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Grammar: What and why?

What is grammar?

How do we know what we "ought" to say?

What are the main grammatical categories?

What I do



Teaching
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Talk the Talk
a weekly podcast on RTFM
Tuesdays at 11am
talkthetalkpodcast.com



The Speakeasy
a weekly spot on
ABC Perth 720
Thursdays at 6:30am
danielmidgley.com/speakeasy

Quick questions

1. What is grammar?
2. How and when did you learn the grammar of English?
3. Can you think of something that someone has told you not to say?
Did they tell you why?

What is grammar?

Grammar can refer to structural rules that govern how parts of language combine.

But it can also refer to the mechanics of language, including usage and punctuation.

“Grammar is often a generic way of referring to any aspect of English that people object to.”

Jeremy Butterfield

Damp Squid: The English Language Laid Bare



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What is grammar?

We need to understand grammar in two ways:

1. Grammar in the broad sense

Syntax

I love the smell of linguistics in the morning.

***Smell I the linguistics love morning the of in.**

Morphology

un-remark-able

***able-remark-un**

Usually, nobody makes these mistakes.

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What is grammar?

2. Grammar in the narrow sense

The conventions of writing

spelling, punctuation, confusable words

Understanding appropriateness

Formality levels

formal, informal, academic, slang

Being able to code-switch

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Language policing

Unfortunately, grammar often involves

- language policing
- language hygiene

And this is especially true now that we communicate in writing so much more.

Hostility toward the type of language used by a group is usually a stand-in for hostility against the people themselves.

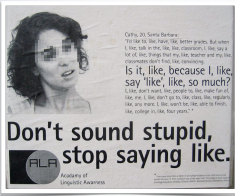
The Apostrophiser

When bad punctuation strikes storefront signage in Bristol, England, a self-styled apostrophe avenger springs into action. The BBC reports that an unidentified man has spent years venturing out at night to correct infractions against the English language spotted in public street and retail signs.

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/93983/grammar-vigilante-correcting-street-signs-one-apostrophe-time>



like



Weird thing 3

A lot of grammar rules are just superstitions
invented by someone's preferences
and not by what people actually do

"Don't end a sentence with a preposition."

What are you thinking **about**?

"Don't split infinitives."

...to **boldly** go where no one has gone before.

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Split your infinitives

Around the 1400s, it was fine (though not very common)
to use an adverb between to and a verb
to better understand

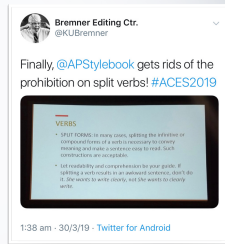
By the 1500s, split infinitives had disappeared
and no one knows why

In the 1700s, they came back

and grammar writers didn't like it one bit

John Comly: *English Grammar Made Easy to the Teacher
and Pupil* (1803)

"An adverb should not be placed between a verb of the
infinitive mood and the preposition to which governs it."



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What people really do

"Don't split infinitives."

But if we examine a *corpus*, we find:

to fully appreciate	109 times
to appreciate fully	16 times
to better understand	874 times
to understand better	94 times

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Weird thing 4

Language is always changing
So don't take today's grammar rules too seriously.

**"Error is the engine of language change,
and today's mistake could be tomorrow's
vigorously defended norm."**

David Shariatmadari

<http://www.theguardian.com/comments/free/2014/mar/11/pronunciation-errors-english-language>



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Weird thing 5

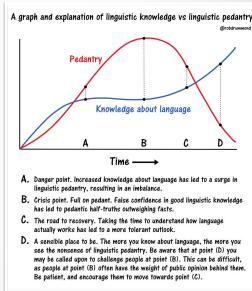
It's normal for people to speak differently.
Everyone has command over a range of styles
and they switch between them all the time
depending on who they're talking to
and what about
We often have one style we use with friends
and another with co-workers

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The stages of language understanding

Three stages to go through:

1. I hate when people say...
2. I know I should not hate when people say... but I still do.
3. I think it's kind of cool when people say... because then I get to find out something about language.



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What we are going to work on

How to solve language problems

Looking at language like linguists do

Knowledge about language (KAL)

Grammar terms

How to recognise and avoid common language SNAFUs

Working with common language attitudes

Recognising that other varieties of English are linguistically valid

What do you want to happen in this class?

Parts of speech



Nouns



Training wheels definition

Person, place or thing

A better definition would look at

what other words can be substituted

The cat messily devours the rare fauna.

what behaviour nouns show

Nouns inflect for number cat → **cats**

Some suffixes are nouny **explanat**ion**, teacher**,**
good**ness**, treat**ment****

Nouns

nouns

But there's more than one kind of noun.

common nouns refer to ordinary things

mountain, dog, woman, city, time

proper nouns refer to specific things

K2, Lassie, Florence Nightingale, Paris

countable nouns can be counted

apples, rocks, knives, cities, forks, bottles

uncountable nouns can't

mud, chocolate, salad, music, importance, justice

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Verbs

verbs

Training wheels definition

Doing words!

A better definition would look at

what other words can be substituted

The cat messily devours the rare fauna.

verb behaviour

Verbs inflect for number, person, tense, whether it's continuous or not

devour → devours, devoured, devouring

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Verbs

verbs

There are different kinds of verbs, too.

main verbs walk, sleep, pontificate, do, have, be

auxiliary verbs do, have, be

modal verbs can, could, shall, should, will, may

They can be used together: *I should have studied*

dynamic verbs buy, build, eat, follow

stative verbs be, have, know, like, seem

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Adjectives

adjectives

Training wheels definition

Describing words! or

A better definition would look at

what other words can be substituted

The cat messily devours the rare fauna.

adjective behaviour

Adjective suffixes accidental, imaginary, easy,
forgetful

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Adverbs

adverbs

Training wheels definition

Describes verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs

Tells how, where, when, or to what extent

A better definition would look at

what other words can be substituted

The cat messily devours the rare fauna.

adverb behaviour

Adverb suffixes smartly, enthusiastically
but also rather, quite

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Parts of speech

What kinds of words do we have in English?

prepositions

Prepositions are "anything you can do to a bridge"
over, under, in, on, around, past

determiners

Determiners "tell about nouns"
a, an, the, some, many

conjunctions

Conjunctions are "joining words"
and, so, but, or, when

pronouns

Pronouns are "substitutes for nouns"
you, it, I, he, she, they

interjections

Interjections are "things you can shout"
Hey! Ouch! Flip! Oh! Tarnation!

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What's the part of speech?

- ☆☆☆ Cats are **playful** and affectionate.
- ☆☆☆ Daniel torments **us** in **every** session.
- ☆☆☆ The **destruction** of the city was **horrifying**.
- ☆☆☆ **Dancing** on the tables is **strictly** prohibited.
- ☆☆☆ That **look** is **so** last week.

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Mad Libs



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Mad Libs Grammar Therapy Worksheet 7 Activity Mad Libs

Without showing your partner this sheet, ask them to think of words that fit these grammatical categories. Write these words down in the spaces, and then read the mad-lib advertisement.

Advertisement

Come _____ at WARMART, where you'll find _____ discounts on all of your favourite brand name _____.

Our _____ associates are there to _____ you _____ hours a day.

We have _____ for the moms, _____ for the kids and all the latest _____ electronics for the _____ in your life.

So come on down to your _____.

_____ WARMART where _____ comes first.

Grammar in Australian schools

The Australian Curriculum		Language English Scope and Sequence: Foundation to Year 6						acara
Sub-strand	Focus of strand within the sub-strand	Foundation Year	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Language	<p>Development and usage</p> <p>Meaning</p> <p>Focus on the use of language in different contexts and the relationship between form and meaning. Focus on the use of language to convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning. Focus on the use of language to convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.</p>	Recognise that language is used to convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Identify the words in a simple sentence that convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand the differences between formal and informal language.	Understand the differences between formal and informal language.
	<p>Word level grammar</p> <p>The elements of words and their use in different contexts.</p>	Recognise that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Identify the words in a simple sentence that convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.	Understand that words convey meaning and the relationship between form and meaning.

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Adverbials

Adverbs

"describe verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs"

"tell how, when, where, why, and to what extent"

For example:

He stared at the donut *hungrily*.

I'll be with you *shortly*.

Adverbials are whole phrases that do the same thing.

He stared at the donut *with a hungry expression*.

I'll be with you *in a few minutes*.

Apposition

Apposition refers to two words or phrases placed next to each other, where one defines the other.

The Paper Kites, a folk band from Melbourne, is coming to town.

Sometimes they use commas (if they're longer phrases).

Patrick Gorman, the member for Perth, said that...

John and Bob, both friends of mine, are starting a band.

Sometimes they don't (if they're single nouns or shorter phrases).

My friend Alice is coming for dinner.

Nellie the elephant packed her trunk.

Local musician Tomás Ford will be playing at the Bird tonight.

Nominalisations

Making nouns out of non-nouns

destroy → destruction

eager → eagerness

From the ACARA website:

Nominalisation is a way of making a text more compact and is often a feature of texts that contain abstract ideas and concepts

Nominalisations

Some people get very worked up over nominalisations.

Opinionator

Exclusive Online Commentary

DRAFT March 30, 2013, 2:59 pm

Those Irritating

By HENRY HITCHINGS

Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

TAGS
GRAMMAR, READING AND WRITING SKILLS

Opinionator

Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times

DRAFT April 9, 2013, 2:59 pm

The Dark Side of Verbs-as-Nouns

By HENRY HITCHINGS

Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

TAGS
GRAMMAR, READING AND WRITING SKILLS, WRITING AND WRITERS

Nominalizations aren't intrinsically either good or bad. Yet, used profusely, they strip the humanity out of what we write and say. They can also be furtively political. Their boosters see them as **marvels of concision**, but one **person's idea of streamlining** is another's idea of a specious and ethically doubtful **simplicity**.

All manifestations of that change. I don't shudder when I see or hear obfuscatory, pretentious or merely ugly.

Another one

DRAFT

Zombie Nouns

By HENRY HITCHINGS

DRAFT March 30, 2013, 2:59 pm

Those Irritating

By HENRY HITCHINGS

Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

TAGS
GRAMMAR, READING AND WRITING SKILLS

Take an adjective (implacable) or a verb (collaborate) or even another noun (crump) and add a suffix like *ity*, *tion* or *ism*. You've created a new noun: implacability, collaboration, crumpism. Sounds impressive, right?

Nouns formed from other parts of speech are called nominalizations. Academics love them; so do lawyers, bureaucrats and business writers. I call them "zombie nouns" because they cannibalize active verbs, suck the lifeblood from adjectives and substitute abstract entities for human beings:

The proliferation of nominalizations in a discursive *journalism* may be an indication of a tendency toward pomposity and abstraction.

The sentence above contains no fewer than seven nominalizations, each formed from a verb or an adjective. Yet it fails to tell us who is doing what! When we eliminate or maximize most of the zombie nouns (tendency becomes trend, abstraction becomes abstract) and add a human subject and some active verbs, the sentence springs back to life:

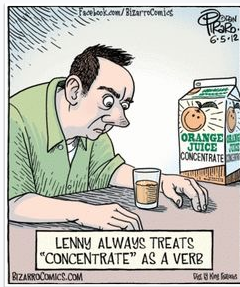
Writers who overload their sentences with nominalizations tend to sound pompous and abstract.

of your own propensity for
tion: to diagnose your own zombie
your prose into the Writer's Diet
ack" in the noun category indicates
s are nominalizations."



Avoiding nominalisations

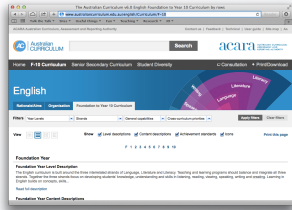
That's one way to do it.



The ACARA website

Explanations of grammar terminology

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/Curriculum/F-10>



Materials and links

You can download these slides (as well as links) at danielmidgley.com/grammartherapy/

Slides will be available the weekend before classes
but don't read them
because spoilers

Next time

Advanced grammar for advanced dummies
subjects and objects
who and *whom*
How to answer any linguistic question
