You* is both singular (one) and plural (more than one).

NONSTANDARD: Us friends should stick together.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: Us is not a proper subject.

STANDARD: We friends should stick together.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: *We* is a proper subject in Standard English.

Chapter 14 explains which pronouns work as subjects.

Pairing subjects with verbs can also cause trouble. Check these examples. Pay attention to the underlined words in these example sentences:

NONSTANDARD: Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones has been promoted.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: *Has been promoted* pairs up with one person. In this sentence, you have two people: *Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones.*

STANDARD: Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones have been promoted.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The verb *have been promoted* properly pairs with *Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones.* Both are plural (more than one).

NONSTANDARD: The list of grammar rules are too long.

WHY IT'S NOT STANDARD: The subject of the sentence is *list,* a singular word. It can't pair with *are,* a plural verb form. Did you focus on *rules? Rules* is not the subject of this sentence. It's part of a description, *of grammar rules.*

STANDARD: The list of grammar rules is too long.

WHY IT'S STANDARD: The singular verb form, *is,* pairs correctly with the singular subject, *list.*

To find out more about matching singular subjects to singular verb forms and plural subjects to plural verb forms, check out Chapter 13.

Complements and descriptions

Your thoughts are rich and varied. You want to say more than "Mary is" or "I run." Some elements, called *complements*, complete ideas. Have a look at these example sentences. The complements are underlined:

Mary is happy.

Deborah mailed the letter.

Cathy and Drew are always nervous in the dentist's office.

Give Jean her pizza.

Did you tell Barbara the secret?

Usually, complements fall into place correctly. Pronouns can cause problems when they act as complements. (Have you noticed that pronouns are troublemakers?) For more information on complements, check out Chapter 9. To sort out pronouns as complements, see Chapter 14.