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Basic English Grammar

FOR
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Learn to:

- Become confident with written and spoken English
- Develop your skills without learning complex grammar
- Improve your spelling and avoid common mistakes

Geraldine Woods



Basic English Grammar

FOR
DUMMIES[®]
A Wiley Brand

by **Geraldine Woods**

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Basic English Grammar For Dummies®

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Introduction

You want to send a letter to your aunt. She is very strict about proper grammar and spelling. This is what you write:

Dear Aunt Louise,

~~I wanted I would like I want to thank~~

Thank you for ~~you're your'~~

Thank you for the ~~presant present~~ gift.

By now, the notepaper is a mess, and so are you. If this sounds like your life, you're not alone. Many people struggle when they must write or speak formally. Fortunately, help is on the way. In fact, it is already here, in the book you're reading.

English grammar is not a mystery. It is a set of traditions and patterns of language handed down through the years. Anyone can learn the rules of Standard English. *Basic English Grammar For Dummies* explains what you need to know. With practice and the information in this book, you can express yourself confidently and correctly. Even Aunt Louise will be pleased!

About This Book

As I wrote this book, I followed *For Dummies* traditions. I also made some patterns myself. Every time I introduce a grammar term, I italicise and explain it. If I write *noun*, for example, I tell you a *noun* is the name of a person, place, thing or idea. Don't be afraid! In *Basic English Grammar For Dummies*, I use very few grammar terms. As often as possible, I explain what you need to know in normal, non-teacher language. I also underline some words or phrases that you should pay close attention to.

To help you pick up important points quickly, I frequently place information in lists. Every item in a list begins with a little checkmark. The key idea appears in boldface. Examples illustrate every rule. Keep an eye out for these examples, centred alone on a line. If I mention an idea but don't explain it immediately, I direct you to a chapter that contains more information.

Although this book focuses on grammar, I couldn't resist throwing in some vocabulary builders. A strong vocabulary makes your writing more

interesting. Look for grey boxes, called sidebars, if you want to learn new words. If your vocabulary is already in good shape, ignore the grey boxes and go right to the text.

Foolish Assumptions

I don't know who you are, but you will spend some time with me. When I write, I keep you, the reader, in my mind. I imagine you holding a yellow *For Dummies* book or an e-reader. This is how I see you:

- ✓ You know the language, but you are open to learning more.
- ✓ You want a firmer grasp of the rules of Standard English, the formal language of educated people.
- ✓ You are busy. You don't want to waste time memorising facts you will never need.
- ✓ You enjoy a little humour.

That is everything I assume about you. Have I described you accurately? I hope so.

Icons Used in This Book

Flip through *Basic English Grammar For Dummies*. Many little drawings appear in the margin. Those pictures are called *icons*. Icons alert you in these ways:



This icon signals a shortcut or an extra bit of information. A tip is a whisper in your ear, helping you master a grammar rule.



This icon tells you where errors often pop up, so you can avoid mistakes.



For every topic, you find a few questions labelled with this icon. Take the quizzes to check whether you have mastered the material. Answers follow every quick quiz. (No peeking allowed.)



Key ideas appear with this icon.

Beyond the Book

Like me, you probably spend a lot of time on the Internet. I have placed extra material there, to add to what you find on the screen of your e-reader or between the paper covers of *Basic English Grammar For Dummies*. Here is what you get, all for free:

- ✔ **Cheat Sheet:** Yes, I know you are honest. You don't cheat on tests or at work. You could use a little help sometimes, though. The Cheat Sheet lists essential information from this book. Print it out and tape it to your desk or put it in your pocket. Glance at the Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/basicenglishgrammar when you want to refresh your memory about key grammar rules.
- ✔ **An extra Part of Tens:** All *For Dummies* books, including this one, end with the Part of Tens. Two chapters in this book explain ten ways to improve your writing skills and ten mistakes that wreck your sentences. You can read an extra Part of Tens online at www.dummies.com/extras/basicenglishgrammar. That one lists ten ways to polish your writing. With this online Part of Tens, you move beyond grammar and into style. You see how to create sophisticated sentences. Like designer clothing, they attract positive attention.
- ✔ **Articles:** I love language, and I have more to say about every topic in this book. Plus, the rules of Standard English are not carved in stone. They are changing right now, adapting to new means of communication such as smartphones, tablets and the like. Fortunately, the Internet gives me space for in-depth discussions of old grammar rules and reports of new developments. Look for articles that tell you a little bit more about parts of speech, parts of a sentence, new media and other topics. For example, do you know how to combine words and images for a presentation? Would you like to find out whether to capitalise school years, seasons and historical eras? Check www.dummies.com/extras/basicenglishgrammar to read articles on these topics, and more.

Where to Go from Here

You don't have to read *Basic English Grammar For Dummies* in order. Nor do you have to read the entire book. You can, of course. If you do, you will be my favourite reader.

I realise, however, that you're busy. You probably want to select just what you need. To get started, take a close look at the Table of Contents. Mark off topics that interest or puzzle you. Read the chapters you have selected.

Another way to personalise your approach to grammar starts with the checklist at the end of Chapter 2. Look at the questions there. If you don't know an answer, turn to the chapter covering that topic. You can also try your hand at the quizzes in each chapter. If you get every question right, feel free to skip that section. (Also, take a moment to pat yourself on the back for a job well done.) If the quiz stumps you, spend some time in that section of the book. Read the explanations, and glance at related material in other chapters.

If you are facing a specific task, a school report or a work presentation, perhaps, turn to Part V. There you find information about common writing formats. Check out the online material, too.

No matter which path you choose to follow through *Basic English Grammar For Dummies*, you will arrive at the same place. You will be a stronger, more confident writer and speaker.

Part I

Getting Started with Basic English Grammar

getting started
with

**Basic English
Grammar**



For Dummies can help you get started with lots of subjects. Visit www.dummies.com to learn more and do more with *For Dummies*.

In this part . . .

- ✓ Identify the elements of proper English.
- ✓ Explore the proper format of everyday writing tasks.
- ✓ Become familiar with common errors.
- ✓ Learn when breaking the rules of Standard English is acceptable.
- ✓ See how to take advantage of computer programs that check your spelling and grammar.

Chapter 1

Getting a Grip on Grammar

In This Chapter

- ▶ Surveying the basic elements of grammar
- ▶ Watching out for punctuation and spelling
- ▶ Coping with everyday writing tasks

Lots of people groan when they hear the word grammar. They think that grammar is just a long list of picky rules. Who cares if you say *had gone* or *went*? Why worry about the choice between *I* and *me*? These issues can seem silly. Wouldn't it be better to spend time searching for a cancer cure?

Yes, grammar is often picky. Certainly, the world needs more than grammar – much more! Yet proper language does matter. Rightly or wrongly, many people judge your intelligence and ability based on the way you speak and write. Better jobs and higher grades often go to those who follow the rules. In this chapter, you survey the key elements of Standard English – grammar, spelling and much more.

Getting to Know the Elements of Proper English

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 cannot ignore any if you wish to express yourself correctly. Here are the ingredients of proper English:

- ✓ **Parts of speech:** Words are like people. Both 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.

Did you go to grammar school?

In the Middle Ages, the word *grammar* meant education. The term applied to all sorts of learning, not just to rules of the language. This old definition lasted a long time. When I was a child, quite a few centuries after the Middle Ages ended, I attended *grammar school*.

I did study English grammar during grades one through eight. I had lessons in maths, history, science and many other subjects. Now, children enrol in *secondary school*, not grammar school. Even so, the link between proper English usage and education remains strong.

- ✔ **Parts of a sentence:** Words seldom like to be alone. (This is 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 automobiles and other machines. In language, the term *mechanics* refers to the little things that help readers understand what you mean. Spelling and capitalisation are included in mechanics. So is *punctuation*, the placement of full stops, commas, question marks and other symbols. Without proper mechanics, your writing suffers.
- ✔ **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.

Building Language, Block by Block: Parts of Speech

According to one survey, the English language includes more than one million words. All of 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.

Just to give you an idea how these parts of speech look within a sentence, here are some examples. The parts of speech are underlined and labelled:

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

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

The baby sat in the pram. (*Sat* 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.)

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

You may ask, ‘Why should anyone bother labelling 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 cannot do an adjective’s job.

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

WRONG: Today the weather is beautifully.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Beautifully* is not the proper part of speech for this spot in the sentence. *Beautifully* is an adverb. You need an adjective here.

RIGHT: Today the weather is beautiful.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The adjective *beautiful* works well here.

WRONG: Bill and Tina agenda the next meeting.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Agenda* is a noun. You need an action word (a verb).

RIGHT: Bill and Tina wrote the agenda for the next meeting.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The verb *wrote* provides the action. *Agenda* correctly appears as a noun.

WRONG: The puppy lifted it's paw.

WHY IT IS WRONG: You need a pronoun in this spot. *It's* means 'it is'.

RIGHT: The puppy lifted its paw.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *Its* is a pronoun.

WRONG: The rumour spread threw the class.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Threw* is a verb. You should not have an action word here.

RIGHT: The rumour spread through the class.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The verb is gone. In its place you have a preposition, a word that relates ideas. In this sentence it relates *spread* and *class*, showing where the rumour *spread*.

In Part II, 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.



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, check out Chapter 21.

Making Sentences

A judge sentences criminals to prison. There, criminals must follow many rules. You may feel that English sentences are prisons, too. So many rules apply to them! I am just kidding. English sentences are definitely *not* prisons.

They are structures to hold your thoughts. They help your reader pick apart 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! In that paragraph, all the ideas are jumbled together. It resembles a wardrobe with no hangers. The clothes are impossible to find.

Take another look at the same paragraph, this time with proper 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 in a wardrobe. They organise your thoughts into complete sentences. In doing so, they sort out ideas the way hangers sort out clothing.



Complete and proper sentences are not 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 will do, turn to Chapter 2. For more about grammar and texting, see Chapter 18.

When you do want to create grammatically correct sentences, you must pay attention to several issues. The sections that follow briefly show you these issues.

Action or being words

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 right verb form is important. Have a look at these examples. Notice the underlined verbs:

WRONG: You was wrong.

WHY IT IS WRONG: The verb form *was* does not pair properly with *you*.

RIGHT: You were wrong.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *Were* is the verb form that matches *you*. (To find out more about this topic, see Chapter 9.)

WRONG: The mayor speaked to voters yesterday.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Speaked* is not correct in Standard English.

RIGHT: The mayor spoke to voters yesterday.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *Spoke* is the irregular verb form you need in this sentence. (For more information about irregular verb forms, see Chapter 10.)

WRONG: John studying for his exam.

WHY IT IS WRONG: The verb form *studying* is not complete.

RIGHT: John is studying for his exam.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: Now the verb is complete. (See Chapter 9 for more about these verb forms.)

As you see, you can make many mistakes with action and being words. Verbs are complicated! Don't panic. The chapters I mention in the earlier examples explain the rules you must follow.

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 example sentences:

Cindy arrived at ten 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)

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

Most times, you know who or what you want to write about. The subject, in other words, is usually easy to select. When the subject is a pronoun, errors often occur. Examine these examples. The underlined words are important:

WRONG: Him and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Him* cannot be a subject.

RIGHT: He and John failed the Latin test.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *He* is a proper subject.

WRONG: Are youse ready?

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Youse* is not the plural of *you*. *Youse* is not a Standard English form.

RIGHT: Are you ready?

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *You* is Standard English. *You* is both singular (one) and plural (more than one).

WRONG: Us friends should stick together.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Us* is not a proper subject.

RIGHT: We friends should stick together.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: *We* is a proper subject.

Chapter 4 explains which pronouns work as subjects.

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

WRONG: Mr Smith and Ms Jones has been promoted.

WHY IT IS WRONG: *Has been promoted* pairs up with one person. In this sentence, you have two people, *Mr Smith and Ms Jones*.

RIGHT: Mr Smith and Ms Jones have been promoted.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: The verb *have been promoted* matches well with *Mr Smith and Ms Jones*. Both are plural (more than one).

WRONG: The list of grammar rules are too long.

WHY IT IS WRONG: The subject of the sentence is *list*, a singular word. It cannot pair with *are*, a plural verb form. Did you focus on *rules*? *Rules* is not the subject of this sentence. It is part of a description, *of grammar rules*.

RIGHT: The list of grammar rules is too long.

WHY IT IS RIGHT: 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 11.

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. Take a peek at these example sentences. The complements are underlined:

Mary is happy.

Deborah posted 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 12. To sort out pronouns, see Chapter 4.

Your writing would be very boring without descriptions. Notice the underlined descriptions in these examples:

Every morning I run through the park.

Pink paint covered the bumpy wall.

Silk thread is more expensive than cotton thread.

Wind in that area blows the fallen leaves away.

The book of speeches helped me prepare for the ceremony.

Singing, the choir entered the church.

As you see, descriptions come in many shapes and sizes. Chapter 6 explains what type of description is best for every situation.

Small but Important: Punctuating, Capitalising and Spelling

Punctuation marks, capital letters and spelling may seem unimportant. Don't overlook these little things, though. They add more to your writing than you may expect. Take punctuation, for example. Some years ago, lawmakers debated the placement of a comma for several hours. With the comma, the law had one meaning. Without it, the law was completely different! This section gives you an overview of punctuation, capitalisation and spelling.

Punctuation

I once saw a television show in which something similar to this conversation took place:

Angel (waving a thick stack of paper): I am writing a book.

Angel's friend (looking at the first page): What is this? I cannot read it. There is no punctuation.

Angel: Oh, I will worry about that stuff later.

Angel's friend: I do not think so! You need punctuation now!

Angel's friend is right. You can't read without punctuation, the little marks that show the reader where to pause, when someone is speaking and so on. These are the basic punctuation marks that you should know:

✓ **Apostrophe:** This is a little curved hook above the line. An apostrophe, along with the letter *s*, shows possession:

- Ellen's car (Ellen owns the car.)
- the boys' changing room (The changing room belongs to the boys.)
- my cousin's shoes (My cousin owns the shoes.)
- the Prime Minister's staff (The staff belongs to the Prime Minister.)
- women's rights (The rights belong to women.)

Apostrophes also shorten words:

- Annie doesn't ice skate. (Here, *doesn't* is short for *does not*)
- I'm excited that our holiday is finally here. (*I'm* is short for *I am*.)
- Olivia couldn't go on the rollercoaster. (In this sentence, *couldn't* is short for *could not*.)
- Isn't that lemonade too cold? (*Isn't* is short for *is not*.)

To find out more about apostrophes, turn to Chapter 14.

✔ **Full stop, question mark, exclamation mark:** These three punctuation marks signal the end of a sentence. A *full stop* is a little dot. It follows a sentence that makes a statement. A *question mark* is made from a curve and a dot. It follows a sentence that asks a question. An *exclamation mark* is a line and a dot. It shows emphasis – the punctuation mark that shouts. Look at these punctuation marks in action:

- Mary’s socks are blue. (The full stop ends the statement.)
- Are Tim’s shoes blue also? (The question mark ends the question.)
- No, they are not! (The exclamation mark adds emphasis.)

To discover more about these three important punctuation marks, see Chapter 13.

✔ **Comma:** This little curved hook starts on the line and reaches below. A comma tells the reader to pause. Notice the commas in these sentences:

- Katie, my friend, is visiting from Chicago.
- Katie arrived yesterday, but she has to leave tomorrow.
- Chicago, which is in the state of Illinois, is a large city.
- Tim, have you ever visited Chicago?

If you read these sentences aloud, you can hear the short silences that appear at each comma. If commas trouble you, check out Chapter 15.

✔ **Quotation marks:** Quotation marks are little curves that appear above the line. Their most common job is to mark off the exact words that someone said or wrote. Notice the quotation marks in these examples:

- ‘Be quiet,’ said the librarian.
- The children cried, ‘We were not very loud.’
- ‘In the library,’ replied the librarian, ‘any noise is too loud.’

To use quotation marks properly, you must follow many rules. Turn to Chapter 16 for everything you need to know about quotation marks.

Capitalisation

Have you ever seen a very old piece of writing? Capital letters show up in strange places. Thomas Hobbes’s book, *The Elements of Law*, is more than 300 years old. In the middle of one sentence, you see this phrase:

parts of our natural Reason

These days, *Reason* would appear in lowercase (non-capital letters). The writers of earlier times could place a capital wherever they wanted. You