

Grammar Girl's™



Quick
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FOR
BETTER
WRITING

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Quick and Dirty Grammar at a Glance

I bet you thought grammar couldn't get any more quick and dirty than it did in the previous pages, but here's the quickest grammar of all, culled from lengthier explanations found elsewhere in this book. Sometimes you just need a quick fix.

A/An: Use *a* before consonant sounds; use *an* before vowel sounds. *She has an MBA. It's a Utopian idea.*

A Lot: *A lot* means "a large number" and is two words, not one. *Allot* means "to parcel out."

Abbreviations (Making Them Plural): Add an *s* (without an apostrophe) to the end of an abbreviation to make it plural. *Smith had two RBIs tonight.*

Affect/Effect: Most of the time *affect* is a verb and *effect* is a noun. *He affected her. The effect mattered.* (Exceptions, p. 11.)

Assure/Ensure/Insure: *Assure* means “to reassure”; *ensure* means “to guarantee”; *insure* refers to insurance.

Because: It’s OK to start a sentence with *because*; just be sure you haven’t created a sentence fragment. *Because Squiggly was tired, he forgot to stow the chocolate.* (OK) *Because Squiggly was tired.* (wrong)

Between You and I/Between You and Me: *Between you and me* is the correct phrase.

Can/May: Traditionalists maintain that *can* refers to ability and *may* refers to permission. *Can you fix the broken dishwasher? May I go to the mall?*

Capital/Capitol: *Capital* refers to a city, uppercase letter, or wealth. A *capitol* is a building.

Colons: In sentences, only use colons after something that would be a complete sentence on its own.

Commas (Equal Pauses): It is *not* a rule that you put a comma in wherever you would naturally pause in a sentence.

Comma (Serial): It’s up to you whether to use a serial comma (the comma before the final *and* in a list of items).

Complement/Compliment: Things that work well together complement each other. Compliments are a form of praise.

Dead: *Dead* is an absolute (nongradable) word that shouldn’t be modified with words such as *completely* or *very*.

Different From/Different Than: In most cases, *different from* is the preferred form.

E.G./I.E.: *E.g.* means “for example”; *i.e.* means “that is.”

Each/Every: *Each* and *every* are singular and mean the same thing.

E-mail/Email: Both forms are acceptable. Traditionalists prefer *e-mail*.

Everyone/Everybody: *Everyone* and *everybody* are singular and mean the same thing.

Farther/Further: *Farther* refers to physical distance; *further* relates to metaphorical distance or means “moreover.” *Aardvark ran farther than Squiggly. Further, they hope to run tomorrow.*

Fewer/Less: Use *fewer* for count nouns; use *less* for mass nouns. *There were fewer fish. There was less water.*

Hanged/Hung: People (or animals) who were executed were hanged; everything else was hung.

Hopefully: Although it isn't wrong, don't start a sentence with *hopefully*—too many people believe it's wrong.

However: It's OK to start a sentence with *however*, but be careful with your comma placement. *However, we wish he hadn't used permanent ink. However hard Squiggly tried, he couldn't reach the chocolate.*

Hyphen: Never use a hyphen in place of a dash.

In To/Into: *Into* is a preposition that specifies a direction; sometimes the words *in* and *to* just end up next to each other. *Move into the foyer. He broke in to the dining room.*

Internet: *Internet* is capitalized.

Its/It's: *Its* is the possessive form of *it*; *it's* means "it is" or "it has." *It's a shame the tree lost its leaves.*

Lay/Lie: Subjects lie down; objects are laid down. *I want to lie down. I will lay the pen on the table.*

Literally: *Literally* means "exactly." Don't use it for emphasis or to mean "figuratively."

Log In/Log On/Log Out/Log Off: These are all acceptable two-word verbs. They require a hyphen when used as adjective. *I want to log in. Please give me the log-in code.*

May/Might: *May* implies more of a likelihood that something is possible than *might*. *We may go out. Pigs might fly.*

Modifiers (Misplaced): Make sure your modifiers apply to the right words. *I only eat chocolate.* (The only thing I do with chocolate is eat it.) *I eat only chocolate.* (I eat nothing but chocolate.)

Myself: *Please visit Aardvark and myself* is an incorrect hypercorrection. The correct form is *Please visit Aardvark and me.*

Nauseated/Nauseous: *Nauseated* means you feel queasy; *nauseous* describes something that makes you queasy. *The nauseous fumes are making me nauseated.*

Nouns (Collective): Collective nouns describe a group of things such as furniture and a team. They are singular in the United States.

Numbers (at the Beginning of a Sentence): Write out numbers at the beginning of a sentence.

Online/On Line: *Online* is one word, not two.

Periods (Abbreviations at the End of a Sentence): Don't use two periods if you have an abbreviation at the end of a sentence.

Periods (Spaces After): Use one space after a period at the end of a sentence.

Possession (Compound): When two people share something, they share an apostrophe. When two people have separate things, they each need their own apostrophe. *We're at Squiggly and Aardvark's house. Have you met Squiggly's and Aardvark's mothers?*

Possession (Words That End with S): The most common way to make a singular word that ends with *s* possessive is to add a lone apostrophe (*Steve Jobs' keynote*), but it's not wrong to add an *s* after the apostrophe (*Steve Jobs's keynote*). Some people make the decision based on pronunciation (*Steve Jobs' keynote, Kansas's statute*).

Prepositions (Ending Sentences with): It's OK to end a sentence with a preposition, except when the preposition is dispensable. *Whom did you step on?* (OK) *Where is he at?* (wrong)

Question Marks (with Indirect Questions): Don't use a question mark after an indirect question. *I wonder why Squiggly left.*

Question Marks (with Question Tags): Use question marks after statements that end with question tags. *Squiggly left because he was mad, didn't he?*

Quote/Quotation: *Quote* is a verb; *quotation* is a noun. *I want to quote you. Is this the correct quotation?*

Quotation Marks (with Other Punctuation): Commas and periods go inside of quotation marks; colons and semicolons go outside of quotation marks. Question marks and exclamation points can go inside or outside of quotation marks, depending on the context.

Sentences (Run-on): Run-on sentences aren't just long sentences; they are created when main clauses are joined without proper punctuation.

Sic: *Sic* is Latin for "thus so." You can use [*sic*] to show that an error

occurred in the original text—you know there’s an error and you didn’t introduce it.

Sit/Set: Subjects sit, objects are set. *I want to sit down. I will set the pen on the table.*

Split Infinitives: It’s OK to split infinitives. *They want to boldly go where no one has gone before.*

Subject/Object: The subject in a sentence takes the action; the object receives or is the target of the action. *[Subject] threw the ball. Squiggly threw the [object].*

Than/Then: Use *than* for comparison; use *then* for time. *Aardvark is taller than Squiggly. Then they went fishing.*

That/Which: Use *that* with restrictive clauses; use *which* with nonrestrictive clauses. *I like gems that sparkle, including diamonds, which are expensive.*

That/Who: Use *that* to refer to things; use *who* to refer to people.

The: Pronounce as “thuh” before consonant sounds, “thee” before vowel sounds.

Unique: *Unique* is an absolute (nongradable) word that shouldn’t be modified with words such as *most* or *very*.

Verbs (Action and Linking): Use adverbs to modify action verbs and adjectives to modify linking verbs. *He ran terribly. He smells terrible.*

Was/Were: Use *was* to refer to the past; use *were* to refer to things that are wishful or not true. *I was at the store. If I were rich, I would buy a yacht.*

Who/Whom: Use *who* to refer to a subject; use *whom* to refer to an object. *Who loves Squiggly? Whom do you love?*

Your/You’re: *Your* is the possessive form of you; *you’re* means “you are.”