

A GRAMMAR PRIMER  
(OF SOATS)

©James Burger

# A GRAMMAR PRIMER (OF SORTS)

## INTRODUCTION

Correct grammar is not to be feared.

While the nuances and quirks are seemingly endless, the basic concept is very simple: *Grammar clarifies*. By following general grammatical rules, you have a better chance that your readers and listeners will understand what you are trying to convey. In the end, the only real “penalty” for grammar errors is confusion.

Herewith, six common areas for consideration:

### 1. A PARALLEL UNIVERSE

First and foremost, make sure that the verbs (predicates) agree with their respective nouns (subjects). “A truck filled with boxes is blocking the street.” *Not*: “A truck filled with boxes are blocking the street.” Use adverbs to modify verbs and adjectives to modify nouns: “I ate my lunch quickly; my lunch was quick.” Maintain consistent spelling (e.g., gray/grey, catalog/catalogue, theater/theatre), voice (first-, second-, or third-person), and verb tense.

Avoid misleading phrase order. This often occurs on the radio—precise grammar is more difficult when spoken. Sometimes, it’s simply amusing for linguistically obsessive listeners (such as I); at other times, it muddies the information. For example:

- “The local government was troubled by protesters who took to the streets and crumbling houses.” Did the protesters take over streets and houses? Or was the government troubled by protesters and by crumbling houses?

As a general rule, put the simpler phrase first. Depending on the intended meaning, the sentence above could be rewritten as follows:

- “The local government was troubled by protesters who took to the streets and went into crumbling houses.”
- “The local government was troubled by crumbling houses and by protesters who took to the streets.”

### 2. NOMINATIVE/OBJECTIVE CASES (AND THE MYSTERIOUS “SELF”)

It is particularly important to use the correct case for pronouns. Think of the difference between a subject (nominative) and an indirect object (objective): A subject acts, whereas an indirect object is the recipient of some kind of action.

- I, he, she, we, or they do something. Something is done to me, him, her, us, or them. Who does something? Something was done to whom?

Use the “self”-ending pronoun only when the subject and the indirect object are the same person.

- You gave something to me. John and I gave something to you. I gave something to myself.

### **3. CAPITALIZATION, ABBREVIATIONS, AND ACRONYMS (OK?)**

Unless the official name is otherwise, always capitalize proper nouns. Do not capitalize articles, conjunctions, or prepositions of fewer than four letters unless they are part of the formal name.

- k.d. lang performed at a benefit concert for the Center of Art and Music. It was sponsored by the Play-A-Tune organization.

Similarly, these rules apply to the titles of books, recordings, films, and other creative works. As with sentences, capitalize the title's first word (e.g., *A Tale of Two Cities*). Capitalize a job title if it precedes the person's name as a matter of respect or formality (e.g., "President John Smith"), but not when it is used as a descriptor (e.g., "John Smith, president of the company"). Capitalize an academic degree when it follows a name (e.g., "John Smith, Doctor of Law"), but not when it is used generically (e.g., "a bachelor's degree"). Capitalize the abbreviated degree (e.g., "M.B.A.").

Capitalize units or departments when referring to internal groups, but not when referring to general groups.

- The Board of Directors is holding a special meeting this evening.
- He has been asked to join the board of directors at Acme Foods.
- You'll need to change your address with Payroll.
- His brother works in the payroll department at Acme Foods.

The time of day is usually written in small case with periods and no spaces (e.g., "a.m."). However, many print publications will use small capitals (e.g., "P.M."). When abbreviated, time zones are capitalized without periods (e.g., "EST"). Capitalize the abbreviations of eras (e.g., "55 A.D.").

Capitalize acronyms (e.g., "OSHA") and abbreviated organization names (e.g., "NYSE") without periods.

### **4. PONDERING PLURALS AND POSSESSIVES**

With few exceptions, pluralize a word by simply adding an " s ". Unfortunately, some writers make the mistake of assuming that the plural of a word ending in a vowel requires an "'s".

- You have very beautiful eyes. (*Not:* You have very beautiful eye's.)
- I saw a group of chickadees. (*Not:* I saw a group of chickadee's.)

Generally, to make the possessive form of a word, add an "'s" to a singular and an "'" to a plural.

- It was in the institution's charter.
- It was in ten institutions' charters.

# A GRAMMAR PRIMER (OF SORTS)

Things tend to get a bit confusing when the word ends in an “ s ”. Here’s a chart designed to help simplify the matter:

SINGULAR	SINGULAR POSSESSIVE	PLURAL	PLURAL POSSESSIVE
<i>Curtis</i>	<i>Curtis’s</i>	<i>Curtises</i>	<i>Curtises’</i>
Bob Curtis is having a party.	It will be held at Bob Curtis’s house.	All the Curtises will be there.	You’re invited to the Curtises’ party.

## 5. SPELLING—MAKING SUFFIXES SUFFICE

Next, we turn to the incredibly nebulous world of spelling. There are some “standard” rules, such as “*i* before *e* except after *c*”, but, of course, there are pesky exceptions:

- “Way”-sounding words (e.g., “weigh”, “reign”, “sleigh”)
- Some “ee”-sounding words (e.g., “either”, “leisure”)
- Words with “ien” (e.g., “science”, “ancient”)

Many spelling errors occur when adding a suffix to a word. What does one do with the “e”, for example? Generally (oh, that qualifier again!), the “e” is kept with words whose root ends in “ce” or “ge”:

- Manage/manageable/management
- Advantage/advantageous
- Notice/noticeable
- Acknowledge/acknowledgeable/acknowledgement

Makes sense, right? Well, beware the “judge”, for it becomes “judgment”!

It’s been said that the only word ending in “full” is “full” itself. There’s probably a delinquent out there somewhere, but you can feel pretty safe with one “l” when forming an adjective (e.g., “cheerful”, “boastful”, “hopeful”, “spoonful”). The adverb, however, *does* require two (e.g., “cheerfully”, “boastfully”, “hopefully”).

Typically, if a suffix beginning with a vowel is added to a word ending with a short vowel/single consonant combination, you will need to double the ending consonant (e.g., “robbing” as opposed to “robing”).

Of “mant”, “ment”, or “mint”, only “ment” is a suffix. It is most often used to denote a result, action, or condition. Remember, you need plenty of “nourishment”, but you should never have any “nourishmant” or “nourishmint”.

Are you able to distinguish between “able” and “ible”? The rule of thumb is that if the root word can stand on its own, use “able”.

- Commendable/commend
- Terrible

Of course, then along comes “pleasurable” to mess up the whole theory!

## 6. COMBINATION EXPLANATION

I do tend to run on, don't I? It's caused more than one run-in with grammarians, I can assure you. Sometimes, my decision making leads them to question my decision-making abilities. I may follow up by apologizing for any foul-up; I figure that a follow-through response is the responsible thing to do. To correct any errors, I may go on line to do more research, or I may decide that there aren't any adequate on-line (or online) sources. In the end, I guess that I'm just a trouble-making troublemaker whose days are filled with trouble making.

Usually, but not always (are you seeing a pattern when it comes to grammar?), the rules for combination word forms work this way:

- For the verb form, use two separate words, with a space (e.g., “team building”).
  - They spent the afternoon team building.
- For the noun and adjective forms, put a hyphen between the two words (e.g., “team-building”).
- Eventually, through usage, the noun/adjective forms lose the hyphen (e.g., “teambuilding”).

Two oddities gum up the works:

- Often, but not always (grrr!), words with “double” or “second” follow the rules in reverse.
  - I double-checked, and, sure enough, he double-crossed me. I second-guessed everything he did after that.
  - After a double check of the record, I found out that I was the victim of a double cross.
- Adjectives following a verb are not hyphenated.
  - The well-known scholar gave a lecture each week.
  - The scholar's weekly lectures are well known.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of the convolutions of the English language, your odds are pretty good if you follow the general rules. Some obscure exception may trip you up here and there, but that's grammar—can't live with it, can't live without it! Just remember the two things that irritate readers the most: confusing sentences and misspelling. Get to the point, make sure that your words support each other, punctuate properly, and, above all, don't force your audience to guess your meaning. Bad spelling looks like laziness, so don't let it undermine all your hard work. Know how to pronounce the words, and you'll have a better chance of spelling them correctly. Never hesitate to use a dictionary. And, finally, have fun with writing—your readers will appreciate it...basically!