



A plain-English guide to grammar

English Grammar

FOR DUMMIES®



Lesley J. Ward

Founder member, Society for Editors and Proofreaders

Geraldine Woods

English teacher and author

A Reference for the Rest of Us!™  **UK Edition**

English Grammar For Dummies®

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**Lesley Ward and
Geraldine Woods**



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About the Authors

Lesley J. Ward has worked in the publishing industry for over thirty years, editing and proofreading books and journals. She is a founder member of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP), and regularly leads training courses for SfEP, the Irish Book Publishers' Association and The London College of Communication. She is also a distance-learning tutor for the Publishing Training Centre. Her favourite course is *Brush up your grammar*. She lives in Berkshire and is notorious for being a harmless eccentric/dangerous radical who refuses to have e-mail. She doesn't have a cat.

Geraldine Woods' career as a grammarian began in her elementary school, which in those days was called "grammar school" for very good reason. With the guidance of a series of nuns carrying long rulers (good for pointing at the board and slapping unruly students), she learned how to diagram every conceivable type of sentence. She has been an English teacher for 25 years and has written 40 books, give or take a few. She loves minor-league baseball, Chinese food, and the novels of Jane Austen.

Dedication

From Lesley: This book is dedicated to Oliver and Francesca, who are going to receive copies from their grammatically obsessed maiden aunt.

From Geraldine: For my husband and son, the hearts of my life.

Authors' Acknowledgments

From Lesley: Most of the people I need to thank will have to remain nameless because I can't remember their names. The primary school teacher who got me hooked on grammar in the first place isn't even a nameless face to me any more, although I can still see the blackboard and remember the weather (rainy) on the day she showed me that language is fascinating. My teachers at grammar school also did a wonderful job. (A special thank-you here to all the members of successive governments who didn't decide that I didn't need to know grammar.) Every author who argued with me, and every publishing house that gave me feedback on the work I did for them, helped to hone my skills. And all the experts who have taken the trouble to write grammar books that I could understand. Bless them - I now have a much better idea of how much effort those books took.

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Joyce Pepple, Acquisitions Director, Consumer
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Gerry Fahey, Vice President of Production Services

Debbie Stailey, Director of Composition Services

Introduction

Why does grammar make so many people nervous? Many of us weren't taught any at school. (A really great government idea that put us all out of our depth the minute we stepped out of the classroom and into the real world!) Some of us found all the terminology boring. Others have forgotten what they learned because they haven't had much chance to practise. And we can find ourselves in circumstances where our language skills aren't as good as they need to be – in a job interview, writing our first report in a new job, or just trying to please a teacher. This can be stressful and make us very self-conscious. And it's worse if everyone around us seems to be better at it, or if we find to our horror that the boss is one of those people who even seems to *speak* proper grammar. (Were some people *born* knowing this stuff?)

Happily, English grammar is a lot easier than you've been led to believe. You don't have to learn all those technical terms, and if you ignore the terminology you'll find that you already know a lot of it anyway. In this book we tell you the tricks of the trade, the strategies that help you make the right decision when you're facing such grammatical dilemmas as the choice between *I* and *me*, *had gone* and *went*, and so forth. We explain *what* you're supposed to do, but also tell you *why* a particular word is correct or incorrect. You won't have to memorise a list of meaningless rules (well, maybe a couple from the punctuation chapter!) because when you understand the reason for a particular choice you'll pick the correct word automatically.

About This Book

In this book, we concentrate on the common errors. We tell you what's what in the sentence, in logical, everyday (pardon the term) English, not in obscure terminology. You don't have to read this book in order, though you can, and you don't have to read the whole thing. Just browse through the table of contents and look for things that you often get wrong. For example, if you know that verbs are your downfall, check out Chapters 2 and 3 for the basics. Chapters 11 and 18 show you how to pick the correct verb in a variety of situations, and Chapter 22 gives you the equivalent of a doctorate in verbology. You decide how picky you want to be.

How to Use This Book

Each chapter in this book introduces some basic ideas and then shows you how to choose the correct sentence when faced with two or three choices. If we define a term—*linking verbs*, for example—we show you a practical situation in which identifying a linking verb helps you pick the right pronoun. The examples are clearly displayed in the text so that you can find them easily. One good way to determine whether or not you need to read a particular section is to check the pop quizzes that are sprinkled around every chapter. If you get the right answer, you probably don't need to read that section. If you're puzzled, however, backtrack and read the chapter. Also, watch for Demon icons. They identify the little things—the difference between two similar words, commonly misused words and so on—that may sabotage your writing.

What You Are Not to Read

Here and there throughout this book, you see some items marked with the Black Belt icon. No human being in the history of the world has ever needed to know those terms for any purpose connected with speaking and writing correct English. In fact, we recommend that you skip them and do something interesting instead. For those of you who actually enjoy obscure terminology for the purpose of, say, clearing a room within ten seconds, the Black Belt icons define such exciting grammatical terms as *subject complement* and *participial phrase*. Everyone else, fear not: these sections are clearly labelled and completely skippable. Look for the Black Belt icons and avoid those paragraphs like the plague.

Foolish Assumptions

We wrote *English Grammar For Dummies* with a specific person in mind. We assume that you, the reader, already speak English (although you may have learned it as a foreign language) and that you want to speak and write it better. We also assume that you're a busy person with better things to do than worry about *who* and *whom*. You want to speak and write well, but you don't want to get a doctorate in English Grammar. (Smart move. Doctorates in English probably move you up on the salary scale less than any other advanced degree, except maybe Doctorates in Philosophy.)

This book is for you if

You want to get better marks for your schoolwork.

You aspire to a better-paid or higher-status job.

You want your speech and writing to present you as an educated, intelligent person.

You want your writing and your speech to be clear and to say exactly what you mean.

You want to polish your skills in English as a second language.

You simply want to use better grammar.

How This Book Is Organised

The first two parts of this book cover the basics: the minimum for reasonably correct English. Part III addresses the nuts and bolts of writing: punctuation and capital letters. Parts IV and V hit the finer (OK, pickier) points of grammar, the ones that separate regular people from Official Grammarians. If you understand the information in this section, you'll have fun finding mistakes in the daily paper.

Here's a more specific guide to navigating *English Grammar For Dummies*.

Part I: The Parts of Speech and Parts of the Sentence

This part explains how to distinguish between the three Englishes: the breezy slang of friend-to-friend chat, the

slightly more proper conversational language, and I'm-on-my-best-behaviour English. We explain the building blocks of a sentence (subjects and verbs) – and show you how to put them together properly. In this part, we also provide a guide to the complete sentence, telling you what's grammatically legal and what's not. We also define objects and complements and show you how to use each effectively.

Part II: Avoiding Common Errors

In this part, we describe the remaining members of Team Grammar – the other parts of speech that can make or break your writing. We show you how to join short, choppy sentences into longer, more fluent ones without incurring a visit from the grammar police. We also explain descriptive word and show you how the location of a description may alter the meaning of the sentence. Prepositions – the bane of many speakers of English as a second language – are in this part, too, as well as some tips for correct usage. Finally, in this part we tell you how to avoid mismatches between singular and plural words, by far the most common mistake in ordinary speech and writing. Part II also contains an explanation of pronoun gender. In addition, reading this section may help you to avoid sexist pronoun usage.

Part III: No Garage, But Plenty of Mechanics

If you've ever asked yourself whether you need a comma or if you've ever got lost in quotation marks and semicolons, Part III is for you. We explain all the rules that govern the use of the apostrophe. We also show you how to quote speech or written material and where to place the most common punctuation mark, the comma. Lastly, we outline the ins and outs of capital letters: when you need them, when you don't, and when they're optional.

Part IV: Polishing Without Wax - the Finer Points of Grammar

Part IV inches up on the pickiness scale – not all the way to Grammar Heaven, but at least as far as the gate. In this part, we tell you the difference between subject and object pronouns and pronouns of possession. (No, you don't need an exorcist.) We also go into detail on verb tenses, explaining which words to use for all sorts of purposes. We show you how to distinguish between active and passive verbs and how to use each properly. We illustrate some common errors of sentence structure and tackle comparisons – both how to form them and how to ensure that your comparisons are logical and complete. Finally, we show you how to achieve balance and order in the sentence.

Part V: Rules Even Your Great-Aunt's Grammar Teacher Didn't Know

Anyone who masters the material in Part V has the right to wear a bun and tut-tut a lot. This part covers the

moods of verbs (ranging from grouchy to just plain irritable) and explains how to avoid double negatives. Part V also gives you the last word on pronouns, those little parts of speech that make everyone's life miserable. The dreaded *who/whom* section is in this part, as well as the explanation for all sorts of errors with pronouns. We explain subordinate clauses and give you the lowdown on the most obscure punctuation rules.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

Part VI is the Part of Tens, which offers some quick tips for better grammar. Here we show you ten ways to fine-tune your proofreading skills. Finally, we suggest ways (apart from reading *English Grammar For Dummies*) to improve your ear for proper English.

Icons Used in This Book



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



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



Think you know how to find the subject in a sentence or identify a pronoun? Take the pop quizzes

located throughout this book to find out what you know and what you may want to learn.



Keep your eye out for these little devils: they point out the difference between easily confused words and show you how to make your sentence say what you want it to say.



Here's where we get a little technical. If you master this information, you're guaranteed to impress your oldest relations and bore all of your friends.

Where to Go from Here

Now that you know what's what and where it is, it's time to get started. Before you do, however, one last word. Actually, two last words. *Trust yourself.* You already know a lot. If you're a native speaker, you've communicated in English all of your life, including the years before you set foot in school and saw your first textbook. If English is an acquired language for you, you've probably already learned a fair amount of vocabulary and grammar, even if you don't know the technical terms. For example, you already understand the difference between

The dog bit Agnes.

and

Agnes bit the dog.