English Grammar for Dummies

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Extract

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Chapter 1

I Already Know How to Talk. Why Should I Study Grammar?

In This Chapter

- Distinguishing between formal and informal English
- Understanding when following the rules is necessary
- Deciding when slang is appropriate
- Using computer grammar checkers properly

You may be reading this book for a number of reasons. Perhaps you're hoping to impress your English teacher (if so, it's a good idea to let her accidentally catch you reading it). Or maybe you're hoping to become so eloquent that when you pluck up the courage to ask the most beautiful girl in your class out on a date she'll say yes. Or perhaps you want to improve the letters you write at work so that your boss will give you a promotion.

What is grammar anyway?

In the Middle Ages, *grammar* meant the study of Latin, because Latin was the language of choice for educated people. In fact, knowing Latin grammar was so closely associated with being an educated person that the word grammar was also used to refer to any kind of learning. That's why *grammar schools* were called grammar schools; they were places of learning – and not just learning about how Latin and English work.

These days, grammar is the study of language – specifically, how words are put together to create meaning. Because of all those obsessive English teachers and their rules, grammar also means a set of standards that you have to follow in order to speak and write correctly. This set of standards is also called *usage*, as in *standard* and *non-standard usage*. Standard usage is the one that earns an A grade. It consists of the commonly accepted correct patterns of speech and writing that mark an educated person in our society. You'll find standard usage in government documents, in newspapers and magazines, and in textbooks. Non-standard usage draws red ink from a teacher's pen faster than a bullet cuts through butter. Non-standard usage includes slang, dialect and just plain bad grammar.

Whatever your ultimate goal is, you have probably decided that learning better grammar is a good strategy. In this chapter we'll look at how the definition of *better grammar* changes according to your situation, purpose and audience. We'll also tell you what your computer can and can't do to help you write proper English.

Living Better with Better Grammar

The curtain goes up and you step on stage. One deep breath and you're ready. *Ladies and gentlemen, it's an honour to be speaking . . . to speak . . . to have spoken . . . to you this evening.* You clear your throat. *I offer my best efforts to whomever . . . whoever the committee decides . . . will decide should receive the nomination.* You begin to sweat, but you go on. *Now if everyone will rise to his . . . to his or her . . . to their . . . to your feet . . .* Does this sound like you? Do your words twist around themselves until you don't know why you ever thought to open your mouth (or turn on your computer)? If so, you have lots of company. Nearly everyone in your class or office (or book club or squadron or whatever) has the same worries.

Stuck in English class, you probably thought that grammar was invented just to give teachers something to test. But in fact grammar – or, to be more precise, formal grammar teaching – exists to help you express yourself clearly. Without a thorough knowledge of grammar, you'll get by just fine chatting with your friends and family. But you may find yourself at a disadvantage when you're interviewed for a job or a place at university, or when you're trying to convince someone to publish your novel, or when you find yourself having a *slight* disagreement with a customs officer at the airport on your way home from your holiday . . . and heaven help you if your boss turns out to be a *stickler* – one of those people who knows every grammar rule that was ever invented (and thinks that you should know them too) and insists that the English language must never be allowed to change.

Rightly or wrongly, your audience or readers will judge you by the words you use and the way you put them together. Ten minutes at the cinema will show you the truth of this statement. Listen to the speech of the people on the screen. An uneducated character sounds different from someone with five diplomas on the wall. The dialogue reflects reality: educated people follow certain rules when they speak and write. If you want to present yourself as an educated person, you have to follow those rules too.

Deciding Which Grammar to Learn

I can hear the groan already. *Which* grammar? You mean there's more than one? Yes, there are actually several different types of grammar, including *historical* (how language has changed through the centuries) and *comparative* (comparing languages). Don't despair. In *English Grammar For Dummies*, we deal with only two – the two you have to know in order to improve your speech and writing: descriptive grammar and functional grammar.

Descriptive grammar gives names to things – the parts of speech and parts of a sentence. When you learn descriptive grammar, you understand what every word *is* (its part of speech) and what every word *does* (its function in the sentence). There is one important reason to learn some grammar terms – to understand *why* a particular word or phrase is correct or incorrect (and sometimes to be able to explain to someone else why it's wrong).

Functional grammar makes up the bulk of *English Grammar For Dummies*. Functional grammar tells you how words behave when they're doing their jobs properly. It guides you to the right expression – the one that fits what you're trying to say – by ensuring that the sentence is put together correctly. When you're agonising over whether to say *I* or *me*, you're actually solving a problem of functional grammar.

So here's the formula for success: a little descriptive grammar plus a lot of functional grammar equals better grammar overall.

Distinguishing between the Three Englishes

Better grammar sounds like a great idea, but *better* is tough to pin down. Why? Because the language of choice depends on your situation. Here's what I mean. Imagine that you're hungry. What do you say?

> Wanna get something to eat?
>
> Do you feel like getting a sandwich?
>
> Will you accompany me to the dining room?

These three statements illustrate the three Englishes of everyday life. We'll call them friendspeak, conversational English and formal English.

Before you choose, you need to know where you are and what's going on. Most important, you need to know your audience.

Wanna get something to eat? Friendspeak

Friendspeak is informal and filled with slang. Its sentence structure breaks all the rules that English teachers love. It's the language of *I know you and you know me and we can relax together.* In friendspeak the speakers are on the same level. They have nothing to prove to each other, and they're comfortable with each other's mistakes. In fact, they make some mistakes on purpose, just to distinguish their personal conversation from what they say on other occasions. Here's a conversation in friendspeak:

> We're gonna go to the gym. Wanna come?
>
> He's, like, I did 60 push-ups, and I go, like, no way.
>
> I mean, what's he think? We're stupid or something? Sixty? More like one.
>
> Yeah, I know. In his dreams he did 60.

I doubt that the preceding conversation makes perfect sense to many people, but the participants understand it quite well. Because they both know the whole situation (the guy they're talking about gets muscle cramps after four seconds of exercise), they can talk in shorthand. It helps, of course, that they're speaking to each other (not just reading the words). The way they say the words helps to communicate their meaning, and if that fails they can wave their hands about or shake their heads in significant ways.

Slang

Psst! Want to be in the in-crowd? Easy. Just create an out-crowd and you're all set. How do you create an out-crowd? Manufacture a special language (slang) with your friends that no one else understands, at least until the media pick it up. You and your pals are on the inside, talking about a *wicked* song that everyone likes (*wicked* means good). Everyone else is on the outside, wondering what you're talking about. Should you use slang in your writing? Probably not, unless you're sending an e-mail or a personal note to a good friend. The goal of writing and speaking is communication (usually with as many people as possible, or your book *won't* become a best-seller). Also, because slang changes so quickly, the meaning may become obscure even a short time after you've written something. Instead of cutting-edge, you sound dated.

When you talk or write in slang, you also risk sounding uneducated. In fact, sometimes breaking the usual rules is the point of slang. In general, you should make sure that your readers know that you understand the rules before you start breaking them (the rules, not the readers) safely.

We don't deal with friendspeak in this book. You already know it. In fact, you've probably created a version of it with your mates.

Do you feel like getting a sandwich? Conversational English

A step up from friendspeak is *conversational English.* Although not quite friendspeak, conversational English includes some friendliness. Conversational English doesn't stray too far from the rules, but it does break some. It's the tone of most everyday speech, especially between equals. Conversational English is – no shock here – usually for conversations, not for writing. Specifically, conversational English is appropriate in these situations:

- Chats with family members, neighbours and acquaintances
- Informal conversations with teachers and co-workers
- Friendly conversations (if there are any) with supervisors
- Notes and e-mails to friends
- Comments in Internet chat rooms, bulletin boards and so on
- Friendly letters to relatives
- Novels

Conversational English has a breezy sound. Letters are dropped in contractions (don't, I'll, would've and so forth). You also drop words (*Got a match? Later. On the fridge.* and so on). In written form, conversational English relaxes the punctuation rules too. Sentences run together, dashes connect all sorts of things, and half-sentences pop up regularly. I'm using conversational English to write this book because I'm pretending that I'm chatting with you, the reader, not teaching grammar in a classroom.

Will you accompany me to the dining room? Formal English

You're now at the pickiest end of the language spectrum: formal, grammatically correct speech and writing. Formal English displays the fact that you have an advanced vocabulary and a knowledge of etiquette. You may use formal English when you have less power, importance and/or status than the other person in the conversation. Formal English shows that you've trotted out your best behaviour in someone's honour. You may also speak or write in formal English when you have *more* power, importance or status than the other person (to maintain the distance between you). The goal of using

formal English is to impress, to create a tone of dignity, or to provide a suitable role model for someone who is still learning. Situations that call for formal English include:

- Business letters and e-mails (from individuals to businesses as well as from or between businesses)
- Letters to government officials
- Office memos
- Reports
- Homework
- Notes or letters to teachers
- Speeches, presentations and formal oral reports
- Important conversations (for example, job interviews, college interviews, parole hearings, sessions with teachers in which you explain that it wasn't you that did what they think you did, and so on)
- Authoritative reference books

Think of formal English as a business suit. If you're in a situation where you want to look your best, you're also in a situation where your words matter. In business, homework or any situation in which you're being judged, use formal English.

Using the Right English at the Right Time

Which type of English do you speak? Friendspeak, conversational English or formal English? Probably all of them. (See the preceding section for more information.) If you're like most people, you switch from one to another without thinking, dozens of times each day. Chances are, the third type of English – formal English – is the one that gives you the most trouble. In fact, it's probably why you bought this book. (OK, there is one more possibility. Maybe your old maiden aunt gave you your copy of *English Grammar For Dummies* and you're stuck with it. But right now you're obviously reading the book instead of playing computer games, so you've at least acknowledged that you may be able to get something useful from it, and we're betting that it's formal English.) All the grammar lessons in this book deal with formal English, because that's where the problems are fiercest and the rewards for knowledge are greatest.

Which is correct?

A. Hi, Ms Stakes! What's up? Here's the thing. I didn't do no homework last night – too much goin' on. See ya! Love, Lucinda

B. Dear Ms Stakes, Just a note to let you know that I'm not handing in my homework today. I didn't manage to get it done last night! I'll explain later!

Your friend,

Lucinda

C. Dear Ms Stakes,

I was not able to do my homework last night. I will speak to you about this matter later.

Yours sincerely,

Lucinda Robinson

Relying on grammar checkers is not enough

Your best friend – the one who's surfing the Internet and talking to you while you're trying to read *English Grammar For Dummies* – may tell you that learning proper grammar in the third millennium is irrelevant because computer grammar checkers make human knowledge obsolete. Your friend is wrong about the grammar programs.

It's comforting to think that a little green or red line will tell you when you've made an error and that a quick mouse-click will show you the path to perfection. Comforting, but unreal. English has half a million words, and you can arrange those words a couple of gazillion ways. No program can catch all your mistakes, and most programs identify errors that aren't actually wrong.

Every time I type *I don't think this matters*, the computer objects. It wants me to change *this matters* to *this matter* or *these matters* because it doesn't recognise that *matters* can be a verb.

Spelling is also a problem. The computer can't tell the difference between *homonyms* (words that sound alike but have different meanings and spellings) and doesn't know whether the words I type are the ones I mean. For example, if my fingers type

> He walk son he edges like than ever day. I've told him it he does if and moor and fall sin I'm not polling his out. He's such a pane! I'm going too complain formerly.

(I'm not much good at typing!) the computer underlines nothing. However, I was actually trying to say

> He walks on the edge like that every day. I've told him if he does it any more and falls in I'm not pulling him out. He's such a pain! I'm going to complain formally.

In short, the computer knows some grammar and spelling, but you have to know the rest.

Answer: The correct answer depends upon a few factors. How willing are you to get a failing grade for this piece of work (assuming you do get round to handing it in eventually)? If your answer is very willing, send note A. It's written in friendspeak. Does your teacher come to school in jeans and trainers and have the self-image of a 1960s hippie? If so, note B is acceptable. Note B is written in conversational English. Is your teacher prim and proper, expecting you to follow the rules? If so, note C (which is written in formal English) is your best bet.