

# 21ST CENTURY GRAMMAR HANDBOOK

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The Princeton Language  
Institute and Joseph Hollander

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Laurel-Leaf



## HOW DO YOU PUNCTUATE THIS?

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*The old wooden school desk lay in the corner and the small oak chair sat forlornly but proudly before the new computer station in the center of the classroom.*

WHICH IS CORRECT?

*Everyone should wear their seat belt.*

*Everyone should wear her or his seat belt.*

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS SENTENCE?

*Scratching and biting, the veterinarian gave the rabies shot to the owner's cat.*

DO YOU NEED AN APOSTROPHE?

*In a democratic society, the people's needs are respected.*

**FIND THE ANSWERS FAST.**

**IT'S AS EASY AS ABC**

**WITH THE NEW DICTIONARY FORMAT**

**OF THE ...**

**21ST CENTURY GRAMMAR HANDBOOK**

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— 21<sup>ST</sup> —

CENTURY  
GRAMMAR  
HANDBOOK

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Edited by  
THE PRINCETON LANGUAGE INSTITUTE  
AND  
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*Produced by The Philip Lief Group, Inc.*



How to Use This Book

How to Know What You Don't Know

How Good Are My Grammar, Writing, and Speaking?

**Grammar A to Z**

A

B

C

D

E

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R

S

T

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XYZ

Key Word Index of Grammatical Terms

The *21st Century Grammar Handbook* is designed to give you direct and rapid answers to your questions about how to write or speak correctly. It is arranged like a dictionary: Its entries are in alphabetical order, covering not only grammar rules and examples of correct and incorrect usage but specific words or terms that often cause errors. It includes entries for *be*, *is*, *am*, *are*, *was*, and *were*, as well as the special names and terms used in English classrooms to analyze and categorize how these words work. The *21st Century Grammar Handbook* is constructed to help you find solutions quickly and directly even if you don't know classroom grammar terminology.

You can also use the *21st Century Grammar Handbook* to improve your writing and speaking overall—to identify the areas in which you are weak or need pointers and then to find all the entries that will help.

To find answers to immediate problems you are having with your writing or speaking, simply look up the word or words that are bothering you. For example, to find out whether you should use “who” or “whom,” just look under *who*. You will discover right and wrong examples, an explanation of why the rules work the way they do, and suggestions for other entries to look at if you need more information.

But what if you know something is wrong but don't know exactly what the problem is or what it is called? Then look at the next section of this book: “How to Know What You Don't Know.” Here you will find a listing of the most common writing and speaking problems along with suggestions for places to look for answers. The list asks some questions that will help guide you to the places where your problems will be solved simply and swiftly.

If you don't find a match for your problem by looking through this section, then try to look up words that are similar to the ones that are causing you difficulty or that you think are okay in your sentence but that might be hiding errors: Look under *and* or *is* or *that* or *commonly* or *ly* or *s*. Then follow the suggestions for looking at related entries until you have identified what's wrong and how to fix it. If you still can't find what you don't know, try the entries on very broad topics like *rules*, *style*, *bland writing*, and similar subjects. There you will find not only specific answers to immediate problems but many hints about other areas you might consider to find the root of your difficulties.

If you do know the name of the grammar category or term with which you need help, you can look in the entries for the full citation and also find related entries on the subject that interests you.

To teach yourself better grammar and writing or speaking, first take the self-assessment quiz called “How Good Are My Grammar, Writing, and Speaking?” It will help you identify weak spots in your statements, places where tips and tricks will help make your writing or speaking stronger and more effective, and ways to avoid common pitfalls and take advantage of your stylistic strengths.

In each entry related subjects are highlighted in *italic type*. Examples are set off in quotation

marks and clearly marked as RIGHT or WRONG.

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This list contains the most common errors and confusions that beset writers and speakers. It is designed to highlight the most likely places for you to look for answers to your questions. Be sure to check entries for similar words or terms as well as for the things in your statements that seem correct to you but that might in fact be what is causing problems. Remember that the *Handbook* includes entries for general problems like *bland writing*, *rules*, and *style*. Each of these entries includes not only solutions to immediate problems but ideas about where else to look in the book for help or answers.

The list of topics to look at is not alphabetical for each problem but in order of where you are most likely to find specific answers to specific problems.

1. SPELLING: How do I know a word is spelled wrong? See *spelling*, *dictionary*, and *languages*.

2. RULES: Do I always have to follow them? See *rules*, *style*, *dialect*, *grammar*, and *standard English*.

3. RULES AGAIN: How do I know when I've broken them? See *editing*, *revision*, and *audience*.

4. PUNCTUATION: Who cares? See *comma*, *period*, *quotation mark*, *question mark*, *exclamation point*, *colon*, *semicolon*, *conjunction*, *clause*, *sentence*, *ellipsis*, *bracket*, *symbol*, and *hyphen*.

5. VERBS: What are they, and how do I use them? See *be*, *is*, *am*, *was*, *were*, *are*, *will*, *would*, *should*, *shall*, *tense*, *verbs*, *conjugation*, *clauses*, *agreement*, and *fragments*.

6. PRONOUNS: When do I use "who" and "whom" or "she" and "her"? See the entries for the specific words as well as *pronoun*, *personal pronoun*, and the related grammatical listings.

7. NOUNS: What are they? See the entries for *noun*, *proper noun*, *names*, *title*, *capitalization*, and suggested related topics in those entries.

8. CONJUNCTIONS: How do parts of sentences get linked together? See the entries on *conjunction*; specific conjunctions like *and*; and *parallelism*, *emphasis*, *clause*, and so on.

9. MODIFIERS: "Good" and "well" drive me crazy. Look them up, along with *adjective*, *adverb*, *comparison*, and many other subjects.

10. CONFUSING WORDS: What is the difference between "their" and "they're" and "there"? Look them up, and see the entry for *homonym*.

11. SEXIST AND OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE: When should I call a woman "Ms." or "Miss" or "Mrs."? All these words are listed, and there are entries on *sexist language*, *titles of people*, *names*, and many related subjects.

12. USING NUMBERS: Is it the "23rd Precinct" or "Twenty-third Precinct"? Look under *numbers*, *cardinal number*, *ordinal number*, and related topics.

Mark any errors you find in the following sentences, each of which is numbered. The answers follow and are listed by the number of the sentence. Look for possible mistakes and whether your solutions are the right ones for making the sentence more accurate or better written. Other things to think about when you write or speak are noted as well. Be careful; there are some tricky things in the samples.

### SAMPLES

1. I didn't know who to give the book to.
2. She completed the operation, and then walked out of the operating room.
3. A doctor is supposed to keep his hands clean.
4. Its clear whats gotta be done.
5. Speaking of grammar, errors are to common to worry about.
6. In the spring the birds begin to sing and the bees begin to sting.
7. Joans book is called, "How To Write Better."
8. I read the book, that is about grammar, and writing.
9. There is great value to an university education but it is weak.
10. The cases of sexual harassment which is common bothers me.
11. Predominant forms of transgressive behavior, deviance that is selfgenerated, and retrogressive emotions.
12. Examples are given so that help can be provided where it is needed.

### THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Remember that *italicized words* refer to entries in the *Handbook* you should look at for answers, details, and explanations. Keep in mind as well that the samples are purposely tricky sentences that are not meant to embarrass or fool you but to help you identify as many areas as possible that you should pay attention to when you write or speak.

### ANSWERS

1. **I didn't know who to give the book to.** In this *sentence*, "*who*" is not right. In fact it should be "*whom*" because you should use the *objective case* of a *pronoun* before an *infinitive*.



(“They asked me to improve.”) and because “*who*” can also be seen as the *object* of the preposition “to” that dangles at the end of the sentence.

But it might not be as obvious that there are other things in this sentence that don’t meet the formal requirements of *standard English* or that could be written more clearly or carefully. First, a *contraction* like “didn’t” may not be acceptable if the *audience* for this statement sets very high, formal standards for writing. It’s better to use “did not” if this sentence is to appear in a school paper, scholarly publication, or some similar place.

The dangling preposition “to” might confuse some readers or offend those who apply grammar rules strictly. Better to edit or revise this sentence along these lines: “I did not know to whom to give the book.” Of course, you can’t edit words you’ve already spoken, and you might feel that the people who are going to read this sentence will understand you perfectly and either not notice or not care about your “errors.” But be sure you know your audience will be that tolerant, and be aware that informal *style* is not always appropriate. See also *dangling modifier*, *editing*, and *revision*.

2. **She completed the speech, and then walked out of the lecture hall.** No *comma* needed before a *compound predicate* like “completed ... and ... walked.” Overuse of *punctuation* is as much an error as underuse, and it can lead to a very heavy or boring *style*. Also see *and* and *predicate*.

3. **A doctor is supposed to keep his hands clean.** Not all doctors are men, so the *possessive pronoun* “his” is misleading and lacks *agreement* with its *antecedent*. This *sentence* should be revised to something like: “All doctors should keep their hands clean.” Or: “A doctor should keep her or his hands clean.” This is an instance of *sexist language* or offensive language. See also *pronouns*, *gender*, and *revision*.

4. **Its clear whats gotta be done.** This information *sentence* would not be considered appropriate in most written communications except perhaps a personal letter. The most glaring error is “gotta,” which would be just as wrong if it were “got to.” Formal, *standard English* requires “must,” “should,” “has,” or a similar construction: “... what should be done.”

Two *apostrophes* are missing from *contractions*: “It’s” (compare the *possessive pronoun* “its” and “what’s.”) And in more formal *style* contractions might not be appropriate, although the *rule* is less rigid than it used to be. Here is a possible *revision* that would meet most standards: “It’s clear what has to be done.” Change “It’s” to “It is” to satisfy the most rigorous *audience*. See also *possessive* and *pronoun*.

5. **Speaking of grammar, errors are to common to worry about.** The first verbal phrase (“Speaking of grammar”) is a *dangling modifier* or *misplaced modifier* that has no clear *antecedent*, or referent. “Errors” were not speaking of grammar, nor was anything or anyone else in the *sentence*. Moreover, the form of the phrase does not show whether it is an adjectival usage (modifying a *noun*) or an adverbial construction (modifying a *verb*; surely the phrase does not refer to “are”). Most readers will actually “understand” this sentence on first and rapid reading, but any closer attention will lead to puzzlement, the need to reread, and try to figure out what is meant, and a loss of *clarity* and *efficiency* of communication. See also *adjective*.

You can avoid *bland writing* or weak writing by starting sentences with phrases instead of

noun *subjects*. But you need to be careful that the phrases are constructed properly and refer clearly to something or someone appearing soon after in the sentence.

The first “to” is also wrong; instead of the *preposition* “to,” its *homonym*, the *adverb* “too,” is required here.

The *preposition* “about” at the end of the sentence is not dangling since it is an integral part of the verb. Dropping it would make the sentence unintelligible, while *revising* to add an *object* or inserting a pronoun object would make the sentence very stilted.

The whole sentence could be rewritten as follows: “When one is talking about grammar errors are too common to worry about.” If the last preposition troubles you because it seems to be dangling, try: “When the subject is grammar, errors are too common to cause worry.” See *revision* and *editing*.

6. **In the spring the birds begin to sing and the bees begin to sting.** A *comma* should be inserted after “sing” because the two *clauses* in this sentence are independent. Modern *usage* permits the dropping of such commas between short independent clauses, particularly in less formal or journalistic writing. If you are striving for a racy effect, need to save space by cutting down on *punctuation*, or want to defy authority a bit, the comma could be left out but not in most classroom work or more formal writing.

7. **Joan's book is called, “How To Write Better.”** “Joan’s” is a *possessive* that requires an *apostrophe* before the “s” (as do all singular *nouns* in the *possessive case* no matter how they are spelled: “Gus’s book”). But the *comma* before the *quotation marks* isn’t necessary because what follows is not someone’s speech but a *title* of a work. Book titles are usually underlined or italicized rather than being set off in quotes. Within *capitalized* titles of works, *conjunctions*, *prepositions*, and the “to” of *infinitives* are not capitalized. The rules of capitalization are complex and flexible, depending on the purposes of your writing and your *audience*. See also *possessive* and *italics*.

8. **I read the book, that is about grammar, and writing.** The choice of the *definite article* “the” is probably poor since there are many books about grammar and writing: “a book” would likely be better. *That* is a *relative pronoun* used to introduce a *restrictive phrase* or *restrictive clause*; *nonrestrictive phrases*, *nonrestrictive clauses*, or *appositives* are not set off by *commas*. “Which” could be used here with a comma to make a *nonrestrictive clause*, but the sentence then wouldn’t make sense (try it). The best revision might be: “I read a book about grammar and writing.” This is less wordy and solves the pronoun problem by eliminating the pronoun altogether.

The final comma (after “grammar”) is not needed since there are only two words in the *series*; standard English requires a comma before “and” only in series of more than two elements: “... a book that is about grammar, usage, and writing.” See also *phrase*, *clause*, and *standard English*.

9. **There is great value to an university education but it is weak.** The *indefinite article* “an” is wrong because “university” begins with a consonant sound. Only words that begin with vowel sounds should take “an” (“an owl,” “a one-time offer,” “a university,” “a unclean house”).

There should be a *comma* between the two independent *clauses* that are joined by the

*conjunction* “*but*.” However, something must be done about “*it*.” There is no clear *antecedent* or referent, for this *pronoun*, and therefore, what is weak is completely unclear. Since “*university*” is a *noun* serving as an *adjective* in this sentence, and since the sentence begins with the weak opening “*There is*,” which presents no clear *subject*, the reader could assume “*it*” has something to do with “*value*,” “*university*,” or “*education*” (see *expletive*). Whatever assumption a reader makes, time will be lost trying to figure out what is meant, and *clarity* will never be achieved.

It is not wrong to begin sentences with vague opening *phrases* like “*It is*” or “*There is*.” But overreliance on them can lead to boring, unclear statements, particularly if later pronouns in such sentences are not given clear antecedents. *Revision* of this sample sentence requires going back to square one and rethinking what it is you have to say before setting pen to paper.

10. **The cases of sexual harassment which is common bothers me.** Here a *nonrestrictive clause*, properly introduced by “*which*,” needs to be set off by *commas*, and the main verb (“*bothers*”) should be *plural* to agree with the *subject* (“*cases*”): “*The cases of sexual harassment, which is common, bother me.*” The sentence is now grammatically correct, but *editing* or rewriting would help eliminate the *awkwardness* of a plural subject separated from its verb by a singular *clause*: “*I am bothered by the cases of sexual harassment, which is common.*” Although this change creates a *passive* construction, the sentence is clearer. See also *that* and *agreement*.

11. **Predominant forms of transgressive behavior, deviance that is self-generated and retrogressive emotions.** Although there is a *linking verb* (“*is*”) in a restrictive dependent *clause* in this set of words, the example is not a *sentence* since it lacks a main *verb*. The *compound word* “*self-generated*” should also be hyphenated. See *is*, *hyphen*, *restrictive clause*, and *fragment*.

Another problem here is the heavy *vocabulary*, made up mainly of words derived from *Latin*. In some professional or technical contexts, such display of learning might be acceptable or even expected. But in most common communication, it is better to use fewer long, abstract words. Of course, there are some concepts so complex (like scientific ideas) that they defy expression in ordinary words. But if you are not a scholar or scientist or if it is possible your statements will not be read exclusively by specialists able to penetrate *jargon*, write as clear and simply as you can. And even if you are an expert, you might try to find language that uninitiated can understand and enjoy. See *scientific language* and *clarity*.

12. **Examples are given so that help can be provided where it is needed.** There are no grammatical errors in this *sentence*. However, it does contain three *passive* verb constructions. Not only do passives tend to weaken writing *style* by removing actors or *agents* from sentences, but they also add words and make it somewhat harder to find referents and *antecedents*. A possible *revision*: “*We give examples to provide help where you need help.*” This sentence could be criticized for addressing an assumed reader (“*you*”), but it is more direct, shorter, and clearer than the sample.

If you review all the italicized words, terms, and ideas in the answers, you will not become an expert in grammar or stop making mistakes in writing or speaking. But you will gain some insight into the possible deficiencies in your Statements and some ways to identify the

quickly so that you can seek further help in the *Handbook*. That help—plus care, attention, and constant rethinking and revision—will go a long way toward making you a more accurate, better writer.

**A, an.** “A” and “an” indicate single, uncertain objects and are, therefore, called “indefinite articles.” Like most words that say something about *objects* (modify them in the broadest sense), they usually come directly before the word they describe (*noun* or *adjective*): “a dog,” “an orange cloud.”

When the word these articles comes before begins with a consonant sound, use “a” to describe or modify it; when the word begins with a vowel sound, choose “an.” If the word that follows begins with a *number* or an *abbreviation* or an acronym, then choose “a” or “an” depending on the way the word is said out loud: if it sounds as though it began with a vowel, choose “an” if it sounds like a consonant, choose “a.” For example, these are correct choices: “a 100-megabyte disk,” “an EKG reading,” “an mflop.”

The *rule* of choosing “a” or “an” according to the *spelling* or pronunciation of the word that comes before can lead to some confusion when different groups of people write or say a word differently. For instance, some British speakers do not pronounce the “h” of words like “humble,” leading them to say or write “an humble home.” Most American speakers and writers do not drop “h” and do not use “an” before words that begin with “h” in most cases. However, this Britishism does continue to appear in the most formal English, especially in the case of “historical.” Some American writers prefer “an historical study” to avoid possible confusion with “ahistorical study.” If the group to which you are addressing your work prefers this construction, it is acceptable to break the more generally followed rule stated above. See also *modifier* and *British English*.

**Abbreviation, acronym.** If possible, avoid abbreviations or acronyms—letters used to stand for words or clusters of words—in your writing if you are unsure your readers will understand them. To ensure *clarity*, spell out any acronym or abbreviation the first time you use it and show the way you will shorten the word or *phrase* in *parentheses*: “We will examine how the central processing unit (CPU) works.” If there are many such instances in your writing, you might include a *list* of abbreviated terms or the acronyms used so that readers can check similar or less frequently used terms.

Many of these clusters have become so common they don’t need explanation: common names like “IBM,” commonly used words and abbreviations, such as “etc.,” and many symbols or signs like “\$,” “%,” and “&,” can sometimes be used without further clarification. But when it is possible those who read or hear you won’t know what you mean, help them with a fuller treatment of the abbreviation or acronyms you use.

Another group of commonly recognized shortened versions of words includes *numbers* and *symbols*: “There are 400 snakes in that pit.”

*Efficiency* or length considerations are common reasons for using abbreviations or acronyms. Technical writing is often full of long names for things that must be repeated to ensure accuracy and clarity. Shortening these terms can save a great deal of space.

computer manual, for example, that repeats “central processing unit” a few thousand times will be much longer than one that uses “CPU.” Some also argue that it is more efficient and quicker to read abbreviations and acronyms. That is so if you have first made sure your *audience* knows what you are shortening, and how.

If you are writing or speaking to people who are used to or even demand the use of acronyms, then follow the local *rules* and use them to save space or show you are part of the group.

Finally, remember that acronyms and abbreviations are treated as sound clusters when deciding whether to put “a” or “an” before them—use “an” if the shortened form usually pronounced with a vowel sound (“an LED readout”) but “a” if the pronunciation begins with a consonant sound (“a 100° day”) no matter how the acronyms, abbreviations, numbers, or symbols are spelled.

You can find explanations of the proper use of the following terms in the entries for each abbreviation or acronym: A.D., A.M., B.C., *ca.*, *cf.*, *Co.*, *dollars*, *Dr.*, *ed.*, *e.g.*, *et al.*, *etc.*, *ibid.*, *i.e.*, *ib.*, *loc.*, *cit.*, *Ltd.*, *min.*, *Mr.*, *Ms.*, *N.B.*, *op.*, *cit.*, *percent*, *Ph.D.*, *P.M.*, *q.v.*, *sec.*, *St.*, and *U.S.* See also *contractions*.

**About, around.** In *standard English* “about” should be used instead of “around” to mean approximately. WRONG: “He is around six feet tall.” RIGHT: “He is about six feet tall.”

**Above.** *Preposition* governing the *objective case*: “The balloon is above me.”

**Accent.** In our multicultural, international age, we encounter more and more words from other *languages* that use accent marks. And more and more it becomes correct grammar to apply accents to names, words, and so on that come into English from other languages or that we use as we address those whose first language is not English.

If you are doing business with a company or person whose name has an accent, your correspondence will show more consideration and most likely be better received if you include accents. On the other hand, if you are uncertain how the name or word appears in the other language, omitting an accent is usually not very offensive or confusing to the person who is being addressed. If you are dealing with individuals or organizations that choose to use an accent in their names, then it is probably best to show the mark in all your correspondence.

Please look under the specific language for common accents and their use (*French*, *German*, *Spanish*, etc.).

**Accept, except.** Do not confuse these two words that sound almost alike (*near-homonyms*). “Accept” is a *verb* that means to allow, tolerate, receive. “Except” is a *preposition* that means besides.

**Accusative case.** See *objective case*.

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**Acronym.** See *abbreviation*.

**Across.** *Preposition* governing the *objective case*: “The pedestrian walked across the street.”

**Active voice.** English is said to have two voices: active and *passive*. These grammatical terms denote two ways of forming *sentences* or two ways of thinking about and expressing actions. While it is not necessary to know the distinctions of the grammatical categories (except in English classes), it is critical to understand the difference between the two forms of expression, when to use or avoid them and what the choice of one or the other suggests about your writing and you.

In the active voice, a sentence or idea conveys the fairly simple and direct sense of a *subject* acting on an *object* by preserving a *noun, verb, noun* structure: “The bat hit the ball, and Duke chased it.” While active voice sentences can become much more elaborate and the sense of “action” can become quite remote (“Gaseous products of distillation amalgamate ionizing forces ...”), the basic structure is still something acting or having an effect on something else.

In the passive voice, usually signaled by the presence of an *auxiliary* verb like “is” linked to the main verb, the sentence is turned around from the active pattern—the thing that somehow the object or focus of the verb is its subject, while the thing or person that does the action moves into a *prepositional phrase*: “The ball is hit by the bat.” Thus, the passive voice shifts the emphasis of the sentence from actor to recipient of action.

*Standard English* dictates that the active voice is preferred to the passive since it is simpler, more direct form of communication. This is true only to a certain extent, but it is a handy *rule* to follow: Avoid the passive voice where possible to give your speech or writing more direct force, *clarity*, and simplicity.

But like all rules, this one has many exceptions. There are many instances when the passive voice allows a subtle distinction or is otherwise the preferable form of saying something. And for some *audiences* it is more or less mandatory. Much scientific and scholarly writing is done in the passive voice because many scientists and scholars feel that removing themselves—their specific personalities and predilections—from the focus of the sentence lends their ideas “objectivity.” They believe that the sentence “I saw the bacteria grow” is more personal, more subjective, and more likely to be read as a single, nonverifiable action than “Bacteria were observed to grow” (see *scientific language*).

When you speak to or write for a scholarly or scientific audience, you may prefer to violate the active-passive rule in order to adopt the more common passive, “objective” style. However, this stylistic preference has been subjected to many questions and doubts in recent times. Thus passive constructions are no longer so much the rule as the preference of scholarly and scientific writing, which has come to recognize that the observer, actor, or agent whose role is obscured by passive constructions still takes part in and influences activities reported in the passive voice. Writing or speaking in the active voice seems to make

that presence more explicit, hence clearer.

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A.D. This *abbreviation* stands for the *Latin* words “anno Domini” and means “in the year of the Lord” or the time since the birth of Christ. It is added to dates to distinguish where they fall in the commonly accepted Western dating system. The abbreviation is usually not spelled out and precedes the whole date, and appears in capital letters with *periods*. Using *lower case* and dropping the periods is acceptable in many *styles* and less standard writing, though A.D. and B.C. (“before Christ”) usually appear in more formal works, where the standard *rule* should be followed. See *capitalization*.

**Adjective.** Words or *phrases* that add qualities to *nouns* are called adjectives. Few are usually needed to convey the essential attributes of the things, people, or places about which we are talking or writing. However, many writers and speakers pile up too many adjectives before *nouns*, thus weakening their writing by obscuring or thinning out their intent. Using too many adjectives can lead to a weak *style* or *bland writing*.

Adjectives normally come before the nouns they apply to or modify. Quite commonly they stand in the *predicate* of simple *sentences*: “The house is red.” When more than one adjective is used to qualify something, the adjectives can be separated by *and* or by *commas*: “the red and white house” “the tall, strong, and athletic singer.” If the “and” is omitted between two adjectives of equal weight modifying the same thing, a comma separates the *modifiers*: “The tall, athletic singer ran.” If two adjectives modifying a noun are not of equal weight or would not normally require “and” to make the meaning clear, then no comma need be inserted: “The tall French singer said.” The distinction between these two cases is often not very clear, and the choice of using the comma between adjectives is up to the writer, who may be indicating the relationship between the modifiers by putting in or leaving out the comma.

To indicate the qualities of adjectives, use *adverbs*: “the bright red house.” Only adjectives can apply to nouns, and only adverbs can qualify adjectives (and *verbs* or other adverbs). It is a common mistake to use adjectives to modify verbs or adverbs to modify nouns. When the qualifying word stands near a noun or verb, the mistake is fairly easy to notice. But when the modifier stands alone in the predicate of a sentence, errors are more likely. RIGHT: “I drive a fast car.” “I drive rapidly.” WRONG: “I drive rapid.” Some specific adjectives and adverbs that are particularly troublesome are treated in separate entries: “good” and “well,” “bad” and “badly,” “real” and “really,” and so on.

The most common problems with adjectives or adverbs in predicates come from using *linking verbs* like “is,” “looks,” “seems,” “appears,” “sounds,” “smells,” “tastes,” “feels.” All these words can be followed by adjectives or adverbs to make correct sentences. But the meaning will dictate which kind of modifier to use. If you are stating the qualities of a thing or person (noun), then the word in the predicate should be an adjective no matter how far away the noun being talked about might be located: “The expert who spoke at our meeting, held on March 25 at an alternate location (because the usual hall was being used by someone else), looked feeble.” This is a weak, wandering sentence, but it makes the point.

If you want to indicate the quality of action taking place—even if that action is embodied



in bland linking verbs—then use an adverb, again, no matter where the verbs, nouns, or other adjectives in the sentence fall: “The expert who spoke looked, perhaps because we weren’t at our usual location, feebly at me.”

Adjective *phrases* work the same way as single-word adjectives but are made up of more complex ideas expressed through combinations of more words, including, possibly, almost any other *parts of speech*. In the long, weak sentence about the feeble speaker, the *clause* that begins with “who spoke” functions as an adjective modifying “expert” the participial clause that begins “held on” is an adjectival phrase modifying “meeting.”

Nouns can also be used as adjectives: “computer program.” This is a simple way of conveying a more elaborate relationship in fewer words than “program written for the computer.” Take care not to use too many nouns as adjectives in a string because your *audience* will have trouble finding the end of the string and knowing what is modified by what: “Desktop computer writing correction programs are useful.” Such strings can often be broken into *prepositional phrases* or other kinds of phrases that are easier to follow: “Desktop computer programs for correcting writing are useful.”

Adjectives indicate qualities that may be more or less present in the thing they modify. This property is called *comparison* and is treated in a separate entry; see also *more, superlatives, good, better, best, bad, ill, little, many, much, some, and worse*.

**Adverb.** The properties of *adjectives, verbs,* and other adverbs are conveyed or described by adverbs. Many adverbs signal their role by ending in “-ly,” but not all do: “He spoke rapidly and well.”

Adverbs cannot modify *nouns* or stand alone in *predicates* where they refer to nouns. WRONG: “The lecturer is angrily.” RIGHT: “The lecturer is angrily gesturing,” “The lecturer seems angry.” While “angrily” in the WRONG example seems incomplete and probably incorrect to most readers, some adverbs can stand alone after verbs (though not usually after the *linking verbs* “is” “seems,” “appears,” “looks,” “feels,” “sounds,” “tastes”): “The lecturer speaks well.” Confusing pairs of adjectives and adverbs are treated in separate entries. See, for example, *good, bad, and real*.

Because they are often marked in some way (such as having an “-ly” ending) and can modify so many different kinds of words or *phrases*, adverbs can appear in many places in a sentence. They therefore must be used with care to ensure that they clearly indicate which word or phrase they are qualifying. To help make decisions about adverb placement somewhat easier, a number of *rules* have evolved over the years. These guidelines are useful but are also commonly bent or broken by the best writers and speakers.

The first rule is that of the *split infinitive*: Do not put an adverb between “to” and the verb in commands. This rule would make the phrase “to boldly go” substandard. Many people who associate these words with a popular television show and will feel that alternate phrasings would be odd: “boldly to go” or “to go boldly.” While it is best to follow this rule in most cases, if the resulting sentence or phrase strikes you as awkward, stiff, or simply pretentious, then abandon the rule for fluidity’s sake.

The second rule is to avoid dangling adverbs that don’t bear a clear relationship to the

word or phrase they modify. Generally, this is a rule that should be observed more firmly—revise your writing when possible to make sure what is being modified is clear. However, the broad qualifier (like “generally” in the preceding sentence or the conjunctive “however” at the beginning of this sentence) can sometimes float about to good or at least passable effect in a less formal sentence or where it does little harm. Moving such semidetached adverbs can create subtle changes in meaning or *emphasis*, however. So care should be taken to consider whether an adverb has been “dangled” so that your *audience* is misled. See *dangling modifier*, *awkwardness*, *conjunctive adverb*, and *revision*.

Like adjectives, adverbs can indicate comparative degrees of a quality or property: “more concretely, most concretely.” Almost all adverbs form the comparative and *superlative* by adding “more” or “most” before the adverb. But there are a few irregular *comparisons* of adverbs: see the entries for *better*, *best*, *ill*, and *worse*.

**Advice, advise.** These two words sound almost alike (*near-homonyms*) but are quite different *parts of speech* with dissimilar meanings. “Advice” is suggestions or guidance given to someone when he or she is “advised” by someone else. The first word is a *noun*, while the second is a *verb*.

**Advise.** See *advice*.

**Affect, effect.** Commonly confused, these two words have different meanings despite their somewhat similar sound (*mar-homonyms*). “Affect” is both a *noun* and a *verb*. As a verb it means to influence how a thing happens or is experienced; as a noun it has to do with emotions and attitudes and is used principally in psychological texts. “Effect” is also both a noun and a verb: the noun means the result or outcome of some action, while the verb means to make something happen. Just as the noun “affect” is little used in ordinary speech or writing, so “effect” as a verb is not very common. In most cases, the right choice for a verb is “affect,” and the right choice for a noun is “effect”: “Poverty has a bad effect on people; it affects them adversely.” “The prisoners effected their escape, revealing little affect in the process.”

**African American English.** See *black English*.

**Afro-American English.** See *black English*.

**After.** *Preposition* governing the *objective case*: “The dog ran after her.” *Adverb* of time: “The accident happened after.”

**Against.** *Preposition* governing the *objective case*: “The politician worked against us.”

**Agent.** The *subject* of a sentence is often the agent of some action, the person or thing that does something.

**Agreement.** Perhaps the most common and most glaring grammatical errors come with matching the various elements of sentences—*subject* with *verb*, and *pronoun* with *antecedent*.

While the *rules* for properly pairing verb and noun and referent and pronoun are fairly simple, a number of common writing problems (usually inattention or carelessness) too often fracture these important links in *sentences*. The rules of agreement should be treated consistently by all writers because they spell out how readers and listeners should make the connections we want them to between key concepts. If the rules are broken, so are the logical bonds of our ideas, and our *audience* is left adrift to wonder what we mean.

To understand agreement, recall that *nouns* and pronouns can vary in *number* and *person*.

Number simply means that there may be one or more things or people who perform an action in a sentence—who are its subject. If a noun is the subject, it can be singular—only one actor or agent—or plural—more than one agent. Verbs usually change their forms for singular or plural subjects: “One elephant trumpets, but two elephants trumpet.” Normally, singular verbs with noun subjects add “S” or “es” to their simple or normal forms to show that the subject is singular. English retains this form of marking the number of verbs in order to ensure that subjects and verbs clearly indicate agreement.

Person and *gender* are properties of pronouns, which can be used to stand in the place of nouns in *sentences*. Pronouns can indicate not only number but gender (“he,” “she”) and whether the subject (person) is the same being as others in the sentence: “I,” “you,” “we,” “they,” “e,” “he,” “it.” English does not indicate gender distinctions in verb forms (*conjugation*), but it does retain some verb forms that match only with certain persons of subject pronouns: “I am,” “we are,” “it is.” More important, it has a rich array of pronoun forms that must match the person and number of the words the pronouns replace or refer to (their antecedents).

The process of taking into account the number and person of a sentence’s subject and fitting those to the correct verb form is called agreement. Why is it sometimes difficult?

Sentences come in many shapes and sizes. Sometimes subjects are rather far from the verb with which they must agree. Some nouns and pronouns can have different or varying numbers or persons. The number of such words is small, but some of them are tricky to work with. All these factors and others can complicate the process of making verb and subject agree. Let’s look at some specific examples of problems.

## AGREEMENT OF SUBJECT AND VERB

REMOTE SUBJECT. It is easy to fall into the trap of making a *verb* agree with the closest *noun* even though that word is not the *subject* of the *sentence*. WRONG: “The book containing lists of names and addresses often include errors.” RIGHT: “The book ... includes errors.” WRONG: “Many people standing in the line around the theater is impatient.” RIGHT: “Many people standing in the line around the theater are impatient.”

people ... are impatient.” Only careful rereading and revising will catch and correct these errors. Note that many nouns that end in “S” are *plural*, but not all. “People” is a plural word. There are also many singular words that end in “s”: “electronics,” “physics,” “mattress,” and so on. And remember that some verbs do not form *third-person* singulars with “s”: “the man has” “the woman is.”

TITLES OR WORDS AS SUBJECT. *Titles* of works or words treated as things in themselves agree with singular *verbs* even if they contain *plurals* or compound *subjects*: “*War and Peace* is a novel” “which war and peace are the subjects discussed.” “‘Words’ is the plural of word.”

INVERTED SUBJECTS. One way to enliven *sentences* is to change the expected *order of words* by putting the *verb* first—to invert the sentence. When you flip verb and *subject*, be sure that the verb agrees with the following *noun or pronoun* subject rather than any preceding nouns or pronouns: “Near the cat stand five pigeons.” A form of *inversion* is to begin sentences with a general word like “there” and “*is*” or “*are*.” It is tempting and a common mistake to begin such sentences with the singular verb, although the following subject is often plural. WRONG: “There is five pigeons near the cat.” RIGHT: “There are five pigeons near the cat.”

SUBJECTS LINKED BY “AND.” In most cases, *subjects* that consist of two or more *nouns or pronouns* linked by “and” are *plural*. However, in some cases the pairing of words with “and” indicates a unity so tight that the words are meant to be a single thing and thus agree with a singular form of the verb: “Bacon and eggs is a traditional breakfast.” “The bacon and the eggs are on the plate.”

SUBJECTS LINKED BY “OR,” “EITHER,” “NEITHER,” AND “NOR.” *Subjects* tied together by the *conjunctions* “or,” “nor,” “either,” and “neither” are not of equal weight. The *verbs* that follow such compound subjects agree with the second *noun or pronoun* of the linked pair: “Either my roommates or I am going to flunk out.” “Neither the cows nor the horse stays out in the rain.” Generally, the *plural* of the pair should be the second subject linked and followed by a plural verb to avoid leading an *audience* to think plural first and then have to shift into singular later. A singular subject linked to a plural and followed by a plural verb somehow sounds more natural to an audience used to finding more than one subject, however linked, followed by a plural verb.

SUBJECTS THAT CAN BE EITHER PLURAL OR SINGULAR. Some *collective nouns* that stand for groups of things or people can be treated as either singular or *plural* subjects. American English normally takes these words to be singular and matches them to singular *verbs* unless special *emphasis* is being placed on the activity of the individuals in the collective, in which case they can be joined to a plural verb. It is probably better to rewrite such plural use of collective nouns rather than make your *audience* wonder what you mean. But if a collective in the plural sense seems the best way to convey your idea, such agreements are possible: “The team plays well.”

on weekends.” “Today the team are going to their homes for a rest.” The second *sentence* grammatically defensible, but it seems a bit forced in modern American English. (*British English* usually treats such collectives as plural, making a correct American plural construction sometimes seem like an affectation of British “refinement.”)

**INDEFINITE PRONOUN SUBJECT.** Some *indefinite* pronouns (“another,” “anybody,” “anyone,” “each,” “either,” “everyone,” “everything,” “much,” “neither,” “nobody,” “no one,” “nothing,” “one,” “other,” “somebody,” “someone,” and “something”) agree with singular *verbs*, while others are treated as *plurals* (“both,” “few,” “many,” “others,” “several”), and some can be used both ways (“all,” “any,” “enough,” “more,” “most,” “none,” and “some”): “All of the paint spilled, and all of the children mop it up.” Note that the singular indefinites may be followed by *prepositional phrases* with plural *objects* but still take singular verb forms: “Each of the cars is white.”

**RELATIVE PRONOUN AS SUBJECT.** In dependent *clauses*, *relative pronouns* can refer to either *singular* or *plural* things or people (*antecedents*). The *verb* in the clause agrees with the antecedent. “The car with the four doors that is near me has trouble starting.” “Picasso is one of the artists who have an inflated reputation.” “Picasso is the one among all those artists who has the most exaggerated reputation.”

**PREDICATE NOUN VERSUS SUBJECT.** Sentences with *linking verbs* should have the *verb* agree with the *subject* and not with the following *predicate noun* (word or words after the linking verb), even if the subject is not the same *number* as the predicate noun: “Artists’ reputations are a subject of controversy.”

## AGREEMENT OF PRONOUN AND ANTECEDENT

*Pronouns* replace or refer to other words, which usually come before them in *sentences* (*antecedents*). In more complex sentences it takes care to distinguish which words the pronoun relates to and to match them in *number* and *person*. For example, in the previous sentence “them” refers to “words” and, therefore, is third-person plural. If the sentence had said “which word the pronoun relates to,” then the proper pronoun would be singular third person: “it.”

Problems in making the proper links between pronoun and antecedent commonly arise in distinguishing plurals from singulars, collectives, and *indefinites*. There is also the issue of *gender* to examine.

The use of “*he*” as a generic pronoun that represents both men and women has come to be viewed as restrictive of women and prejudicial. For instance, a sentence that reads “A doctor should keep his instruments clean” ignores and excludes women who are doctors. The sentence can easily be changed by using a more accurate construction: “A doctor should keep

his or her instruments clean.” Remember to consider your *audience* and always choose appropriate pronouns. This subject is discussed more fully in the entry on *sexist language*, where ways to avoid prejudicial or offensive constructions are also examined.

When antecedents consist of more than one word linked by “*and*,” we have a tendency to assume that the words referred to are *plural* and to follow them with plural pronouns. Sometimes this assumption betrays us: “Dogs and cats have their special traits.” “Each dog and cat has its special traits.” In the first instance “*and*” does link a plural antecedent; but in the second sentence, “*and*” is less important than “*each*,” which is an indefinite pronoun that is singular. The subject in the second sentence means “each dog and each cat taken by itself as a single thing.” That is why “*each*” agrees with a singular *verb* and takes precedence over the seemingly plural antecedent linked by “*and*.”

Similar problems occur with indefinites or collectives as antecedents since these words can vary in number. All of the following sentences are correct: “All of the people had their favorites.” “All of the paint poured out of its can.” “The orchestra was proud of its performance.” “The orchestra shifted in their chairs.”

Antecedents linked by “*or*,” “*nor*,” “*neither*,” “*either*,” and the like also require care in determining person and number. Remember that it is the second element in pairs linked by these *conjunctions* that governs agreement: if a singular word is joined to a plural word by “*or*,” for instance, the plural word dictates that the following pronoun must be plural: “The boy or the men will call their elephant.” Avoid writing sentences that link a plural antecedent and a following singular one with “*or*” because such sentences often sound awkward: “The women or the girl will call her elephant.” Rewrite such sentences to make clear who is doing what: “The women will call their elephant, or the girl will call hers.”

*Appositives*—*nouns* or pronouns that add information to other nouns or pronouns—also must agree in person, number, and *case*: “The president awarded the medal to Smith, teacher of the year.” See the entry on appositives for more examples and details.

**Ain’t.** “Ain’t” should appear only in informal speech, correspondence, or humorous writing. No *standard English* statement should include it.

**All ready, already.** “All ready” is a compound adjective *phrase* that means someone or something is totally prepared. “Already” is an *adverb* that means before or previously. See also *adjective*.

**All right.** A compound adjective *phrase*; it is not spelled “alright,” a *colloquial* form used only to report or record less than standard speech. See also *adjective*.

**All together, altogether.** Don’t confuse “all together”—everyone or everything assembled or at the same time (“the giraffes were all together”)—with the *adverb* “altogether”—completely or totally (“the giraffes were altogether edgy”).

**Allude, elude.** Although these words sound about the same (*near-homonyms*) they mean different things. “Allude” means to refer to or note in passing. “Elude” means to evade or escape.

**Allusion, illusion.** These *near-homonyms* (sound alike) differ in sense. “Allusion” is a reference to something, while “illusion” is a deception or misperception.

**All ways, always.** Like many *compound words* using “all,” “all ways” differs from a similar merged form of the two words—“always.” “All ways” means in all possible manners, while “always” means for all time or every time: “The freelancer is always trying all ways to make a living.”

**Along.** *Preposition* governing the *objective case*: “The boat sailed along the coast.”

**A lot.** Never “alot.”

**Alphabet.** See individual *languages* for their alphabets and how to alphabetize words in them. See also *alphabetization*.

**Alphabetization.** Two systems exist for putting words into alphabetical order, and both of them are correct. Choose the one that is commonly used by your *audience* or that you find better suits your purposes.

**Word-by-word** alphabetizing arranges lists of words by letter order until a space is reached in a *compound word*, at which point it arranges all words that begin with the first word of the compound by the order of the word that follows, and then moves on to the next word, compound or not. For example, in word-by-word alphabetizing “fire dog,” “fire screen,” and “fire station” would come before “fireboat,” “firehouse,” and “fireside,” since each of the compounds of “fire” plus another word after a space is seen as a category of “fire.”

In **letter-by-letter** alphabetizing spaces are ignored, with the result that the words in the example in the previous paragraph would be alphabetized as follows: “fireboat, fire dog, firehouse, fire screen, fireside, fire station.” Both methods of alphabetization ignore *hyphenation* and other internal *punctuation* of words or names. This book is arranged by the letter-by-letter method.

There are elaborate procedures, *rules*, and customs for specialized alphabetizing systems used by scholars, libraries, *dictionaries*, and for other purposes. If you need to work in such a system with a long list of terms that present difficult ordering decisions, then it is best to follow the standard guides or in-house documents that are used to resolve alphabetizing problems.

**Already.** See *all ready*.

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**Also.** An *adverb* always spelled as one word, never “all so.”

**Altar, alter.** This *homonym* pair (sound-alike words) combines a *noun* and a *verb*. The noun “altar” is a sacred place or platform, while the verb “alter” means to change: “The sexton altered the altar by lowering it.”

**Alter.** See *altar*.

**Although.** A *subordinating conjunction*: “Although you speak the truth, I still don’t trust you.”

**Altogether.** See *all together*.

**Always.** See *all ways*.

**Am.** The first-person singular, present tense of *be*: “I am.” “I am writing.” Also see *agreement, auxiliary, conjugation, number, and person*.

**A.M.** This *abbreviation* of the *Latin* phrase “ante meridiem” means before noon. It is used to distinguish times from the two halves of the day where a twelve-hour clock or system of time notation is common.

Where twenty-four-hour clocks are used, the abbreviations A.M. and P.M. are not used, since there is no possibility of confusing one in the morning with thirteen in the afternoon. Since English speakers who write in twenty-four-hour systems still tend to say “one in the afternoon” rather than “thirteen,” the abbreviations still creep into speech even where the twelve-hour clock is no longer used.

The standard use of these abbreviations has them follow the time, in small capital letters and with *periods*. *Lower case* and no periods are acceptable in many *styles* and in less formal writing, though you should avoid confusion with the *verb* “*am*.”

**Among, between.** The *preposition* “between” is used only when you are talking or writing about two things or people. “Among” links more than two things or people: “I split the assignment between John and Joan.” “I divided the task among Joe, Jean, and Jim.”

This simple *rule* changes if there are more than two things or people that are conceived of as separated into natural or logical pairs: “There are four bridges between the three islands.” Writing “There are four bridges among the three islands” would suggest that the three islands shared four bridges that might or might not link one to the other, while the initial example



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