

## GRAMMAR: DO WORDS GO “WRONG”?

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“Grammar” describes both the organization of the parts of speech that make up language and the accepted ways a particular language is organized to make it meaning. That is, English grammar is made of building blocks similar to those of other languages like Mandarin, Urdu, Greek, Latin, but these building blocks are organized in ways unique to English. The “rules” of each grammar develop from usage: centuries of people using a language. So grammar can be said to **DESCRIBE** (not **PRESCRIBE**) how a language works. This makes the rules of grammar less like **LAWS** that you might break, with terrible consequences, and more like social behaviours (like being polite) that you can learn in order to do things with words that gets you the responses you want.

### What follows is a quick tour of major “building blocks” of English Grammar

**Prepositions: what are they?** *at, by, for, from, in, on, over, to, of, with*

- these locate the reader in space, showing spatial relationships

**Co-ordinating Conjunctions: what are these?** *and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*

- these show and evaluate logical connective relationships between ideas or parts of sentences

**Phrase: what is it?**

Several kinds: noun phrases, verb phrase, prepositional phrases

1. **Noun phrase:** a noun plus any adjectives or indexical/pointing words: *this, that, those, a, an, the*

EG: a book  
the dull party  
the charitable doctor  
an attractive Yaletown apartment

2. **Verb phrase:** a verb, any modifiers (adverbs) and anything following it

EG: was purchased  
easily jumped the fence  
drives 100 miles daily

3. **Prepositional Phrase:** a preposition and a noun phrase...can modify nouns, verbs, and adjectives

EG: in the subway  
on the river  
of the two

**Clause: what is it?**

Two kinds: dependant and independent

Similar to discussing the subject-predicate relationship. The predicate is really just another name for *finite verb phrase*. The predicate serves to make some kind of comment about the subject of the clause, as in the sentence “Michael likes chess”, where the subject is “Michael” and the comment/predicate is (that he) “likes chess.” In the sentence “The gallant knight lost the battle,” “The gallant knight” is the subject, and the comment is (that he) “lost

the battle.” It is important to remember that any construction containing a subject-predicate relationship is a clause, whether or not the construction constitutes a sentence. Those clauses that can stand as sentences are called **independent (or main) clauses**. Those clauses that cannot stand by themselves as sentences are called **dependent (or subordinate)** and are typically preceded by an introductory word.

### Independent Clauses:

Monica (subject)	visited her uncle (predicate).
Richard Burton (subject)	played Hamlet (predicate).
A good friend (subject)	is hard to find (predicate).

### Dependant Clauses

(introductory word)	(subject)	(predicate)
Because	the hurricane	struck
after	the dance	is over
whom	her uncle	hired
that	he	could lie so unskillfully
until	the Vikings	won York.

Dependent clauses cannot stand alone. If they are on their own, they are usually called **sentence fragments**, and marked as errors. Dependent clauses also require careful thought to use as a part of a complete sentence; **modification errors** tend to arise because of them.

For example: With the taste of victory in his mouth, an ankle twisted and John lost the race. (misplaced preposition phrase/dependent clause).

Also: To be truly tasty, you should broil lobster, then dip in butter. (misplaced infinitive phrase)

In both cases, what follows the dependent clause is NOT what that dependent clause is about, but it SHOULD be.

### Pronouns:

#### • Stand in for nouns.

“he” “she” “it” “we” “they” can replace nouns as we see in the following:

John likes icecream. **He** also likes chocolate.

Mary doesn’t like vanilla. **She** only likes strawberry.

Everyone in English 105 wrote a summary. **We** worked hard.

Everybody in the building left when the bell rang. **They** knew that the bell meant there was a fire drill.

Pronouns can be the topic of a sentence. Pronouns can be used as part of a reporting frame to tell the reader where a statement comes from. Giddens reports that lay people distrust experts. **He** notices, however, that education changes this picture somewhat.

**It is important to make sure the reader can tell what the pronoun is referring to.**

Consider the following:

David is an artist. He paints, makes sculptures, and takes photographs.

Here it is easy to see that “he” **refers** to “David” This reference works because the noun and the pronoun are close to each other.

But

He used to do welding. Sometimes he thinks about learning to cook. He wants to go to Prague.

In these three sentences, we have no referent for the term “he,” and we cannot even tell if each “he” refers to the same person. Pronouns need nouns to refer back to, to secure their meaning.

### Referring Words:

- Pronouns are referring words, but not the only ones. “**This**,” “**that**,” “**those**,” and “**these**” all refer to things, nouns, and the expectation when they are used is that the reader can easily figure out what they point to.
- **This** and **that** are **singular**. **Those** and **these** are plural: this book/ these books, that book/ those books.
- When they are used with a noun, they help the reader understand the writer’s relationship to the noun. When they are used without a noun, they refer back to a noun that has recently been mentioned.

For example:

These tomatoes are not ready to use yet. (This sentence **points** at the tomatoes, indicates **which** tomatoes are being discussed.)

These are not ripe yet, but those are. (This sentence points, too, but the referent is not in the sentence itself. Instead, to understand it, you need to be in the same room with the speaker and see where she is pointing, or you need to have heard in a previous sentence about the tomatoes in question in order to refer back and understand **which** tomatoes are meant.)

### Notice how referring words locate the writer.

If someone writes “These tomatoes are no good,” we think that the writer is pointing at some tomatoes close to her. “Those tomatoes are no good” points towards tomatoes that are some distance from the writer. Same for “this tomato” versus “that tomato.” This is close; that is far.

Other words also position the writer. “Here comes Harry” differs from “There goes Harry.”

**Here** and **there** show the position of the writer. They indicate relationships in space. They are **indexical** (that is, they are things that indicate). Pronouns are indexicals, too, as are this, these, those, that (which are also a kind of pronoun)!

## MANAGING GRAMMAR: 1. Transitions, and 2. Comma Problems

### 1. Transitions

Useful expressions that show readers how to link together the ideas presented, but which are not interchangeable! That is, you need to choose your transition words carefully to best direct your readers’ attention to the connections you want them to see.

Examples:

- A) **Sometimes** you may not realize that you are using transitional expressions.
- B) **On the other hand**, to understand transitions, it helps to understand sentence structure.
- C) **Consequently**, when you want your reader to see a particular kind of relationship between sentences you have written, you need to use transition words to display this relevance.
- D) **Of course**, it is always good to practice.
- E) **Beyond** learning these things about transition, it is good as well to remember that though they share the function of transition, they are not all prepositions.

“On the other hand,” “sometimes,” “consequently,” “of course,” and “beyond” are **transitional expressions**.

A) **sometimes** (and other transition words including always, next, before, when, whenever, formerly, finally, soon, until, immediately, next, once, occasionally) relates to time and shows the reader a time sequence or frequency, or display where you are in a linear series.

B) **on the other hand** (and transition words including similarly, in spite of, otherwise, likewise, in contrast to, nevertheless) shows the reader you are comparing and/or contrasting things in your discussion of them.

C) **consequently** (and other transition words including admittedly, because, so that, if, hence, in this way) shows the reader your reasoning and the state of knowledge from your point of view.

D) **of course** (and transition words including certainly, obviously, thus, undoubtedly, therefore) shows the reader that you are emphasizing a point, one that you believe but that some might disagree with.

E) **beyond** (and transition words like before, below, beside, above, further, around, from) shows the reader a spatial relationship, a position in space, a place. Note that these words are **prepositions**.

**AND/BUT: Conjunctions as discussed above provide for reader transitions as well.**

## 2. Comma Problems

To understand commas, we need to understand the difference between dependent and independent clauses.

**Commas** organize and separate material **within independent** clauses:

Trains, planes, buses, and automobiles are fuelled by petrochemical products.

To make a cake, you need flour, eggs, milk, butter, sugar, and baking powder.

**Commas CANNOT** link independent clauses. That is, commas can't be used in the following way (these would be described as comma splices):

The blockade continued for weeks, the media clouded the issues.

The island is covered in berry bushes, birds love it.

Instead, a semicolon can be used to separate two such independent clauses:

The blockade continued for weeks; the media clouded the issues.

The island is covered in berry bushes; birds love it.

Dependent clauses, however, **CAN** be separated from other sentence elements by **commas**:

Because the hurricane struck, many people lost their homes.

After the dance is over, we will go for coffee.

John, whom her uncle hired, would not work with her.

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