

CHAPTER 5

Grammar

People who are frightened about making mistakes often have tremendous difficulty writing. Grammar can appear to be a minefield of potential error and thus, for many, it is the most frightening element of writing.

You can combat this fear. Relax and try to write as naturally as possible. You'll usually find any grammatical errors when you do a careful proofreading. When I asked one professional how she managed to write such good letters, she replied: "Simple. I have a good secretary." Her secretary filled the role of proofreader. Most people don't need a secretary, however, to find and fix their errors. But first, they have to get something down on paper.

Relax and just start writing—after you've done the planning we talked about in Chapter 1. That's the key: get something down on paper. If you find you have a real problem with grammar, there are many easy-to-understand grammar and usage books that should help you avoid any mistakes you might be making. Two books that are particularly useful are *The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 2010) and William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style, Fourth Edition* (Longman, 1999). There are also many good online sources of grammar and usage information. Among the best is Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>. Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is available online for free at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>.

Word-processing programs also feature a grammar-check function. While these can be useful, it's still best to know the basic rules of grammar when writing. Knowing these basic rules will help you be able to fix mistakes identified by your grammar check, or, even better, will keep you from making them in the first place. This chapter gives you the grammar basics you need to create a well-written letter.

Grammar

The rules of grammar define how to speak and write clearly. Most of these rules are logical. Some may not seem as logical as others, but, on the whole, following the rules of grammar helps your writing to be consistent and understandable. If you get the basics correct and write with clarity and precision foremost in your mind, you will most likely produce correctly written English.

All types of grammatical errors are possible. In the next few pages, we discuss some of the most common problems, which—luckily—happen to also be the easiest to find and correct. Remember, most errors can be detected in a careful proofreading after you’ve finished the first draft of your letter.

Wrong Pronouns

Some writers have a tendency to want to write “I” instead of “me,” even when the latter is correct. For instance, the sentence:

He gave the book to Eddie and I.

is incorrect. The sentence properly should be written:

He gave the book to Eddie and me.

The above error is common when two or more people are the recipient of the action. If you find yourself having difficulty in such a case, simply say the sentence to yourself as if you were the *only* receiver of the action.

He gave the book to me.

It is easy to add other receivers of the action after you have determined the proper pronoun to use. This is a simple way to avoid using the wrong pronoun.

Another way to avoid using the wrong pronoun is to remember that there are three “cases” of pronouns. The *nominative case* pronouns are the subject of the verb. The *nominative case* pronouns are:

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
I	we
you	you
he, she, it	they

You would never write:

Her and me are going to the movies.

but rather:

She and I are going to the movies.

In the above sentence, because the phrase “She and I” is the subject of the verb, the *nominative case* pronouns are used.

The *objective case* pronouns are used as the direct or indirect object of a verb's action or as the object of a preposition. The objective case pronouns are:

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
me	us
you	you
him, her, it	them

The object of the verb can usually be determined by asking “what” or “who” is the receiver of the verb's action. In the sentence

I gave it to her.

“her” is the indirect object of the verb because it answers the question: “To whom did you give it?”

One of the most problematic pronouns is “who.” Some situations are no-brainers:

Who goes there? [nominative case]
 With *whom* are you going? [objective case]
Whose is this? [possessive case]

But when “who” is the subject of a clause (“The voters *who elected her* have been sorely disappointed.”), you must use the nominative case.

Remember that an objective case pronoun is always used as the object of a preposition as well, so when you see a sentence that includes a prepositional phrase such as “at him,” “with her,” or “about me,” it should immediately trigger your memory to use one of the objective case pronouns.

Possessive case pronouns indicate possession and are usually used correctly by native speakers of English. The possessive case pronouns are:

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
my, mine	our, ours
your, yours	your, yours
his, her, hers, its	their, theirs

Another common error involving the use of pronouns occurs when the words “than” or “as” precede an incomplete sentence construction. For example, let's look at the following sentence:

Mr. Bradford is richer than I.

To determine the proper pronoun to use, complete the sentence:

Mr. Bradford is richer *than I am*.

As we see in the completed structure (“richer than I am”), you would use “I,” so indeed, that first example (“richer than I”) is correct.

There are many more rules governing the proper use of pronouns. The ones we've discussed here are particularly useful to remedy some common problems. If you are unsure of

the pronoun to use, you can usually determine whether or not your sentence is correct by listening to how the sentence sounds once you have written it. If you remain unsure, check the examples above or consult a grammar reference.

Pronouns and Antecedents

The most common mistake concerning pronouns and their antecedents occurs when it is unclear to what or whom a pronoun refers. To avoid any confusion in your letters, make sure that when you begin a sentence or a clause in a sentence with “he,” “she,” “it,” or other pronouns, it is absolutely clear to whom or what these pronouns refer.

A couple of simple examples of unclear references involving pronouns and antecedents follow:

Loren Gary and Guy Martin prepared the advertising presentation and visited the customer’s new office building. It was a handsome piece of work. [What was a handsome piece of work? The advertising presentation? The office building?]

Brian Palay spoke with Robert Long about the possibility of working together. He thought it was a good idea. [Who thought it was a good idea? Brian? Robert?]

Subject and Verb Agreement

Sentences consisting of a disagreement in number (plural versus singular) between subject and verb often result from quick, careless writing.

A word that is said to be singular refers to only one person or thing, whereas a word that is plural refers to more than one person or thing.

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
check	checks
this	these
loan	loans
client	clients

Remember these two basic rules:

1. Singular subjects take singular verbs.

The check *is* here.
This *is* unsatisfactory.
The loan *is* adequate.
The client *coughs* a great deal.

2. Plural subjects take plural verbs.

The checks *are* here.
These *are* unsatisfactory.
The loans *are* adequate.
The clients *cough* a great deal.

In a simple sentence, making subjects and verbs agree is not too difficult. But when a phrase appears between the subject and the verb or a word whose number you are unsure of is in a sentence, it becomes more difficult.

Remember that the verb must always agree with the subject. No matter how many words separate the subject and the verb, check to make sure they agree.

The cancellation was final.

The cancellation of the contracts was final.

Even though “contracts” would take a plural verb if it were the subject of the sentence, “cancellation” is still the subject, so you still use a singular verb.

When you use an indefinite pronoun as the subject of a sentence, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether the pronoun is singular or plural. Some take a singular verb while others take a plural.

These indefinite pronouns take a singular verb:

anybody	everybody	one
anyone	everyone	somebody
each	neither	someone
either	no one	

These indefinite pronouns take a plural verb:

both
few
many
several

With the following indefinite pronouns you must judge from the context of the sentence whether to use a singular or plural verb:

all
any
most
none
some

For example:

1. All of the secretaries *are* talented.
All of the money *is* green.
2. Any desk *is* fine.
Are any of the proceedings to be taped?
3. Most of my days *are* busy.
Most of my dinner *is* cold.

4. None of the stores *were* open.
None of the ledger *was* saved.
5. Some of our orders *are* processed incorrectly.
Some of the order book *is* missing.

Another simple rule to remember is that *compound subjects always take a plural verb*.

Mr. Hemingway *has* arrived.
Mr. Hemingway and Mr. Grimes *have* arrived.

When “or” or “nor” connects the two subjects, however, a singular verb is used.

Neither Mr. Hemingway nor Mr. Grimes *has* arrived.

If you carefully check to make sure that the subjects and verbs of your sentences agree in number, you will most likely not make any errors. Sometimes, however, when it is difficult to determine whether a singular or plural verb should be used, a quick reference to my pointers above or a grammar book will set you straight.

Dangling Modifiers

When a phrase doesn’t clearly refer to the word it is modifying, it is said to be “dangling.” The sentence

Preoccupied with the business negotiation, her assistant surprised her.

is unclear. What does the phrase “preoccupied with the business negotiation” modify? It is a dangling modifier. It appears to modify “assistant” because that’s the noun it’s closest too, but it’s more likely that it’s meant to modify the “her” of the sentence. A word that the modifier can refer to sensibly in the sentence is needed:

Because she was preoccupied with the business negotiation, she was surprised by her assistant.

When you write a sentence that contains a modifying phrase, always make sure that it clearly modifies what it’s supposed to. Most dangling modifiers result from carelessness. You can usually tell after a careful proofreading of your letter whether or not the sentences you have written make sense.

Split Infinitives

You may remember your English teacher telling you: “Now remember, don’t split an infinitive,” probably sometime back in junior high. But splitting infinitives is not always wrong. Some people will go to such great lengths to make sure infinitives are not split that the sentences they write are awkwardly constructed.

As a rule of thumb, you should not split an infinitive when the splitting results in an awkwardly constructed sentence. For example, the infinitive “to pass” is awkwardly split in the following sentence:

The legislation is the proper one to, whether or not you approve of deficit spending, pass in the upcoming session.

A better way to write the above sentence is:

Whether or not you approve of deficit spending, the legislation is the proper one to pass in the upcoming session.

If splitting an infinitive is less awkward than leaving it intact, however, it is acceptable to split it. For example:

For the client to never lose is unusual.

If the scriptwriters had blindly followed the rule, the *U.S.S. Enterprise* would never have boldly gone where no man had gone before!

Parallel Structure

Perhaps the most common error involving parallel structure occurs with elements in a series. When you write a sentence that lists a series of items, make sure all of the elements are written in the same grammatical form. The use of parallel structure makes your writing more consistent and clearer to your reader.

Faulty parallel structure: To sell her proposal, the marketing director presented her marketing plan, asked for reactions to her presentation, and many other things to involve her audience.

Better: To sell her proposal, the marketing director presented her marketing plan, asked for reactions to her presentation, and did many things to involve her audience.

Faulty parallel structure: The personnel director was requested to handle terminations of employees as well as writing commendations.

Better: The personnel director was requested to handle terminations of employees as well as to write commendations.

Faulty parallel structure can be corrected no matter what part of speech the items in a series are. The important thing to remember is to be consistent with the grammatical form you use for writing items in a series.

Punctuation

Punctuation is used in writing to distinguish or separate one group of words from another to convey some meaning to a reader. The use of punctuation creates pauses and stresses where the writer feels they are necessary.

Appendix II goes over various aspects of punctuation that will help you use it correctly and effectively in your letter writing.

The most important thing about punctuation is using it consistently. Ralph Waldo Emerson might have thought that “foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” but you can rest assured that consistency in the use of punctuation is not foolish. It helps to clarify your message to your reader. By the same token, avoid overpunctuation; it impedes understanding.

Capitalization

Capitalization is another area that calls for consistency. Obviously you should capitalize the first word of every sentence as well as proper nouns and proper adjectives. There are, however, many quirks to the proper use of capitalization. When in doubt, it is usually best to lowercase or to check a reference such as a dictionary. For a discussion of proper capitalization within the various letter formats, see Chapter 4.

Spelling

Many books have been written to help writers with spelling problems. Most often, however, the best help is a dictionary. To avoid careless spelling mistakes, you should look up those words about which you have even the slightest doubt. The two best tools to guard against spelling errors in your letters are care in writing and a dictionary at your side.

Word-processing software packages feature spell-check. If you have any doubts about your spelling ability, a spell-check can be a saving grace. It will highlight any misspelled words and help you choose a correctly spelled alternative. Spell-check will not, however, catch misused words (e.g., “cat” for “can” or “lamb” for “lamp”), and your spell-check program may drive you crazy with its “false negatives” (it will accuse you of misspelling any word not in *its* meager list; this will include Mr. Jones’s last name—who could misspell “Jones”?—and “smartphone,” along with other words too recent to have been included). A careful proofreading is still the best guard against misuse.

Jargon

Jargon is a curse to any writer who wants to get a clear, precise message across to a reader. The word “jargon” has two meanings. The first is “incoherent language.” The second is “the technical language of a profession.” Usually both of these types of jargon should be avoided in letter writing. Of course the first, incoherent language, must be avoided at all costs. Technical language should be kept to a minimum in your letters to avoid confusing your reader.

A person who writes jargon is usually more impressed with the way the words sound than with getting a message across. You are writing to convey a message, not to impress your reader with how many big words you know. People who write in lofty language or jargon will often string together complex words that sound great but mean nothing.

Avoid pretension and strive for clarity in your letter writing. Forget about jargon!

Use simple language. Your reader will appreciate it.

Clichés

Clichés are words or expressions that become stale from overuse. Clichés often take the form of metaphors or comparisons, such as “big as an ox” or “slept like a log.” They are trite and show a lack of originality in writing.

In business, expressions such as “put on the back burner,” “caught between a rock and a hard place,” and “thinking out of the box” have been used so often that they can be considered clichés. Nothing is grammatically wrong with these trite expressions. They are just so stale that they have lost the power to convey much meaning to the reader.

Avoid clichés by writing exactly what you want to convey. Make every word in your letters mean something. After you’ve written your first draft, clarify your message by deleting any clichés or trite expressions.

Be original in your letter writing. If you need to make a comparison, try to make an original one. Avoid drawing from the stock of clichés that have been used for years.

Wordiness

In Chapter 2, I warned that if you don’t write what you mean, your writing will be full of ambiguity. I can’t emphasize this point too much. Write what you mean, not what you think sounds good.

The following pointers may be helpful in guiding you away from the curse of wordiness. Remember the following “five avoids” and you will be on your way to writing in a clear, direct style:

1. *Avoid pretentiousness.* Don’t overcomplicate your writing by trying to impress the reader with your vocabulary or your great literary style. Write simply, clearly, and directly.
2. *Avoid redundancy.* Don’t use superfluous or repetitious words. Write what your reader needs to know and he or she will most likely get the message. There is no need to repeat your message over and over.
3. *Avoid padding.* Be direct in your letter writing. Strike out all unnecessary words or sentences. If you write more than you have to, your reader might become impatient. Strive for clarity and precision.
4. *Avoid weak intensifiers.* Words like “very,” “quite,” and “completely” usually add little or nothing to the meaning of your sentences.
5. *Avoid unnecessary definitions or explanations.* Explain only what absolutely needs to be explained. Don’t insult your reader by explaining something that is obvious or that he or she would already know.

Revisions can help you eliminate any problem with wordiness you may be having. In the revision process you should:

1. Reread the letter to make sure you’ve said what you wanted to say.
2. Edit out all unnecessary words and phrases.
3. Clarify until your letter is precise enough to get the proper message across.