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for
People Who Need To Communicate Clearly



**How The English Language Works — And
How To Make The Language Work For You!**

Mike McClory

Acknowledgment

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Learning from Lincoln

One of America's greatest writers, Abraham Lincoln, once described writing as "the great invention of the world." Like most people living in the 19th century, Lincoln used the word *invention* in place of the term more commonly used today: *technology*. Lincoln understood that the "greatest help" provided by writing was the role it played in supporting "all other inventions" — that is, all other technologies.

Writing: The Highest Tech

Lincoln's observation is as true in the 21st century as it was 150 years ago. In 2010, communication skills — writing and speaking — topped the list of what business and government organizations are looking for in prospective employees, according to an annual survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. In its 2008 survey of "the skills that employers prize most," the association found that a significant percentage of college graduates "lack writing skills."

Later that year, an article in *Newsweek* magazine noted that "employers are spending \$1.3 billion a year to teach basic writing skills...." And *The New York Times*, in a 2006 editorial, questioned the conventional wisdom that "this country has the best higher education system in the world," pointing out that "large numbers of college graduates...lack what should be basic skills in writing, problem solving and analytical thinking — the minimum price of admission to the new global economy."

Several years earlier, *Fortune* magazine voiced similar concerns, bluntly stating that even Americans with graduate degrees "lack the ability to speak and write with clarity and conciseness...In skills such as writing, [graduate schools] are forced to compensate for the many sins of American high schools and colleges, in effect supplying remedial instruction."

A 2003 government report on the quality of writing produced by federal agencies included the following comments:

"grammatical mistakes...spelling errors...poor organization, poor writing...unintelligible...disorganized presentation...misspelled words and grammatical errors...vague, confusing...sloppy writing..."

What Went Wrong?

During the last 50 years or so, America has poured billions of dollars into educational programs that were supposed to improve our analytical and communication skills. Instead, things have been moving in the opposite direction. Educators abandoned Lincoln's approach of studying the English language as a communication system — including exercises focusing on fundamental grammatical relationships and logical sentence structure — in favor of "Language Arts," with an emphasis on

abstract concepts such as using “different process elements appropriately” and communicating “with a variety of audiences for a variety of purposes.” In the 1960s, one influential group of educators declared war against grammar, claiming that spending time learning grammar “has a harmful effect on the teaching of writing.” But by 2003, after the disastrous results of the anti-grammar experiment had become apparent, the same group was hawking one of its publications as “a much-needed resource for K-college teachers who wonder what to do about grammar — how to teach it, how to apply it, how to learn what they themselves were never taught.” Most educators are now willing to admit that de-emphasizing grammar was a mistake, but very few know how to teach it.

Learning Professional Writing and Editing Techniques

Perhaps it is time to consider the problem in a different way:

Why is the typical magazine article easy to follow, while so many of the day-to-day communications that dominate our lives — from instructions on the Internet and government regulations to e-mail messages and student compositions — are tedious and muddled?

Which techniques do America’s best professional writers and editors use to present ideas in language that is clear, concise, informative, and interesting?

In the **Write Smart 12-Step System** — a time-tested system based on 12 fundamental techniques used by top professional writers and editors around the world — you will learn how to...

- Appreciate the role of English as the world’s dominant communication system.
- Look at how the English system operates and how to use the system to solve problems, not just to complete assignments or to satisfy creative urges.
- Treat sentences as word puzzles and organize ideas by putting the pieces together.
- Think of sentence patterns as the fundamental operations of English, and handle them as easily as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division — the fundamental operations of mathematics.
- Understand the architecture of the language by playing the **Game of GrammaTecture**[®].
- Master tricky punctuation and usage problems by playing the **Game of GrammaText**[®].
- Use a new and improved method of identifying and diagramming sentence elements to understand how words work together to create meaning.
- Develop strong critical thinking and communication skills that will last a lifetime.

If you are given to metaphor, you might want to think of the **Write Smart 12-Step System** as essential software for the brain.

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Part I - The Right Place

1. How the English Language Works: Pieces and Patterns of the Puzzle

Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gullivers Travels* and many other classics, once defined writing style as “**proper words in proper places. . . .**” A century and a half later, Mark Twain expressed the same sentiment in more down-to-earth terms: “**Anybody can have ideas,**” he wrote in a letter to a young admirer. The “difficulty” — as Twain put it — lies in understanding how to “**get the right word in the right place. . . .**”

1.1 Smart = Simple

“To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement.” — *Mark Twain*

Skilled professional writers and editors know how to present information in a way that most readers can understand easily. The following sentences — four written by critically acclaimed, award-winning authors, the other by an author whose works continue to be read more than two centuries after they were published — rely on a **fundamental principle** to connect with their readers. In a word or two, what is it?

1. Games lubricate the body and the mind. — *Benjamin Franklin*
2. Harry heard something creak outside. — *J.K. Rowling*
3. Who runs U.S. foreign policy? — *Anne Applebaum*
4. The smart money hit the canvas. The long shot got the nod. — *Ralph Ellison*
5. Hurricane Katrina struck metropolitan New Orleans on Monday with a staggering blow, far surpassing Hurricane Betsy, the landmark disaster of an earlier generation.
— *The Times-Picayune, New Orleans, August 30, 2005*

The answer is **action** — or, to be more specific, the controlling element in each of these sentences is an **action verb**. Let’s look at the simpler sentences first:

Games **lubricate** the body and the mind.

Harry **heard** something creak outside.

Who **runs** U.S. foreign policy?

Most professional writers and editors rely on action verbs most of the time because action verbs **keep things moving** and **keep the reader involved**.

The **action verb*** fits into a **pattern** that you may have learned in elementary school. Most sentences — though not all — have a **subject** and a **verb** and express a **complete thought**. The problem is that although thoughts may **seem** “complete” while they are abstractions in the mind, **translating** our thoughts into clear, direct sentences can be a complicated and often frustrating process. That process becomes much easier if we understand how the English sentence works as an **organized communication system**.

To get a better idea of **how action verbs operate** within the system, let’s look at Benjamin Franklin’s sentence again.

Games lubricate the body and the mind.

In this simple sentence, you can see that the verb *lubricate* supplies the action.

Games lubricate...

To determine the subject, we need to understand which word operates as the **source** of the action.

Games lubricate...

Establishing a **strong subject-action verb relationship** is important, but you have to **go somewhere** with that relationship. What’s missing here is the **third** and **most challenging** part of the equation: the **complete thought**.

Most good sentences include a **complement** — a word (or group of words) that **completes** the subject-verb relationship.

Games lubricate ➔ the body and the mind.

* **NOTE:** The most commonly used (and abused) verb in English — the verb **to be** — is not an action verb. As we will see, overuse of the seemingly innocent forms of the verb **to be** (*am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been*) can transform perfectly good ideas into perfectly awful sentences.

In Franklin’s sentence, we can see that two words, *body* and *mind*, **complete** the subject-verb relationship. In most English sentences, the complement following an action verb answers the question “what.” *Games lubricate **what**? ... the body and the mind.*

Games lubricate ➔ the body and the mind.

Notice that the word is not “compliment” with an “i” (as in, “how nice you look today”). This is “complement” with an “e” (meaning “something that **completes**”).

Don’t make the mistake of assuming that this sentence pattern is **too simple** to merit serious consideration. In English, **word order** is the primary factor in establishing our grammatical relationships, and **understanding fundamental grammatical relationships** will often make the difference between **sense** and **nonsense**.

This sentence pattern may seem “natural” to you, but many **other languages** follow patterns that are somewhat (or completely!) **different**. In **Latin**, for instance, we could drop “the” (before both *body* and *mind*) and write the sentence this way:

Lubricate games body mindand. (Yes, *mindand* would be a **single word**.)

A writing system conveys meaning through established patterns of **visual symbols** that arouse images in the mind of the reader. **Each language** has its own **syntax** — its own **unique way of organizing** words into sentence patterns. Over the centuries, Latin has had a profound influence on English, but there is **no evidence** to support the claim that you can “learn” English by studying Latin. Acquiring an appreciation for word order in general, and for the **subject-action verb-complement pattern** in particular, will help you write English sentences that express ideas clearly and engage the interest of your readers.

Harry heard something creak outside. — J.K. Rowling

Think of the action verb as the engine that powers your car. When you develop a direct relationship between a subject and an action verb, generally referred to as the **active** voice, the action verb **drives** your message. The action verb tells the reader what the subject *does* (or *did* or *will do*): *Games lubricate . . . Harry heard . . .*

1.2. Creating Word Combinations and Phrases

The skilled professional adds **descriptive language** — in the form of words or phrases — to support the subject-verb-complement relationship. You can't always get away with sentence patterns like *Games lubricate the body...* or *Harry heard something...* Your readers will generally respond positively to **combinations** of words that put some **flesh on the bones**.

Who runs U.S. foreign policy? — Anne Applebaum

Here, we are looking at a slightly different subject-action verb-complement pattern:

Who...runs...policy?

Who runs ➡ U.S. foreign policy?

This sentence asks a question and includes a bit of descriptive language.

Who runs ➡ U.S. foreign policy ?

It's easy to see that *U.S.* and *foreign* describe *policy*. It should also be easy to see that this sentence **makes sense** because the words relate to one another in specific ways. In English, the primary organizing principle — what we commonly refer to as the sentence's syntax — is the **order** of the words in the sentence. Making sense depends on syntax, and syntax depends on **word order**.

To create strong visual images for our readers, we may need to **extend the scope** of the **subject-action verb-complement** (or **subject-action verb-object**) relationship. Often, we can accomplish this by creating well-organized word combinations or phrases.

*Hurricane Katrina struck metropolitan New Orleans on Monday with a staggering blow,
 far surpassing Hurricane Betsy, the landmark disaster of an earlier generation.*

— *The Times-Picayune, New Orleans, August 30, 2005*

The sentence begins with a strong subject-action verb-complement relationship:

Hurricane Katrina struck ➔ metropolitan New Orleans...

In a sentence of this type, the reader needs **additional supporting information**, and the writer supplies it — in the form of **a series of phrases** following the complement.

S **AV** **com**
 Hurricane Katrina struck metropolitan New Orleans (on Monday) (with a staggering blow,) (far surpassing Hurricane Betsy,) (the landmark disaster) (of an earlier generation.)

You may have noticed that there appear to be two **other action verbs** in the sentence.

Hurricane Katrina struck metropolitan New Orleans (on Monday) (with a **staggering** blow,) (far **surpassing** Hurricane Betsy,) (the landmark disaster) (of an earlier generation.)

Note that *staggering* and *surpassing* do not act as verbs; they act as **verbals** — as **verb forms** that **describe** other elements in the sentence: *a staggering blow* and *far surpassing Hurricane Betsy*. Good writers look for opportunities to use verbals to keep their sentences moving and keep the reader involved. (As we will see, other kinds of **verbals can play a variety of roles** — a critical aspect of good writing that generally gets passed over in high school and college English classes.)

Most first-rate professional writers and editors, either consciously or intuitively, take pains to make sure the subject-verb relationship drives the message, adding appropriate descriptive language to support and clarify that relationship. But be careful. Many otherwise reasonable and capable people make the mistake of **burying the subject-verb-complement relationship** with an overload of descriptive language, believing that ornamentation is synonymous with “creative” writing.

The extensive cyclonic system referred to as Hurricane Katrina by the National Weather Service struck the city of New Orleans and areas adjacent to the city with what numerous observers are describing as an impact of staggering proportions, the extent of which would initially appear to be equal to or even greater than the extensive damage caused by the landmark Hurricane Betsy’s destructive intrusion in early September of 1965.

1.3. Grammatical Competence and Creativity

There is **no contradiction** between **grammatical competence** and **creativity**. If we think of grammatical relationships as the **architecture** (or **GrammaTecture**) of a language, we can appreciate the need to understand the **structural elements** that serve as the **foundation** of strong sentences and coherent paragraphs.

By his own account, Abraham Lincoln, one of America's greatest writers, had less than one year of formal education. In *The Eloquent President*, Ronald C. White Jr. describes Lincoln's decision as a young man "to master the English language by an intense study of grammar." White quotes William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, as recalling that Lincoln purchased a copy of Samuel Kirkham's *English Grammar* in an effort to improve his communication skills "by mastering the intricacies of grammatical construction."

Lincoln devoured the text. Sometimes . . . he committed whole sections of the book to memory. . . . The young Lincoln would wheedle his friends to help him practice the review tasks at the end of each chapter.

After completing his study of Kirkham's *English Grammar*, Lincoln gave the book to the young woman widely regarded as the secret love of his life, Ann Rutledge. The book now resides in the Rare Book Room of the Library of Congress.
<http://myloc.gov/Exhibitions/lincoln/Multimedia/LincolnGrammar.aspx>

As his mastery of grammatical relationships grew, Lincoln came to understand writing as a remarkable **technology** that made speech **visible**. In his own words: "Writing — the art of communicating thoughts to the mind, through the **eye** — is the **great invention** of the world. . . ." He recognized that writing is "great not only in its direct benefits," but also in its critical contribution "to **all other inventions**." Throughout his career, Lincoln demonstrated an awareness of the bond between clear grammatical relationships and creativity. Here's one example:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Note the primary sentence pattern (fathers brought forth ➡ nation) and the use of other strong verbal elements:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers **brought forth** on this continent, a new nation, **conceived** in Liberty, and **dedicated** to the proposition that all men are **created** equal.*

But in the 1960s and '70s, many prominent educators decided that Lincoln's approach was all wrong. **Studying English** as an **organized communication system**, they insisted, inhibits creativity. One influential educational organization began making **sweeping claims** about "research" proving that in English classes where memorizing is encouraged, particularly as it relates to studying grammatical relationships, students' writing "may even get worse." This wobbly line of reasoning has resulted in a **national catastrophe** — what *The New York Times* has described as "distressing declines in literacy, especially among those with the most education."

In the world of professional publishing, whether print or electronic, the notion of an inherent conflict between grammatical competence and creativity has **zero credibility**. Consider the use of figurative language in two sentences from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a book that won the National Book Award for excellence in fiction. At one point, Ellison describes a prizefight between two boxers of unequal ability. The more skilled and experienced boxer is heavily favored (Ellison refers to him as the *smart money*). The other boxer (the *long shot*) is clumsy and overmatched, but he lands a lucky punch, knocks his opponent out (*hit the canvas*), and wins the fight (*got the nod*).

The smart money hit the canvas. The long shot got the nod.

In both sentences, we are looking at subject-action verb-complement relationships.

The smart money hit ➡ the canvas. The long shot got ➡ the nod.

* The end of this sentence also demonstrates the effective use of a passive verb. More about that later...

Not everyone learns how to organize ideas by studying grammar books. A few writers, like Mark Twain, develop the ability to read a good sentence and “unconsciously store it away in our model-chamber...” According to biographer John Lauber, Twain gained much of his knowledge about writing good sentences during his years working as a typesetter in a newspaper office, where he “picked out one by one the individual letters, each cast in metal, and assembled them in a small metal frame...” Twain may have joked about not knowing the rules of grammar “word for word,” but he once described writing style as an “edifice,” which the writer is “building, brick by brick...” Lauber portrays him as an author with “a lifelong interest in the technology of writing” who was “proud of his mastery of English grammar and punctuation...”*

Again, note the distinction between **complement** (completing the action of a verb) and **direct object** (“directly” affected by a verb).

The smart money hit  the canvas. The long shot got  the nod.
 _____ = - - - vc/o _____ = - - - vc/o

In the first sentence, Ellison’s use of figurative language — *hit the canvas* — is a more dramatic way of saying ***fell to the canvas***.

In the second sentence, we can see that *nod* completes the meaning of the action verb *got*, but it would make no sense at all to suggest that *got* “directly affects” *nod*. We can refer to the complement *canvas* as the **object** of the verb *hit*, and to the complement *nod* as the **object** of the verb *got*, as long as we recognize that neither object is the “direct” effect of a verb.

And what about *smart money*, *long shot*, and *home run*? Is it permissible to express a two-word combination as a single word? To be continued...

* *The Making of Mark Twain: A Biography* by John Lauber

1.4. The Curious History of the English Writing System

Historians generally trace the roots of literacy in Western civilization to the ancient Greeks, who coined the term *gramma* more than 2,500 years ago to mean “something written” or “letter of the alphabet.” You may have learned in elementary school that the English word *alphabet* comes from the first two letters of the Greek alphabet: *alpha* and *beta*. In the strict sense of the word, then, **literacy** actually means **letteracy**.

Not coincidentally, both *graphic* and *gramma* are derived from *graphien*, the Greek word for “writing” — that is, “visual representation.” The Greeks didn’t invent *gramma*. They copied it from their rivals, modified it to suit their own purposes, and used it to create one of the most brilliant civilizations the world has ever known, producing the likes of Homer, Aesop, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, and Alexander the Great. By applying the term *gramma* to **writing** — as opposed to **talking** — the Greeks recognized that “writing skill” (*grammatike techne*) was a distinct technology, an organization of **visual language patterns** serving as the **basis of all literacy**.

When Greece became part of the Roman Empire, Greek culture and language had a profound influence on the conquerors: Zeus became Jupiter, Aphrodite became Venus, and *grammatike techne* became *ars grammtica* — the art of **writing**, not the art of **grammar**! In Latin, the dominant language of that era, *art* was a synonym for *craft* or *skill*.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Latin survived as the language of religion, scholarship, and diplomacy throughout most of Western Europe, but other languages flourished as well. When wave after wave of West German invaders began attacking and settling in the territory then known as Briton about 1500 years ago, they brought their language with them. Two of the invading tribes, the Angles and the Saxons, lent the collective name “Anglo-Saxon” to the culture (and the language) that materialized. Over the next four centuries, that culture was further influenced by a series of assaults mounted by other groups of Germanic invaders — the Vikings — from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

(Your interest in writing may be purely practical, in which case you can **skip the rest** of this “Curious History” and **go to page 18**. If you want to know more about how Latin and other languages have influenced English, or about why so many Americans learn so little about **English as a writing system** in school, see **Appendix A**.)

The Write Smart 12-Step System: Steps 1 - 4

The verb is the heart of the English sentence. In elementary school, we all learned about subjects and verbs. You have the subject and then you have the verb, right? Subject-verb may be the normal **order** of most English sentences, but that kind of understanding distorts the relationship between the two key elements in the language.

Action verbs, not subjects, are the words that **move your message**. When you develop a direct relationship between a subject and an action verb, the action verb **drives** your sentence. The action verb tells the reader what the subject **does** — or **did** or **will do**.

The action verb is like the **engine** of an automobile. Whether we're talking about a fuel-efficient Prius or a gas-guzzling Hummer, one thing is certain: If you don't have a functioning engine to power it, your vehicle won't make it around the block.

Using this metaphor will help you understand the English language's 4 dominant sentence patterns:

1. Moving the Message: Action Verbs
2. Shifting into Neutral: Linking Verbs
3. Shifting into Overdrive: Phrases as Complements
4. Shifting into Reverse: Passive Verbs

Think of these four sentence patterns as the **fundamental operations** of the English language, in much the same way that **addition**, **subtraction**, **multiplication**, and **division** are the fundamental operations of mathematics.

2. Building Strong Sentences: The Architecture of English

Talking is something that most of us pick up without the need of formal instruction. But writing, as Abraham Lincoln observed, is a **human invention** — a complex, tool-dependent technology. Since the invention of writing, this remarkable technology has served as a critical element in the development of all cultural, scientific, and technological advances.

To a large extent, your success in acquiring strong writing skills will depend on your ability to understand how the English language works as a **system**: how to use the **organization of the language** to express ideas with ease and confidence. If you want to have some fun in the process, you can use a little imagination and pretend **it's just a game**.

To distinguish your role as a participant in the game, not a mere spectator, you need to begin thinking of the organization of the language as its **architecture** (or **GrammarTecture**) — and yourself as an **architect of English**. You aren't just analyzing sentences and paragraphs; you're learning **how to build them**.

2.1 How To Play The Game

“The United States is by far the most visually organized country in the history of the world. It is the only country that was ever founded on the basis of phonetic literacy for all. All of its political and business institutions assume the ground plan of this literacy.” – Marshall McLuhan

In English, we rely on a 26-letter alphabet to translate sound patterns into a **visual communication system**. This process is what the ancient Greeks called *grammatike techne*, or simply *writing skill*. You can improve your skill as a writer by learning how to treat the English language as a game. But rather than accepting the old cliché “to play the game, you have to know the rules,” you’ll enjoy greater success if you play this game by **knowing the players** and the **patterns**. In English, the main players are the **verb** and the **noun**. As we have seen, the verbs used most frequently by the best professional writers and editors are verbs that express **action**.

2.1. 1 Action

Action verbs usually express physical activity.

say walk build write

Action verbs may also express mental or emotional activity.

think hope wonder understand

2.1. 2 Names

The common definition of a noun as a “person, place, or thing” is a bit misleading. *Noun* comes from the Latin *nomen*, meaning *name*, so it’s best to think of a **noun** as the symbolic **name** of **something** or **somebody**. (You can add **someplace** if you want to, but in the minds of most people, a place **is** something.)

Most nouns are concrete; they can be seen and touched.

brother house computer tree

Some nouns are abstract; they cannot be seen or touched.

love democracy idea election

Both concrete and abstract nouns may be collective nouns.

team audience data majority

Proper nouns represent a particular something or somebody.

London Abraham Lincoln Toyota

Nouns that do not represent a particular something or somebody are common nouns.

city president automobile

One of the **articles** — *a, an, the* — will often come before a noun, creating a **noun combination**.*

a city	a president	an automobile
the city	the president	the automobile

The article before a noun is one of the many differences between English and Latin. For example:

Latin: In principio erat verbum . . .

English: In **the** beginning was **the** word . . .

As seen here, the article forms a combination with the noun. This **noun combination** functions as a single entity.

the beginning = principio the word = verbum.

Verbs and nouns interact with one another in specific ways to create meaning. Nouns may cause verbs to act; nouns may also complete the meaning of a verb. Each word in a sentence operates in **two ways**: 1) as a **speech part** (What **kind** of word is it? Is it a noun? Is it an action verb? What is the word's **identity** — its **ID**?); 2) as a **sentence part** (How does the word **act** in the sentence? What **Role** does the word play? What is the word's **relationship** to other words in the sentence?)

* The articles *a, an, and the* are referred to by many linguists as **determiners**. Some linguists confuse matters unnecessarily by treating **all English nouns and verbs** as “phrases.” For details about the distinction between a **combination** and a **phrase**, see the footnote on page 56.

2.1. 3 What kind of word is it? **Speech Part = IDentity**

Consider the following sentence:

Abraham Lincoln won the election.

What's the **action**?

won = **action verb**

Abraham Lincoln is the name of **somebody**, and *the election* is the name of **something**.

Abraham Lincoln = **noun**

the election = **noun combination**

So we can describe the sentence *Abraham Lincoln won the election* in terms of its speech parts.

N AV n
Abraham Lincoln won the election.

Abraham Lincoln and *election* are **both nouns**, but they play completely **different roles**.

2.1. 4 How does the word act? **Sentence Part = Role**

The role the word plays is determined by its relationship to other words in the sentence.

Speech Part (IDentity)	Sentence Part (Role)
Action Verb	Verb
Noun	Subject Complement (Object)

* Is the Latin term *predicate* (from *praedicare*, meaning *to proclaim*) helpful in understanding the relationships within the English sentence? Or does the concept of the predicate as a separate entity add an unnecessary layer of complexity?

Paying attention to the roles that words play in a sentence will enable you to understand and build strong grammatical relationships, which in turn create meaning. Sentences with action verbs generally follow a pattern that's easy to recognize. The **subject** tells us what the sentence is **about**; the **action verb** tells us what the subject **does**; and, in most cases, a word or group of words — the verb's **complement** (or **object of the verb**) — **completes** the subject–action verb relationship.

Abraham Lincoln won ➔ the election.*

- - -vc/o

In this sentence, the **subject** (**Role** or sentence part) is the **noun** *Abraham Lincoln* (**ID** or speech part); the **verb** of the sentence (**Role** or sentence part) is the **action verb** *won* (**ID** or speech part); the **complement** (**Role** or sentence part) is the **noun** *election* (**ID** or speech part), which completes the action of the verb and answers the question — “*won what?*”

N AV n

Abraham Lincoln won the election.

- - -vc/o

You might find it helpful to think of a word's identity and its role in a more familiar context. In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland (**IDentity**) played Dorothy (**Role**); Bert Lahr (**IDentity**) played the Cowardly Lion (**Role**).

Playing the game is a lot more fun if you think of the English language as an operating system — **Operating System** ^{ENGLISH®} (or **OS^E**). Each word in a well-written sentence relates to other words in specific ways. **OS^E** is **easier to understand** and **more practical** than **traditional diagramming** or the **transformational** grammarians' **upside down** “tree diagrams.”

OS^E enables you to see how the **words** in a sentence operate on **two levels**:

- *Abraham Lincoln* is a **Noun (N)** acting as the Subject;
- *won* is an **Action Verb (AV)** acting as the verb;
- *election* is a **noun (n)** acting as the **verb complement** (or **object**) — **vc/o**.

Note that at this point, all word **ID**entities are lower case except for those acting as the Subject (**S**) and the Action Verb (**AV**).

* Do not confuse the **OS^E** arrow (➔), meaning *leads to*, with the transformational symbols (→), which is supposed to indicate *consists of*; or with (⇒), which is supposed to indicate a “transformation.”

2.2 Building Strong Sentences: 4 Dominant Patterns

I once heard an automotive engineer say, “The best way to learn how an engine works is to take all the parts, put them on the floor, and build the engine from the ground up.” That’s what we’re going to do with the English language for the next 62 pages.

2.2. 1 Moving the Message: Action Verbs

“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.” – *William Shakespeare*

A Action Verbs

Although Shakespeare was offering his advice about *action* to actors, it applies to writers as well. The difference is that in writing, the most **important word** *is* the action — or to put it another way, the word that **expresses action**. As we have seen, the subject-action verb relationship generally leads to information that completes the action of the verb.

Botanists study plants.

1st SENTENCE PATTERN

A word that completes the action of a verb is a **complement** (or **object** of the verb). Here, the noun *plants* is the complement of the verb *study*. The noun *plants* completes the action of the verb and answers the question **what**. *Botanists study what?* — *plants*.

Botanists study ➔ plants.

The OS^E blueprint enables us to see the dual role of each word in the sentence:

- *Botanists* is a **NOUN** (speech part — **ID**) acting as the SUBJECT (sentence part — **Role**);
- *study* is an **ACTION VERB** (speech part — **ID**) acting as the VERB (sentence part — **Role**);
- *plants* is a **NOUN** (speech part — **ID**) acting as the COMPLEMENT (sentence part — **Role**) of the action verb *study* (**vc/o**) and answering the question **what**.

N AV n
 Botanists study plants.
 _____ _____ - - - -vc/o

C Pronouns in the Subject-Verb-Complement Relationship

A subject or complement may be a **pronoun**.* For our purposes, we may think of a pronoun (**pn**) as a word that **assumes the role** or **takes the place** of a **noun**. For example:

Personal Pronouns

I (me) you he (him) she (her) it we (us) they (them)

Indefinite Pronouns

all many one much either nobody anybody somebody everybody
 none few both more neither no one anyone someone everyone
 any some each most other nothing anything something everything

Demonstrative Pronouns

this that these those

Relative Pronouns

who whom whose which that

Interrogative Pronouns

what when why how which who

A pronoun will often refer to a noun called an **antecedent**, a word derived from Latin meaning *goes before*. A pronoun, like a noun, may function as a subject or complement.

Doris saved the day. She found the key.

The personal pronoun *she* takes the place of the antecedent *Doris*.

N AV n
 Doris found the key.

PN AV n
 She found the key.

pr
 Doris found it.

PN pn
 She found it.

The personal pronoun *she* refers to the antecedent *Doris*; the personal pronoun *it* refers to the *key*.

* Several of these pronouns — when used as adjectives — are referred to by some linguists as **determiners**.

The form of a noun acting as a subject is the same as the form of a noun acting as a complement (i.e., object), but the form (or **case**) of the personal pronoun (except *you* and *it*) changes.

John loves Mary.

He loves her.

Mary loves John.

She loves him.

The form of a **personal pronoun** depends on the pronoun's function (i.e., role).

he, she = subject*

him, her = object

D

Connectives

Connectives are words that tie together words, phrases, or clauses. The most common connective is the **coordinating conjunction (cc)** *and*. (We'll take a closer look at these conjunctions on page 72.)

N cc N AV n
Dell and Apple make computers.

Orson Welles produced and directed movies.

Complements may take the form of a list of three or more items.

The Ford Motor Company manufactures cars, trucks, and spare parts.

• Speech Part •

(ID)

Action Verb

Noun

Pronoun

Conjunction

• Sentence Part •

(Role)

Verb

Subject

Complement

Connective

Nouns and pronouns can act as subjects or complements.

* May also include **subject complements**. For details about the case of pronouns, see pages 173-181.

E

 Auxiliary Verbs

In the examples we have considered so far, the verb is a single action verb. But sometimes, the verb may be a **combination** of an **action verb** plus one or more **auxiliary** verbs (i.e., “helping” verbs*).

She is editing the report.

In this example, the **verb combination** *is editing* leads to the complement *report*. Here are the common auxiliaries:

am	have	will	would
are	has	shall	should
is	had	can	could
was			
were	do	may	might
be	done	must	
being	did		
been			

An auxiliary verb (**aux**) may combine with an action verb (**AV**) to express a variety of meanings.

PN	aux	AV	n	aux	AV	aux	aux	AV				
<u>She</u>	<u>is</u>	<u>editing</u>	<u>the report.</u>	<u>She</u>	<u>has</u>	<u>edited</u>	<u>the report</u>	<u>She</u>	<u>should</u>	<u>have</u>	<u>edited</u>	<u>the report.</u>

The auxiliary verb is used in many sentences that ask questions. (Note that the word order may change in some **interrogative sentences**; see page 52.)

aux	PN	AV	n	aux	AV			
<u>Did</u>	<u>she</u>	<u>edit</u>	<u>the report?</u>	<u>Which</u>	<u>report</u>	<u>did</u>	<u>she</u>	<u>edit?</u>

* If you learned the term “helping” verb in elementary school, join the club. But over the centuries, the term preferred by linguists has been **auxiliary** verb or simply auxiliary — meaning something **extra** that **may be** called upon to lend support. The problem with the term “helping” verbs is that they don’t always help; sometimes, they can get in the way — as we will see on pages 48-51.

F

Inflection of Regular Verbs

In English, the most basic form of the verb is the **infinitive**. The infinitive may be expressed as *to* plus the verb (*to climb*); or without the *to* (*climb*) — referred to as the **plain** (or **bare**) **form**.

Infinitive (with *to*): I told Louise **to lock** the door.

Infinitive (*to* understood): I saw Louise **lock** the door.

Remember Harry (page 5)? Harry heard something **creak** outside.

We create tenses and other verb forms from the verb's four **principal parts**.

- **present**
- **past**
- **present participle**
- **past participle**

The present tense of a regular verb is taken from the plain form of the infinitive — the infinitive without the *to*. Regular verbs form the present participle by adding *-ing* to the plain form; the past and past participle, by adding *d*, *-ed*, or *-ied*.

Inflection of *to climb*

Present	Past	Present Participle	Past Participle
climb(s)	climbed	climbing	climbed

These changes in the form of a verb are called the verb's **inflection** (from the Latin *inflectere*, meaning *bend* or *alter*). The present and past verb forms need no auxiliary.

Present: Cats **climb** trees.

Past: The cat **climbed** a tree.

When acting as the main verb in a clause, however, the present participle and past participle **combine** with an auxiliary.

N aux AV n

Present Participle: A cat was climbing the tree. **Past Participle:** A cat has climbed the tree.

The **past** and the **past participle** forms of a regular verb are always the **same**; they end in ***-ed***.

G

 Inflection of Regular Verbs

Infinitive	Present	Past	Present Participle	Past Participle (have, has, had)
(to) help	help(s)	helped	helping	helped
(to) fix	fix (es)	fixed	fixing	fixed
(to) use	use(s)	used	using	used
(to) study	stud(ies)	studied	studying	studied

Present: He fixes computers.

Past: He fixed the computer.

Present

Participle: He is fixing the computer.

Past

Participle: He has fixed the computer.

Irregular verbs do **not** follow the predictable *-ed* ending for the past and the past participle.

H

 Inflection of Irregular Verbs

Infinitive	Present	Past	Present Participle	Past Participle (have, has, had)
(to) give	give(s)	gave	giving	given
(to) go	go(es)	went	going	gone
(to) eat	eat (s)	ate	eating	eaten
(to) run	run(s)	ran	running	run
(to) see	see(s)	saw	seeing	seen
(to) write	write(s)	wrote	writing	written
(to) read	read(s)	read	reading	read
(to) hit	hit(s)	hit	hitting	hit

Present: Bears eat honey.

Past: A bear ate the honey.

Present

Participle: A bear is eating the honey.

Past

Participle: Bears have eaten the honey.

“Learning an Appropriate Name”

In his book *How We Think*, educator John Dewey stressed the relationship between “learning an **appropriate name**” for something and **understanding what it means**. “Some meaning... refuses to condense into a definite form; the **attaching of a word ... puts limits around the meaning** . . . makes it **stand out** as an entity on its own account.” Most of the terms we use to describe the English language are borrowed from Latin: *sentence, noun, verb, antecedent, inflection, infinitive, participle*, etc. Becoming familiar with these terms will help you understand the fundamental operations of English.

• Speech Part •**(ID)**

Action Verb Auxiliary Verb

Noun
Pronoun
Conjunction

• Sentence Part •**(Role)**

Verb

Subject
Complement (Object)
Connective

Note: **We will** treat the auxiliary verb as a **separate** element.

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Enter Username (**play**) and Password (**gametoday**).

I Adjectives in the Subject-Verb-Complement Pattern

Words that describe or define are **modifiers**. A word that describes or defines a noun (that is, **adds meaning** to a noun) is an adjective (from the Latin *adiectus* meaning *add to*). An adjective indicates a characteristic — color, kind, size, composition, age, texture, quality, etc. — of the noun it describes. Think of adjectives as words that change (or modify) the reader’s perception of something or somebody.

I bought a clock.

This sentence is grammatically correct, but it reveals nothing about the characteristics of the clock.

I bought an alarm clock.

The adjective *alarm* tells us something about the noun, identifying it as a particular kind of *clock*.

PN AV adj n
I bought an alarm clock.

I bought a digital clock.

I bought an antique clock.

I bought a cuckoo clock.

Like the articles (*a*, *an*, *the*), adjectives normally work with nouns to form **noun combinations**. The **adj** above the word indicates the speech part (IDentity); the arrow under the adjective, pointing to the noun described, indicates the sentence part (Role) — how the adjective acts in the sentence.

He completed the assignment.

He completed the wrong assignment.

The governor proposed changes.

The new governor proposed few changes.

adj N AV adj n
The new governor proposed few changes.

• Participles as Adjectives •

When an auxiliary combines with the participle, we have a verb combination. But when it stands alone, the participle acts as an **adjective (adj)**.

Present Participle	Past Participle
using	used
frightening	frightened
driving	driven
writing	written

Participle as verb: The suspect was driving an SUV.

Participle as adjective: A ^{adj}driving rain ruined the picnic.

Participle as verb: Sharon Aker has written several computer manuals.

Participle as adjective: The judge required a written explanation.

Participle as verb: A loud noise frightened the children.

Participle as adjective: The frightened children locked the door.

A participle operating as an adjective is called a **verbal** — the **participle** is **part** verb and **part** adjective. Most good writers look for opportunities to **use verbals to keep the message moving**.*

The report described a lost puppy.

Growing children need nourishing food.

* **NOTE:** Understanding the role of the participle is critical to developing a fluid writing style. For centuries, the **participle** was treated as a **separate part of speech**. For example, the text that Abraham Lincoln studied, *Kirkham's English Grammar*, devoted an entire chapter — Chapter V — to the uses and abuses of the participle. <http://www.archive.org/stream/englishgrammarin00inkirk#page/58/mode/2up/search/of+participles>

J Adverbs in the Subject-Verb-Complement Pattern

An **adverb (adv)** usually describes or modifies (that is, adds meaning to) a **verb**.

She ^{adv} almost spilled the milk.

_____ ^

Many adverbs **end** in *-ly*.

The plumber quickly repaired the leak.

_____ ^

An adverb modifying a verb is part of the verb combination. Adverbs answer the questions **how? how often? when? where? to what degree? in what order?**

How: Warren Buffet ^{adv} invested wisely.

_____ ^

How often: Reporters **often** criticize the administration.

_____ ^

When: **Soon**, the company will increase production.

_____ ^

Where: I will wait **here**.

Degree: Mismanagement **nearly** ruined the business.

Order: **First**, we must develop goals.

The word *not* often acts as an adverb in a verb combination that express the **negative** of a verb.

adv AV
 I do not like sweets.
 L ^

The **contraction** *n't* in a verb combination also acts as an adverb, even though it is attached to the auxiliary.

adv
 I don't like sweets.
 L ^

An adverb **sometimes follows** an action verb.

He talks foolishly.

The team played well.

Although adverbs usually modify verbs, they may also modify **adjectives** or other **adverbs**.

N AV adv adj n
Adv-Adj: Agatha Christie devised a most unusual plot.
 L ^ L ^

Adv-Adj: Exceptionally talented children need encouragement.
 L ^

Adv-Adv: The team has played extremely well.
 L ^

Adv-Adv: Dr. Stampa removed the cast very carefully.
 L ^

• Nouns as Adverbs •

Certain **nouns** that tell **when** or **where** may function as adverbs (**n/adv**).

^{n/adv}
When: Yesterday, the governor proposed a tax increase.

^{n/adv}
Where: I am going home.

A **noun combination** may function as an adverb.

^{adj n/adv}
Last year, Lois visited Paris.

We will finish the job next week.

K Distinguishing between Adjectives and Adverbs

Although the *-ly* ending usually indicates an adverb, a few adjectives also end in *-ly*.

For example:

likely
holy
early
friendly

timely
goodly
kindly
daily

lovely
manly
womanly
sickly

lively
homely
elderly

The early bird gets the worm.

The department store has a friendly staff.

Certain words that are normally **adverbs** occasionally act as **adjectives**.

not
never
very

also
almost
only

too
especially
simply

^{adv}
Adverb: He almost dropped the ball.

^{adj}
Adjective: Almost anyone can make pancakes.

You have now **completed Step 1** of the Write Smart 12-Step Program. Becoming familiar with the subject-action verb-complement pattern — and the elements (i.e., speech parts and sentence parts) that generally accompany that pattern — is the first step in understanding the **architecture** (or **GrammaTecture**) of the English language.

• **Speech Part** •

(**ID**)

Action Verb
Auxiliary Verb

Noun
Pronoun
Adjective
Adverb
Conjunction

• **Sentence Part** •

(**Role**)

Verb

Subject
Complement
Modifier

Connective

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2.2. 2 Linking Verb ➔ Complement

“Research **is** formalized curiosity. It **is** poking and prying with a purpose.”

– Zora Neale Hurston

We have seen that certain verbs may act as auxiliaries.

ax AV
I **am editing** the report.

As an auxiliary, *am* supports and influences the meaning of the action verb, *editing*. But *am* and other forms of the verb *to be* may also act as the **main verb** of a sentence.

am	was	be
are	were	being
is		been

2nd SENTENCE PATTERN

When a form of the verb *to be* is the main verb, it acts as a **linking verb (LV)**.

I **am** ➔ an editor.

Edna Miller **is** ➔ the director.

One of the forms of *to be* (*am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been*) may link the subject to a complement. Instead of expressing action, a linking verb (or **copula**, from the Latin *copulare* meaning *to join together*) simply states a relationship.

When the verb of a sentence is an action verb — *I edited the report* — the subject (*I*) and the complement (*report*) are **separate** entities. The complement **receives** the action of the verb, so we refer to it as a **verb complement** — or **object (vc/o)**. But a noun that acts as a complement after a **linking verb** is an **extension** of the **subject**, so we refer to it as a **subject complement (sc)**.*

PN LV n
I **am** an editor. **sc**

Edna Miller **is** the director. **sc**

Research **is** formalized curiosity. **sc**

* Traditional grammar books have generally called these nouns **predicate nouns** or **predicate nominatives**. If these terms work for you, use them.

A Linking Verbs Expressing a Physical Condition

Certain verbs expressing the **physical senses** sometimes act as linking verbs.

become sound taste appear stay remain
 feel smell look seem grow

The soup ^{LV}
was good.

The soup ^{LV}
tasted good.

The music **is** lively.

The music **sounds** lively.

Nathaniel **is** tired.

Nathaniel **feels** tired.

Nathaniel **looks** tired.

Nathaniel **seems** tired.

Some linking verbs express a **change** in condition; others indicate **continuation**.

Rockefeller **became** governor.

Rockefeller **remained** governor.

• **Speech Part** •

(**ID**)

Action Verb
 Linking Verb
 Auxiliary Verb

Noun
 Pronoun
 Adjective
 Adverb
 Conjunction

• **Sentence Part** •

(**Role**)

Verb

Subject
 Complement
 Modifier
 Connective

Note: We will treat the linking verb as a separate element.

The new governor is articulate and resourceful.

adj N LV adj cc adj

The new governor is articulate and resourceful.

└───┘ └───┘ └───┘ └───┘ └───┘

The recently elected governor has submitted her revised budget proposal.

adv adj N aux AV adj adj adj n

The recently elected governor has submitted her revised budget proposal.

└───┘ └───┘ └───┘ └───┘ └───┘ └───┘ └───┘ └───┘

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2.2. 3 Action or Linking Verb ➔ Phrase

“A vast silence reigned **over the land.**” – Jack London

The most common **connectives** in English are the **prepositions**.^{*} For example:

to in of for at from over under through

One of the roles that the preposition (**pp**) can play is to connect a subject-verb relationship to yet another kind of complement—the **complement** of a **preposition** or **object** of a **preposition (opp)**. In other words, a **prepositional phrase** can **complete** an action verb or linking verb.^{*}

He ran ➔ (to the bus stop.)

The preposition *to* connects the verb *ran* with the object *bus stop*. Subject-verb-complement relationships of this type (often referred to ambiguously as “intransitive”) can answer a variety of questions, such as **where, when, how long** or to **what extent**.

Last summer, I traveled ➔ (through southern France.)
PR AV pp n
opp

Your umbrella is ➔ (in the closet.)
N LV pp
opp

The court adjourned ➔ (at 4:30 p.m.)

I slept ➔ (for eight hours.)

3rd SENTENCE PATTERN

Some prepositions are simply extensions of the verb.

Several budget analysts **reviewed** the latest financial data.

Several budget analysts **looked at** the latest financial data.

^{*}Some languages get along fine without prepositions. In Chinese, for example, the sentence *On Saturday, I am going to the mall* could be expressed with perfect clarity in four words: *Saturday I go mall*. To find out more about how prepositional phrases act as adverbs and adjectives, see pages 54-56.

• **Prepositional Phrases and “Indirect” Objects** •

Sometimes, a prepositional phrase may extend the subject-verb-complement relationship.

The university offered a full scholarship to Andrea Litton.

Oliver bought a birthday present for his wife.

In each of these sentences, the prepositional phrase relates to the verb.

offered . . . to Andrea Litton

bought . . . for his wife

By transposing the object of the preposition, we can express the idea **without** the preposition.

The university offered Andrea Litton a full scholarship. vc/o

Oliver bought his wife a birthday present. vc/o

In most traditional texts, *Andrea Litton* and *wife* would be referred to as **indirect objects** — defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (one of the better dictionaries) as words “indirectly affected” by a verb — although there appears to be nothing remotely “indirect” about the function of these words in either sentence. As you can see, *Andrea Litton* and *wife* are actually **prepositional objects**, with the prepositions *to* and *for* **understood**. If anything, the transposed sentences are **more direct** than the original. This is another example of how a “rule” that is not a rule can interfere with our ability to understand fundamental language relationships.

The bully gave Billy a bloody nose.

According to the illogic of the accepted definition, we would have to regard *Billy* as only “indirectly affected” by the verb. Do you think Billy would agree? Remember — in English, word order rules. Because these elements invariably come **between** the verb and the verb complement (or object), think of these elements as **intermediate complements** or, for the sake of convenience, **intermediate objects (io)**. Note that in each of the examples above, the action involves a **transfer**, and the intermediate object **receives** the action of the verb.

The bully gave Billy a bloody nose. -io vc/o

A reporter asked the senator a question. -io vc/o

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2.3 Making Connections: 4 Phrases

“The moss was like velvet, and as I ran under the arches of yellow and red leaves,
I sang for joy...” – *Louisa May Alcott*

Underlying the sentences written by most professional writers and editors is a fundamental pattern: the subject-verb relationship. Another pattern that we need to consider is the **pattern of the phrase**. On page 18, I suggested — figuratively speaking — that we think of the four dominant sentence patterns as the addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of writing. In a similar sense, the four phrases are akin to **fractions**, converting **fractions to decimals**, converting **decimals to percents**, and converting **fractions to percents** (e.g., $3/4 = 75\%$).

We have seen that certain words called prepositions can introduce phrases, and that these phrases can complete a subject-verb relationship.

to in of for at from over under through

He ran ➔ (to the bus stop.)

Last summer, I traveled ➔ (through southern France.)

Your umbrella is ➔ (in the closet.)

The court adjourned ➔ (at 4:30 p.m.)

The prepositional phrase is the most common phrase in the English language. In Louisa May Alcott’s sentence at the top of the page, there are four of them.

The moss was **like** velvet, and as I ran **under** the arches **of** yellow and red leaves,
I sang **for** joy....

like velvet

under the arches

of yellow and red leaves

for joy

2.3. 1 Words You Can't End A Sentence With?

“**In** the morning, a knock **on** the door woke me **up**.” – Terry McMillan

On page 45, we saw that a phrase may complete the subject-verb relationship. A key word — the preposition (**pp**) — **connects** the subject-verb relationship to a different kind of **complement**, commonly referred to as the **object** of the preposition (**opp**).

The governor responded ^{pp} (to the crisis.)
_{opp}

Your umbrella is ^{pp} (in the closet.)
_{opp}

Prepositions are the most frequently used connectives in the English language.

about	between	near	through
abroad	beyond	notwithstanding	throughout
across	but (“except”)	of	till (’til)
after	by	off	to
against	concerning	on	toward
along	considering	onto	under
amid	despite	out	underneath
among	down	outside	until
amongst	during	over	unto
around	except	past	up
at	for	pending	upon
before	from	per	via
behind	in	regarding	with
below	inside	respecting	within
beneath	into	round	without
beside	like	save	as*
besides	midst	since	than*

The preposition may be a combination of words.

according to	due to	in consideration of
ahead of	in back of	on account of
apart from	in front of	owing to
as far as	in place of	with reference to
as near as	in regard to	with regard to
because of	in spite of	with respect to
by means of	in respect to	contrary to

* Some prepositions play multiple roles. For example, *but* can act as a preposition meaning *except*: *All of the committee members **but one** voted in favor of the proposal.* Like *before*, *after*, *since*, and *until*, the **subordinate conjunctions** *as* and *than* (see page 75) have come to act as **prepositions**. For example: *She finished the race **before I did**.* – OR – *She finished the race **before me**.* *He is smarter **than I am**.* – OR – *He is smarter **than me**.*

2.3. 2 Verb Forms That Describe Nouns

“The traffic on U.S. 80 had gone to I-20, and the two-lane carried only farm trucks and tractors **pulling** big cannisters of liquid fertility.” — William Least Heat Moon

Good writers look for opportunities to use strong verbs that keep things moving. On page 34, we encountered a **verbal** form that can act as an adjective: the participle. Participles (taken from the Latin *particeps*, meaning one who *partakes* or *shares*) literally share the characteristics of a verb and an adjective. So you might find it easier to think of **participles** as **part** adjective and **part** verb.

Present Participle: A ^{pt}**driving** rain ruined the picnic.

Past Participle: The ^{pt}**frightened** children locked the door.

The report described a ^{pt}**lost** puppy.

Growing children need ^{pt}**nourishing** food.

Each of the above sentences contains an example of the participle **before** the noun. The participle often comes **after** the noun or pronoun.

Several of the skiers **competing** in the cross-country race were Canadians.

The committee rejected the amendment **proposed** by Senator Gaddisen

The participle may come at the beginning of a sentence.

^{pt}**Irritated**, I responded with a few angry words.

Undaunted, Churchill mapped a new strategy.

* Present participles end in *-ing*; regular past participles end in *-ed*. For a list of the most common **irregular** past participles, see pages 187-90.

A prepositional phrase may follow the participle.

^{pt}**Irritated** (^{pp}by the remark,) I responded with a few angry words.

_____ ^ _____ ^

Undaunted by defeat, Churchill mapped a new strategy.

Like the preposition, the participle can introduce its own phrase, complete with object and modifiers.

Prepositional Phrase: This morning, I saw my neighbor (^{pp}with his dog.)

_____ ^ _____ opp

Prepositional Phrase = Preposition + Object

The participial phrase follows the pattern established by the prepositional phrase: introductory word + object.

Participial Phrase = Participle + Object

Participial Phrase: This morning, I saw my neighbor (^{pt}walking his dog.)

_____ ^ _____ opt

The participial phrase follows the introductory word + object pattern. Here, *walking* refers to the noun *neighbor* and takes the object *dog* (**opt**) — the object of the participle.

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2.4 Making Connections: 4 Clauses

A Sentences and Clauses

To understand the role of the clause — and how a clause differs from a sentence — we need to take another quick look at the history of the English language. Although Latin and English are structurally different in most respects, certain Latin concepts and have had, and continue to have, a profound influence on America’s adopted language. As in other technical and scientific disciplines, many of the terms traditionally used to describe the components of the English system are borrowed from Latin.

Sentence is derived from the Latin *sentire*, which means *to go mentally*; *sentire* is also the root of the word *sense*. **Making sense** is just as important as developing a strong subject-verb relationship — no sense, no sentence. For example:

Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
– Lewis Carroll

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
– Noam Chomsky

A **clause** — from the Latin *clausa*, meaning *close* — is generally defined as “a group of words containing a **subject** and a **finite verb**” (*Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, www.yourdictionary.com). A clause doesn’t have to make sense. For example, I could write:

that she would oppose higher taxes

or

The governor said

We are looking at two subject-verb relationships, neither of which makes sense. When we put them together, though, we have a sentence:

The governor said that she would oppose higher taxes.

* The definition of a clause includes the term “finite verb” to distinguish the verb in a clause (or a sentence) from the “infinitive,” the complex verbal form we looked at on pages 64-67. Within the structure of Latin, some sentences use the infinitive form (a single word in that language, not two words as is commonly the case in English) in a way that can be interpreted as acting like the verb in a clause. But as Professor William Harris pointed out in *The Intelligent Person’s Guide to Latin*, an infinitive is “a very poor excuse for a verb!” To keep things as consistent and simple as possible, we will treat infinitives — *to be*, *to think*, *to write*, *to run*, etc. — as elements associated with phrases, not clauses.

B What Is the Difference between Independent and Dependent Clauses?

Many linguists have defined the sentence in many different ways. Here, we will look at the sentence as a subject-verb relationship that expresses a complete thought — or, as an alternative, a subject-verb relationship that makes sense.

A clause also has a subject-verb relationship. But unlike a sentence, a clause **doesn't** have to express a complete thought.

after he moved to California

whose dog barks constantly

dark clouds covered the sky

As you can see, each example has a subject and a verb, but the first two clauses require additional information to express complete thoughts. They are **fragments**, not sentences.

[After he moved to California,] my brother started his own business.

I have a neighbor [whose dog barks constantly.]

The third example expresses a complete thought.

dark clouds covered the sky

This is an **independent clause** because it makes complete **sense** and can **stand alone**. If you add a capital at the beginning and a period at the end, you have a sentence.

Dark clouds covered the sky.

In English, we have **four clauses**: one that can stand alone — the **independent** clause (sometimes called the **main** clause) — and three **dependent** clauses, which convey meaning through their association with another clause. Understanding the four clauses is no more complicated than understanding how to **multiply with decimals**, find the **area of a square**, find the **area of a rectangle**, or deal with **basic algebra** (e.g., $2x = 12$; $x = 6$).

Most of the sentences you see in a book, a magazine article, or other professionally edited publications are combinations of two or more clauses. You probably learned at a relatively early age that you can often create a smoother sentence by using *and* to **connect** two independent clauses (referred to in some textbooks as “sentence combining”).

Choppy: Dark clouds covered the sky. A fierce wind swept across the plains.

Connected: Dark clouds covered the sky, and a fierce wind swept across the plains.

Here’s the lead sentence from an Associated Press article that appeared on the Internet in 2003.

Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout after union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general strike over rising fuel prices.

Do you see that one clause is independent — that it could stand alone as a separate sentence?

Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout.

But the other clause in the sentence cannot stand alone.

... **after** union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general strike over rising fuel prices.

The meaning of the second clause **depends** on its association with the independent clause. Logic dictates that the independent clause (or main clause) is a subject-verb relationship that **drives** the other elements in the sentence, while the dependent clause provides **supporting** information.

Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout after union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general strike over rising fuel prices.

2.4. 1 Clauses That Can Stand Alone

“No human being can really understand another, **and** no one can arrange another’s happiness.”

– Graham Green

A Coordinating Conjunctions

As we have seen, the independent clause can express a complete thought. Independent clauses can stand alone as separate sentences.

Separate Sentences: Dark clouds covered the sky. A fierce wind swept across the plains.

In English, we rely on certain **key words** to connect clauses and tie ideas together. The word most commonly used to connect independent clauses is the coordinating conjunction *and*.

cc

Connected Clauses: Dark clouds covered the sky, and a fierce wind swept across the plains.

The coordinating conjunction (**cc**) connects the two clauses and coordinates the flow of information from one subject-verb relationship to the next: *clouds covered . . . and . . . wind swept*. Making this kind of connection creates a sentence that is more interesting and easier to follow.

Coordinating conjunctions are the **key words** most commonly used to connect independent clauses.

and but for or nor yet so

The conjunction *and* acts as a connective that coordinates the flow of information from one clause to the next. Observe that *and* coordinates two clauses, i.e., two subject–verb relationships: *clouds covered . . . wind swept*.

Separate Sentences: We arrived at the airport early. Violent thunderstorms caused a two-hour delay.

cc

Connected Clauses: We arrived at the airport early, but violent thunderstorms caused a two-hour delay.

Separate Sentences: You must submit your application immediately. The bank will reject your loan.

cc

Connected Clauses: You must submit your application immediately, or the bank will reject your loan.

2.4. 3 Clauses That Are Like Your Cousin

“America was discovered by a great seaman **who** was looking for something else . . .”

– Samuel Eliot Morrison

A Relative Pronouns

Another type of dependent clause is introduced by one of the five main **relative pronouns**.

who whom whose which that

A relative pronoun (**rpn**) is a connecting word that **relates to** a noun or pronoun in **another clause**.

^N Inspectors ^{AV} condemned ⁿ all the buildings [^{RPN} that ^{AV} violated ⁿ the municipal fire laws.]

The relative pronoun *that* relates to the noun *buildings* and acts as the subject of its own clause — a **relative clause**. The relative clause acts as an adjective.* Here, *that violated the municipal fire laws* describes (or modifies) the noun *buildings*.

^N William Shakespeare, [^{RPN} who ^{AV} lived (from 1564 to 1616),] ^{LV} is the world’s most famous playwright.

The relative pronoun always plays a specific role within its own clause. In the above example, the relative pronoun *who* acts as a subject: *who lived from 1564 to 1616*. Usually, the relative pronoun will act as subject, complement, or object of a phrase.

Subject: Everyone [who completes the training program] will receive a certificate.

Complement: An author [whom you would like] is Chinua Achebe.

The word a relative pronoun refers to (**Everyone** who . . . **author** whom) is called an **antecedent**, a term derived from Latin meaning *word that comes before* (see page 26).

* Many traditional grammar books refer to the **relative clause** as an **adjective clause**. Use the term that works for you.

The relative pronouns *which* and *that* may function as subjects or complements.

The Grand Canyon, [which attracts millions of tourists,] is in Arizona.

The Grand Canyon, [which we visited last month,] is in Arizona.

The judge's decision included several points [that confused me.]

The judge's decision included several points [that I did not understand.]

In some cases, the relative pronoun may be **understood**.

Relative Pronoun: She lives in a house [that her grandfather built more than 100 years ago.]

No Relative Pronoun: She lives in a house [her grandfather built more than 100 years ago.]

B Multiple Roles

All the words that act as relative pronouns may play other roles as well (see pages 26 and 82). A word acts as a relative pronoun only when it relates specifically to an antecedent.

Relative pronoun: Captain Brown, [who can handle a sailboat in rough weather,] has been exploring the waters of Georgian Bay for more than 40 years.

Who can also act as the subject of an independent clause (interrogative pronoun — no antecedent) when introducing a direct question (see page 26).

Interrogative Pronoun: Who can handle a sailboat in rough weather?

Like conditional clauses (adverb clauses), relative clauses (adjective clauses) may sometimes refer to the sentence as a whole.

Six inches of snow fell overnight, which caused several traffic accidents during rush hour.

C Other Words That May Act as Relative Pronouns

The **possessive** form of *who* — that is, *whose* — will relate to both an **antecedent** and to a **noun** in the relative clause.

Possessive: I have a neighbor ⁿ [^{rpn} **whose** ⁿ dog barks constantly.]

Three other words occasionally act as relative pronouns.

when where as

For the most part, *when* and *where* will refer to verbs act as subordinating conjunctions.

^{sc} [**When** Napoleon and his army marched into Moscow,] they **found** a deserted city.

But *when* and *where* sometimes refer to **nouns** that indicate **time** or **place**.

The 1960s was a time ⁿ [^{rpn} **when** great changes occurred throughout the world.]

Waikiki Beach is a place ⁿ [^{rpn} **where** the sun shines almost every day.]

The use of *as* meaning *that* or *who* — common in centuries past — is now rare.

“I want the particulars . . . and such other information **as** will give me a correct understanding of affairs.” — Abraham Lincoln

• The Architecture of English •

The Write Smart 12-Step System

Becoming familiar with how these 12 fundamental language patterns work together — the architecture (or GrammarTecture) of English — is the key to understanding how the language operates as a unique communication system.

4 Sentence Patterns

Action Verb ➔ Complement
 Linking Verb ➔ Complement
 Action or Linking Verb ➔ Phrase
 ← Passive Verb

4 Phrases

Prepositional
 Participial
 Gerund
 Infinitive

4 Clauses

Independent
 Conditional (Adverb)
 Relative (Adjective)
 Noun

3. Giving Clear Directions: Perfect Punctuation

In English, punctuation provides the signs that keep readers moving in the right direction. Using your understanding of the **Write Smart 12-Step System** will help you see how specific punctuation principles apply to the four clauses, four phrases, and related structural elements.

At the same time, we need to recognize that punctuation is not strictly bound by the rules that govern the architecture of the language. Although literate people will agree that “American blue the and is flag red white” violates fundamental rules of English syntax, they may disagree about whether it is better to write, “The American flag is red, white and blue” or “The American flag is red, white, and blue.”

As we move from **patterns** to **practices**, we will find ourselves dealing with a new level of complexity and playing a more challenging kind of game: **The Game of GrammaText**.

3.1 Punctuation: Guiding or Guessing?

Punctuation comes from the Latin *punctus*, meaning *points*. If you think of commas and periods as signs that **point** the way or **give directions** to help the reader **see** what you are trying to **say**, you will greatly improve your chances of being understood — and appreciated.

Fortunately, we have the structure of the language to help us decide which signs to use and where to put them. As David Crystal noted in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, the “primary purpose” of punctuation is to help readers understand “stretches of written language . . . by displaying their grammatical structure.” For the most part, virtually all of America’s publishing companies rely on the structure of the language to ensure consistent punctuation practices.

But over the last 40 years or so, the academic community — from grade school through graduate school — has largely abandoned the teaching of English as an organized language system. As a result, many publishers have had to institute remedial writing training for their young writers and aspiring editors. In the latest edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, regarded as one of the most respected style books in the American publishing industry since the early 1900s, the editors found it necessary to include 50 pages of basic grammar before introducing the chapter on punctuation. The implicit message? If you don’t have a solid grammatical foundation to build on, subjective decisions about punctuation (e.g., “put a comma where you hear a pause” . . . “if in doubt, leave it out” . . . “listen to your inner voice”) amount to little more than guesswork.

Although the word *punctuation* may have been derived from *punctus*, the influence of Latin on this aspect of English expression has been zero. That’s because the writers of classical Latin didn’t use any of the common marks of punctuation marks that we are familiar with today. They didn’t even put spaces between words or use lower case letters.

They didn’t need to. It may seem difficult for us to grasp now, but the complex system of inflections (that is, the word endings) — along with the use of certain key words that often indicated the beginning of a new sentence — were sufficient to convey meaning to readers during the centuries of Roman dominance. So to Roman eyes, “I came, I saw, I conquered” looked like this:

VENIVIDIVICI

Because the ancient manuscripts were generally read aloud, there were occasional indications above the words to signal vocal interpretation — louder, softer, pause, etc. — but nothing comparable to the punctuation marks that today are primarily intended as aids to silent reading.

3.1. 1 Punctuation Practices, Not Punctuation Rules

After the introduction of advanced printing methods in the 15th century, English punctuation practices, as opposed to linguistically prescribed punctuation “rules,” came under the control of the people responsible for producing the final product — originally printers, now more commonly referred to as publishers. Then as now, publishers knew that most readers didn’t want to buy books or periodicals that they couldn’t understand. So by the 18th century, publishers had adopted a relatively simple set of punctuation practices, which were designed to break up long sentences and make it easy for the reader to follow the writer’s ideas.

3.1. 2 Connections and Commas

Most of these punctuation practices, in one form or another, are still with us. Consider some typical sentences from *A History of Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding’s runaway bestseller published in London in the middle of the 18th century. (In 1963, a movie version of *Tom Jones* won the Academy Award for best picture.)

- Fielding and other writers used a comma before *and* (by far the most common connective in English) to indicate the beginning of a **new clause**.

A flood of tears now gushed from the eyes of Jones, **and** every faculty of speech and motion seemed to have deserted him.

- Until the 20th century, a clause was regarded as any construction bringing into play a **new verb** (though not necessarily a new subject).

He then snatched her hand, **and** eagerly kissed it . . .

- The sense of commas to indicate separate elements also applied when *and* separated words and phrases in a series.

Her eyebrows were full, even, and arched beyond the power of art to imitate.

- Commas to indicate separate elements, but no commas when joining like elements.

This was the case at present, and in less than a month the captain and his lady were man and wife.

Note the comma before *and* separating the two clauses, but not between *the captain and his lady* or *man and wife*. (For more about the comma — or no comma — before *and*, see pages 251-52.)

3.1. 3 Clarity and Variety

Of course, 18th century writers used commas to set off clauses introduced by words besides *and*.

He then snatched her hand, **and** eagerly kissed it, **which** was the first time his lips had ever touched her.

- But no comma to set off a clause that kept things moving in the **same direction**.

Her heart was irretrievably lost **before** she suspected it was in danger.

A **parenthetical expression** — extra information inserted in the midst of a sentence and set off with a comma **before** and a comma **after** — could be anything from a single word to a clause.

He feigned, therefore, some excuse of business for his departure . . .

It has been observed by wise men or women, I forget which, that all persons are doomed to be in love once in their lives.

In plain English, when you have made your fortune by the good offices of a friend, you are advised to discard him as soon as you can.

Longer sentences were rendered intelligible through the frequent use of semicolons.

When the Squire had finished his half-hour's nap, he summoned his daughter to her harpsichord; but she begged to be excused that evening, on account of a violent headache.

Most editors today would frown upon this punctuation as excessive, but few would deny that breaking up a sentence into manageable bundles of information eases the burden on the reader.

3.1. 4 Practices Then and Now

A century later — and an ocean apart — the printer's practices had hardly changed at all. Here is the first paragraph from Chapter 30 of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*:

When Stubb had departed, Ahab stood for a while leaning over the bulwarks; and then, as had been usual with him of late, calling a sailor to the watch, he sent him below for his ivory stool, and also his pipe. Lighting the pipe at the side of the deck, he sat and smoked.

3.1. 2 Conditions: when, where, because, if . . .

“**When** you can afford to pay an editor, **if** that time ever comes, you must get one.”

– George Eliot

We have seen that certain key connectives — called subordinating conjunctions — introduce clauses that state a condition.

if the drought continues for another week

This is an example of a dependent clause — a subject-verb relationship that depends on another clause (usually an independent clause) to make sense. Generally, this kind of clause states a **condition** under which the **verb of another clause** operates.

If the drought continues for another week, many cattle ranchers **will suffer** huge losses.

If — the subordinating conjunction that introduces the clause — indicates the **condition** under which the *cattle ranchers will suffer* We looked at the subordinating conjunctions on page 75. Do you remember them?

Time, Place, Extent

when	as	after
whenever	as long as	before
where	as soon as	since
wherever	as far as	until
while	so far as	till
	insofar as	(’til)

Cause or Reason

because	whereas
as	in that
since	inasmuch as

Purpose or Result

that so that in order that

Comparison, Contrast, Contingency

although	if
though	as
as though	as if
even though	even if
provided	while
provided that	unless
as . . . as	than
so . . . as	so . . . that

Conditional clauses (referred to as adverb clauses in many traditional grammar books) may be introductory or concluding elements.

Introductory: *If the drought continues for another week, many cattle ranchers will suffer huge losses.*

Concluding: *Many cattle ranchers will suffer huge losses if the drought continues for another week.*

A Position of the Conditional Clause (Adverb Clause)

The position of the conditional clause (or adverb clause) in a sentence generally determines the choice of punctuation. The standard professional practice is to set off an **introductory** clause with a comma. If the clause is a **concluding** element and part of the **flow** of the sentence, leave it alone. No comma.

Introductory: If the drought continues for another week, many cattle ranchers will suffer huge losses.

Concluding: Many cattle ranchers will suffer huge losses if the drought continues for another week.

Introductory: After the city council approved special tax incentives, several high-tech companies moved to Denver.

Concluding: Several high-tech companies moved to Denver after the city council approved special tax incentives.

Introductory: When he invaded Russia in 1812, Napoleon made a big mistake.

Concluding: Napoleon made a big mistake when he invaded Russia in 1812.

Even if the construction is short, you may confuse the reader by **carelessly leaving out the comma** after an introductory adverb clause.

Careless: When she leaves Sam will become the new manager.

Clear: When she leaves, Sam will become the new manager.

An adverb or noun/adverb (see page 37) may precede the introductory adverb clause.

n/adv sc

Several hours after the game ended, we were still arguing about the coach's decisions in the final minutes.

B Conditional Clause: Opposite Direction

Sometimes, the adverb clause at the end of a sentence will be parenthetical. Instead of being part of the flow, the conditional clause (adverb clause) may **check the flow** or move in the **opposite** direction. (These may be **contingency** clauses in legal or financial documents.) Set off clauses that move in the opposite direction, or include a contingency, with a comma.

The real estate company has not returned my deposit, **although** it has promised to do so several times.

You will receive compensation for your loss, **provided that** you have fulfilled all of the requirements.

You will receive compensation for your loss, **unless** you have failed to fulfill all of the requirements.

C Conditional Clause: Part of the Flow vs. Opposite Direction

Although subordinating conjunctions look simple, their role in tying ideas together is complex. Some subordinating conjunctions assume different meanings in different contexts. The conjunctions *while* and *because*, for example, may move the action in the same direction in one sentence, and in the opposite direction in another.

Same: Juanita read the *Sunday Times* **while** she waited at the airport for the next flight to Denver.

Opposite: Some insurance companies offer generous benefits, **while** others feature low-cost coverage.

Same: Edmund Hilary climbed Mt. Everest **because** it was there.

Opposite: Lee surrendered to Grant after the fall of Richmond, **because** to do otherwise would have subjected his starving and badly outnumbered troops to utter devastation.

BLANK

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3.4 Parenthetical Expressions

“Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas. . . . This rule is difficult to apply.”

– *Strunk and White*

3.4. 1 Parenthetical Clauses, Phrases, and Words

A Pivotal Parenthetical Expressions

Lately, even former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, **who once incited hero-worship among lawmakers**, has been heaped with blame. – *Los Angeles Times*

A technique that professional writers and editors use frequently to tie ideas together is the **parenthetical expression**. A parenthetical expression **interrupts** the flow of a sentence, **reverses** the direction of thought, or provides **extra information**.

A common form of the parenthetical expression is the supplemental (nonrestrictive) relative clause in the midst of a sentence.

The price of crude oil, **which rose dramatically during the 1970s**, increased the cost of producing energy throughout the world.

William Shakespeare, **who lived from 1564 to 1616**, is the world's most famous playwright.

Think of this type of parenthetical expression as a **pivotal** clause. The sentence literally “revolves around” the parenthetical clause. Set off this type of supplemental clause with commas (comma **before** and comma **after**).

Another common type of pivotal parenthetical expression is the supplemental participial phrase. Set off this type of phrase with commas (comma **before** and comma **after**).

Many farmers in our area, **suffering through another season of drought**, have applied to the government for assistance.

3.4. **3** Appositives

“I have spent most of the day putting in a comma and the rest of the day taking it out.”

– Oscar Wilde

An appositive is a word (usually a noun) or group of words that **defines** or **restates someone** or **something**.

Serena Williams, the U.S. Open Champion in 1999, will face Martina Hingis in the finals.

The appositive generally comes right after the noun it refers to — the **antecedent**. In the above example, *U.S. Open Champion* is an appositive referring to *Serena Williams*. Set off an appositive that restates — i.e., one that provides **extra information** — with commas (comma before, comma after).

Serena Williams, the U.S. Open Champion in 1999, will face Martina Hingis in the finals.

Many appositives are abbreviated forms of supplemental adjective clauses.

Clause: Serena Williams, **who was** the U.S. Open Champion in 1999, will face Martina Hingis in the finals.

Appositive: Serena Williams, the U.S. Open Champion in 1999, will face Martina Hingis in the finals.

An appositive restates, or provides an expanded definition of, its antecedent. Because it is more **concise** than the adjective clause, professional writers and editors tend to use the appositive a lot.

Everyone was surprised when Marvin Foster, president of the company for 10 years, resigned suddenly without explanation.

A gerund or gerund phrase may be as an appositive.

His main concern, **saving enough money** for a new house, has become an obsession.

The punctuation pattern for an appositive at the end of a sentence is comma before and period after.

My neighbor bought an unusual secondhand car, a 1932 Cadillac.

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4. Delivering the Message: GrammarText Apps

Good writers understand how to use the architecture of the language — sentence patterns, clauses, and phrases — in ways that make life easy for the reader.

4.1 Making Every Word Count

The underlying theme of the **Write Smart System** is that making sense depends on putting the right words in the right place. Once you have grasped the principles of grammar and punctuation, you are in a position to **let the logic of the language do the work for you**.

Exactly how we form thoughts and translate them into writing remains a bit of a mystery. Theories on how the process works come and go, but we do know that most human beings have the ability to recognize patterns and that they can learn how to convert language patterns into visual (or tactile) symbols. In English, as we have seen, the fundamental pattern is the subject-verb-complement relationship. Although we generally need to add descriptive elements — words, phrases, clauses — to support the subject-verb-complement relationship, readers will have a hard time understanding our sentences if we get carried away and allow descriptive language to obscure that relationship.

4.1 1 Clarity vs. Clutter

“[O]ur musings pursue an erratic course, swerving continually into some new direction . . .”

— *William James*

Skilled professional writers and editors learn how to communicate clearly by eliminating clutter. The seasoned professional, either consciously or intuitively, will take pains to make sure that the subject-verb relationship drives the message, adding appropriate descriptive language to support and clarify that relationship. Consider the lead sentence from the Associated Press article that we looked at on pages 71 and 78.

Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout after union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general strike over rising fuel prices.

The unwary writer, intent upon impressing rather than expressing, may allow descriptive language to bury the subject-verb relationship.

There is evidence to suggest that considerable numbers of very frustrated and thoroughly demoralized workers in the petroleum industry in the West African country of Nigeria have arrived at what would appear to be a decision in favor of a suspension, at least for the time being of a previously announced walkout after definite indications on the part of union leaders of substantial progress in extensive negotiations with key government representatives.

Many otherwise reasonable and capable people make the mistake of confusing this kind of deeply piled verbiage with intelligent writing.

Many writers confuse quantity with quality.

Cluttered: The Human Resources Department is currently involved in the process of preparing a training manual for the purpose of showing computer programmers how to develop the ability to write instructions that are both clear and concise.

The problem is that the writer has turned what could have been a straightforward statement into a virtual landfill of verbiage.

Edited: The Human Resources Department is preparing a training manual that will show computer programmers how to write clear, concise instructions.

When preparing a first draft, most writers tend to include bits and pieces of extraneous information. Developing the editing skills to clear out the clutter and allow the strong core relationship to carry the message requires time and practice. As Lord Chesterfield once said in a now famous letter, “I am sorry to have written a five-page letter, but I did not have time to write a one-page letter.”

One of America’s most remarkable editors was a man named Gouverneur Morris (yes, Gouverneur was his first name), who in 1787 was chosen to revise the rough draft of the United States Constitution. He was dealing with a group of gifted and opinionated writers, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton among them, so he faced a formidable task. The original document began like this:

Cluttered: “We the People of the States of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, South-Carolina, and Georgia....”

Even the noblest idea will fizzle if it takes forever to get to the verb of the sentence. Morris’s revision resulted not only in a more concise sentence, but also in a new national identity.*

Edited: “We the People of the United States . . .”

Using too many words often takes the form of **redundancy**. Think of redundancy as **unnecessary** or **unconscious repetition**. Here’s a sentence composed by a young Capitol Hill intern:

Redundant: Although you and I may not agree on this issue, I respect your opinions and am glad that you decided to share them with me on this important issue.

The redundancy *on this important issue* weakens a clear, direct statement.

Edited: Although you and I may not agree on this issue, I respect your opinions and am glad that you decided to share them with me.

**Gentleman Revolutionary: Gouverneur Morris, the Rake Who Wrote the Constitution* by Richard Brookhiser

4.2 **4** From Clarity to Emphasis

We have seen that putting sentence elements in the right place will bring clarity and coherence to your sentences.

❌ Before carefully considering all the evidence presented, the judge instructed the jury not to return a verdict in the case.

➡ The judge instructed the jury not to return a verdict before carefully considering all the evidence presented in the case.

The next step is to apply your understanding of the structure of the language to achieving another critical objective of the skilled professional writer: emphasis.

In *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White advise, “Put the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.” This does not mean that you should wait until the end of the sentence to get to the point. But because many students of writing have misunderstood this concept, you may want to think of it in a slightly different way: “Build the sentence to a strong conclusion.”

A strong subject-verb relationship up front may get your sentence off to a good start, but you have to go somewhere with it. Avoid the tendency to bury emphatic words or important information.

❓ Prices on the New York Stock Exchange fell yesterday after news that the Federal Reserve plans to raise interest rates appeared in several reports.

➡ Prices on the New York Stock Exchange fell yesterday after reports that the Federal Reserve plans to raise interest rates.

❓ People who get regular exercise usually sleep better and live longer, regardless of whether they live in urban or rural environments.

➡ Regardless of whether they live in urban or rural environments, people who get regular exercise usually sleep better and live longer.

❓ In a letter to the president of the university, the head of the biology department announced his decision to resign last week.

➡ In a letter last week to the president of the university, the head of the biology department announced his decision to resign.

A Split Infinitives and Passives

For centuries, professional writers and editors have understood that, because the infinitive in English consists of two words (e.g., *to think*, *to write*, *to notify*, *to double*), you may **occasionally need** to use a modifier between the *to* and the stem of the verb. Old English, like other Germanic languages, did not permit splitting infinitives. And the Latin rule about not splitting the infinitive made sense because the **Latin infinitive is only one word** — so you **can't** split it.

Our concern here is 21st-century English, not classical Latin or 9th-century Anglo-Saxon. The important question about the split infinitive is not one of “correctness” — that was settled long ago, despite the continued sniping of obtuse elements within the language-police community — but one of coherence and emphasis. The **infinitive is a strong form**. In most cases, splitting the infinitive will **weaken** your sentence. But the stylebooks used by America's most respected publishers include examples of acceptable split infinitives similar to this:

➔ In 2001, the company was able **to** more than **double** its profit.

Readers would be put off by a sentence if the modifying combination (*more than*) were to come before or after the infinitive (*to double*).

⊘ In 2001, the company was able more than to double its profit.

⊘ In 2001, the company was able to double more than its profit.

But most split infinitives will weaken your sentence.

⊙ Under the terms of our agreement, you are required to immediately pay the outstanding balance.

➔ Under the terms of our agreement, you are required to pay the outstanding balance immediately.

Sometimes, the passive voice will result in a **stronger ending**. For example, the first sentence in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address ends with a relative clause in which the verb is **passive**. (See the footnote on page 9.)

➔ ... dedicated to the proposition that all men are created **equal**.

Lincoln — quoting from Jefferson's famous clause in the *Declaration of Independence* — clearly understood the principle of bringing the sentence to a strong conclusion by putting “the emphatic words...at the end.”

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Part II - The Right Word

5-10. GrammarTexting in Plain English: 21st Century Standard Usage

Because of general confusion in the English-speaking world about the distinction between **grammar** and **usage**, there is a tendency to use the term “grammatical errors” loosely to refer to aspects of English that have nothing to do with the fundamental **organizing patterns** of the language.

Those patterns, which constitute the **architecture** of the language, have endured for more than 400 years with remarkably few changes. But English **usage** — the accepted forms and meanings of words that fit into the structure — has changed dramatically.

For example, the English settlers who came over on the *Mayflower* in 1620 and established a community at Plymouth (which they called “Plimoth”) agreed to “frame shuch just & equall lawes...as shall be thought most meete & conuenient for y^e generall good of y^e colonie. . . .” You might wonder, “What’s with ‘most meete’ and ‘y^e colonie’?”

For many centuries, “meete” (or “meet”) as an adjective meant “fitting” or “appropriate.” And “y^e” was an abbreviation for the article “the.” The older English had a form that combined “th” (*þ*) with ^e (*þ^e* = the). But with the introduction of new printing methods, a standardized alphabet emerged that dispensed with many of the old forms, and “*þ^e*” became “y^e.” Over time, the popular usage has changed — writers eventually dropped “y^e” as a substitute for “the” — but the grammatical structure of the language has remained the same.

So in 21st century English, the sentence in question would go like this: to “frame just and equal laws . . . considered appropriate and convenient for the general good of the colony. . . .”

Standard professional usage refers to the accepted use of words in formal communications at a particular time and in a particular place, not to prescriptive grammatical “rules.” Because usage changes in ways that are often neither logical nor predictable, mastering the intricacies of standard English — the meaning, application, and spelling of a bewildering variety of words — can be challenging. We would say, “I walk to work in the morning; I **walked** to work yesterday; I have **walked** to work every day this month.” All we have to do is add *-ed*. But if we try to express the same information with the verb *go*, we would need to say, “I go to work in the morning; I **went** to work yesterday; I have **gone** to work every day this month.” Where’s the logic in that?

For the next 77 pages, we will work our way through the usages that are regarded as “correct” for our time, but that may not be in the years to come. Here are some examples of usages that were once considered “proper English,” but would be unacceptable in formal writing today.

And certainly there **be** not two more fortunate **properties**, **then** to have a **litle** of the **foole**, and not to much of the honest . . .” — *Sir Francis Bacon (1597)*

“But **tho’** I **confin’d** my **Family**, I could not prevail upon my **unsatisfy’d** Curiosity to stay **within entirely my self** . . .” — *Daniel Defoe (1722)*

“You, my dear Sophia, **was** always my **Superior in every thing** . . .” — *Henry Fielding (1749)*

“**Every body** likes to go **their** own way — to **chuse their** own time and manner of devotion.” — *Jane Austen (1813)*

“**Your’s**, very sincerely, . . .” — *Jane Austen (1813)*

“. . . to gossip with **mine** hostess . . .” — *Washington Irving (1829)*

“Beside the highway were fields of grain, **prest** to the ground with snow . . .” — *William Cullen Bryant (1850)*

“The Hutchinson Family, celebrated vocalists — fellow-passengers — came to my rude fore-castle deck, and **sung** their sweetest songs . . .” — *Frederick Douglass (1855)*

“A little before twelve, we took a cab, and went to the two Houses of Parliament — the most impressive buildings, **methinks**, that ever **was** built . . .” — *Nathaniel Hawthorne (1860)*

“She would not admit to herself that she was in love with him or that she wanted to marry him, yet she spent every minute when she was alone wondering what he thought of her, and in comparing what they had done **to-day** with what they had done the day before.” — *Virginia Woolf (1920)*

5. Nouns

As we saw on page 15, Latin nouns have multiple endings, depending on the intended meaning. But in English grammar, word endings are generally much simpler. Despite the vast differences between the two languages, the writers of English textbooks long ago adopted the Latin method of categorizing nouns in terms of 1) **number**, 2) **person**, 3) **gender**, 4) **case**.

5.1 The Number of a noun is either one (**singular**) or more than one (**plural**).

5.1.1 Plural Nouns: Add *s*

Form the plural of most nouns by adding *s*.

Singular

game
routine
brother
result

Plural

games
routines
brothers
results

Form the plural of a noun ending in *y* following a vowel (*-ey*, *-ay*, or *-oy* endings) by adding *s*.

Singular

key
valley
chimney
essay

Plural

keys
valleys
chimneys
essays

5.1.2 Plural Nouns: Add *-es*

Form the plural of singular nouns with *s*, *x*, *z*, *-ch*, *-sh* endings by adding *-es*.

Singular

boss
kiss
box
fox
quiz
lunch
blush

Plural

bosses
kisses
boxes
foxes
quizzes
lunches
blushes

5.1.3 Plural Nouns: Add *-ies*

Form the plural of nouns ending in *y* (preceded by a consonant or *qu-*) by changing the *y* to *i* and adding *-es*.

Singular

cry
lady
academy
army
ally
baby
soliloquy

Plural

cries
ladies
academies
armies
allies
babies
soliloquies

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6. Pronouns

Like nouns,

pronouns are categorized in terms of

1. **NUMBER**

2. **PERSON**

3. **GENDER**

4. **CASE**

1. **Number** indicates either that the pronoun is **one** in number — **singular**; or **more** than one — **plural**.

2. **Person** indicates whether the reference is to the person writing (*I, we*: **first person**); the person or persons written to (*you*: **second person**); the person(s) or thing(s) written about (*he, she, it, they*: **third person**).

3. **Gender** indicates whether a pronoun is **masculine** (*he, him, his*); **feminine** (*she, her, hers*); or **neuter** (*it, its*).

4. **Case** indicates the pronoun's grammatical role — how it acts (or operates) in a clause.

The case of a pronoun: subject, object, possessive. In most respects, pronouns are more complex than nouns. The noun *boy* as a subject is the **same** as the noun *boy* as an object, but the personal pronoun *he* **changes** to *him* as an object. The possessive of *boy* is formed simply by adding apostrophe s (*'s*), but the possessive of *he* is *his*.

The possessive case of most singular nouns is expressed simply by adding apostrophe s (*'s*) — *woman* becomes *woman's* — but the nominative of the personal pronoun *I* changes radically to *my* (or *mine*) in the possessive.

6.1 Declension of Pronouns

The organization of pronouns is called **declension** (from the Latin *declinare*, meaning to **move down** or **change**). We decline a pronoun by presenting it in terms of number, person, gender, and case.

Declension of Personal Pronouns

Case – Subject (Nominative)

Singular

1st Person - **I**
 2nd Person - **you**
 3rd Person - **he, she, it**

Plural

1st Person - **we**
 2nd Person - **you**
 3rd Person - **they**

In the **third person singular**, the personal pronoun is further declined by gender.

3rd Person Masculine **he**
 3rd Person Feminine **she**
 3rd Person Neuter **it**

Case – Object (Objective)

Singular

1st Person - **me**
 2nd Person - **you**
 3rd Person - **him, her, it**

Plural

1st Person - **us**
 2nd Person - **you**
 3rd Person - **them**

Again, in the third person singular, the personal pronoun is further declined by gender.

3rd Person Masculine **him**
 3rd Person Feminine **her**
 3rd Person Neuter **it**

Case – Possessive

Singular

1st Person - **my (mine)**
 2nd Person - **your (yours)**
 3rd Person - **his**
 her (hers)
 its

Plural

1st Person - **our (ours)**
 2nd Person - **your (yours)**
 3rd Person - **their (theirs)**

Third Person Singular Declension

3rd Person Masculine **his**
 3rd Person Feminine **her (hers)**
 3rd Person Neuter **its**

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7. Verbs

As we saw on page 29, all verb forms come from the **infinitive** and the verb's four **principal parts**:

- **present**
- **present participle**
- **past**
- **past participle**

7.1 Regular Verbs

The present of a **regular** verb comes from the **plain form*** of the infinitive — the infinitive without the *to*. The present of the verb *to help*, for example, is *help*. The present participle is formed by adding *-ing* (*helping*); the past and past participle, by adding *-ed* (*helped*).

The **changes** of a verb in its principal parts are referred to as the **inflection** of the verb.

Inflection of (to) *help*

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle (have, has, had)
help(s)	helping	helped	helped

Regular verbs ending in *e* simply add *d* to form the **past** and **past participle**.

Inflection of (to) *live*

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
live(s)	living	lived	lived

* Sometimes referred to as the **bare infinitive**.

7.2 Irregular Verbs

The present of **irregular verbs** (except the verb *to be*) is also taken from the **plain** form of the infinitive, and the present participle is formed by adding *-ing*. But the **past** and **past participle** undergo changes other than the regular *d* or *-ed* endings.

Inflection of *(to) give*

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle (have, has, had)
give(s)	giving	gave	given

In some cases, there are no changes at all from present to past to past participle.

Inflection of *(to) hit*

Present	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
hit(s)	hitting	hit	hit

The 101 Most Commonly Used Irregular Verbs

Present	Past	Past Participle
beat(s)	beat	beaten
become(s)	became	become
begin(s)	began	begun
bend(s)	bent	bent (bended)
bet(s)	bet	bet
bind(s)	bound	bound
bite(s)	bit	bitten
bleed(s)	bled	bled
blow(s)	blew	blown
break(s)	broke	broken
bring(s)	brought	brought
build(s)	built	built
buy(s)	bought	bought
catch(es)	caught	caught

7.3.2 The Conjugation of a Verb (from the Latin *coniugare* meaning **join together**) refers to the **organization** of a verb in terms of number, person, tense, voice, and mode.)

Inflection of **(to) give**

Present	Past	Present Participle	Past Participle
give (s)	gave	giving	given

Conjugation of **(to) give** Active Voice - Indicative Mood

Singular

Present Tense

Plural

1st Person - I give
2nd Person - you give
3rd Person - he, she, it gives

1st Person - we give
2nd Person - you give
3rd Person - they give

Past Tense

1st Person - I gave
2nd Person - you gave
3rd Person - he, she, it gave

1st Person - we gave
2nd Person - you gave
3rd Person - they gave

Future Tense

(*will* or *shall* + plain infinitive)

1st Person - I will give
2nd Person - you will give
3rd Person - he, she, it will give

1st Person - we will give
2nd Person - you will give
3rd Person - they will give

Present Progressive Tense

(present of *to be* + present participle)

1st Person - I am giving
2nd Person - you are giving
3rd Person - he, she, it is giving

1st Person - we are giving
2nd Person - you are giving
3rd Person - they are giving

Past Progressive Tense

(past of *to be* + present participle)

1st Person - I was giving
2nd Person - you were giving
3rd Person - he, she, it was giving

1st Person - we were giving
2nd Person - you were giving
3rd Person - they were giving

Future Progressive Tense

(*will* or *shall* + *be* + present participle)

1st Person - I will be giving
2nd Person - you will be giving
3rd Person - he, she, it will be giving

1st Person - we will be giving
2nd Person - you will be giving
3rd Person - they will be giving

Singular**Present Perfect Tense**
(present of *to have* + past participle)**Plural**

1st Person - *I have given*
 2nd Person - *you have given*
 3rd Person - *he, she, it has given*

1st Person - *we have given*
 2nd Person - *you have given*
 3rd Person - *they have given*

Past Perfect Tense
(past of *to have* + past participle)

1st Person - *I had given*
 2nd Person - *you had given*
 3rd Person - *he, she, it had given*

1st Person - *we had given*
 2nd Person - *you had given*
 3rd Person - *they had given*

Future Perfect Tense
(*will* or *shall* + *have* + past participle)

1st Person - *I will have given*
 2nd Person - *you will have given*
 3rd Person - *he, she, it will have given*

1st Person - *we will have given*
 2nd Person - *you will have given*
 3rd Person - *they will have given*

Other tenses are the **present perfect progressive** (*I have been giving*), **past perfect progressive** (*I had been giving*), and **future perfect progressive** (*I will have been giving*). In addition, there are verb forms that employ a **variety of auxiliaries**: *would, could, should, might, may, must, do, does, did*. The forms of *to do* are commonly used with *not* (or *n't*) to express the negative: *does not (doesn't) give, did not (didn't) give*, etc.

will* vs. *shall

In the 19th and 20th centuries, most grammar books perpetuated the fiction that *shall* was the “correct” form for the first person singular and plural: *I shall, you will, he (she, it) will; we shall, you will, they will*. Equally baseless has been the presumptuous use of *shall* to express a command or to create a sense of future certainty. (*Each year, all regional managers shall submit budget estimates by June 30.*)

If there is a distinction between *shall* and *will*, it is that *shall* is the more tentative form, a first cousin of *should*. *Shall We Dance?*— made famous by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the 1937 film by the same name — implies *Should We Dance?* (as in “would you like to?”).

Clearly, *will* is a more definite way of expressing the future than *shall*; that’s why we write a “Will” and not a “Shall.” But if you were preparing a government regulation or a company policy, neither verb form would work particularly well. Use *must*.

Each year, all regional managers must submit budget estimates by June 30.

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10. Words That Will Fail You:

The 100 Most Commonly Misused Words

“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter — ’tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.” — Mark Twain

a - an This is an instance in which the **sound** of a word determines the appropriate usage in written English. Use *a* before a consonant sound, *an* before a vowel sound: *a street, a problem, a lovely dress; an opportunity, an idea, an unusual meeting*. Some words that begin with consonants have vowel sounds and vice versa: *an unusual meeting* but *a unique style; a happy person* but *an honest mistake; a CBS reporter* but *an NBC reporter*. (Your spell-check will never catch this one.)

adapt - adopt *Adapt* means *make changes or adjustments*; *adopt* means *make one’s own*.

After moving from New York City to Vermont, I had to adapt to a slower pace of life.

After moving from New York City to Paris, I adopted French as my everyday language.

affect - effect The verb *affect* usually means *influence* or *bring about a change*, but it is also used to mean *imitate* (sometimes pretentiously).

Political changes sometimes affect the stock market.

Americans who affect a British accent tend to be insecure.

The noun *effect* generally means *result*.

⊘ One affect of the company’s profit-sharing plan was increased productivity.

➔ One effect of the company’s profit-sharing plan was increased productivity.

But the plural form *effects* can refer to *property* or *belongings*.

In his will, my uncle left most of his effects to his wife.

As a verb, *effect* means *make* or *bring about*.

The new administration effected changes in federal employment procedures.

aggravate - irritate The verb *aggravate* means *make worse*.

The noisy children aggravated her headache.

The verb *irritate* means *annoy* or *make angry*.

His conceited attitude irritated me.

Substituting *aggravate* for *irritate* is a common error.

❓ Don't aggravate me.

➡ Don't irritate me.

allusion - illusion An *allusion* is a *reference*.

The report made several allusions to corrupt practices.

An *illusion* is an *imagined situation* or an *erroneous idea*.

Living in Hollywood shattered her illusions about the entertainment industry.

all right - alright all together - altogether all ready - already

Don't make the mistake of writing *alright* (nonstandard) in place of *all right*. *Altogether* means *completely* or *wholly*; *all together* means *as a unit*.

Everything is all right.

We were not altogether satisfied with her explanation.

The family was all together again at Christmas.

Already means *previously*.

You already asked me that question.

All ready means *all of us are ready* or *completely prepared*.

We are all ready for the holidays.

a lot - alot Do not make the mistake of writing two words (*a lot*) as one (*alot*). This usage will probably change (*forever* used to be *for ever*), but it hasn't yet.

⊘ Do you still have alot of work to do?

➔ Do you still have a lot of work to do?

among - between Generally, *between* connects two persons or things; *among*, three or more.

There was a disagreement between Baxter and Parelli.

The members of the committee argued among themselves for days.

BUT

The airline lost my luggage somewhere between San Francisco, Honolulu, and Singapore.

amount - number *Amount* refers to a certain quantity.

The amount of money spent by the federal government staggers the imagination.

Number refers to individual units.

The number of dollars spent by the federal government staggers the imagination.

as - like - such as Avoid the tendency to substitute *like* for *as*. The **preposition** *like*, meaning *similar to*, introduces a comparison; the **subordinating conjunction** *as* introduces a clause.

⊘ Do like I say.

➔ Do as I say.

➔ I want to find a job like the one my brother has.

Use *such as* to introduce an example (or examples).

Countries such as Sweden and Finland have national health insurance programs.

Most linguists also recognize the use of *as* to introduce a prepositional phrase.

As a result of his addiction to gambling, Balzac spent most of his life mired in debt.

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III - When Stylebooks Collide

11. Lists and Quotation Marks

When one authority says do it this way, and another authority says do it that way, which way do you do it?

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11. Lists and Quotation Marks

11.1 Comma or No Comma?

In *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White, the authors give this example:

red, white, and blue

But the *Associated Press Stylebook* offers a slightly different version:

red, white and blue

So which way is the right way?

Don't make the mistake of concluding that putting a comma before the *and* is the “old-fashioned” way, or that simplistic clichés like “if in doubt, leave it out” will resolve the question. Making smart decisions about the use of commas when you are presenting information in the form of a **list** — often referred to as a **series** — is a bit more complicated than that.

As we saw in Part I, we need to look at punctuation in terms of practices, not rules. Like other operating systems, the English language follows certain structural patterns. The fundamental organizing principles that have governed English for the better part of four centuries are based on subject-verb relationships, word order (syntax), and connections (key words that introduce phrases and clauses). But over the centuries, writers have relied on a variety of punctuation practices to clarify the meaning of their sentences. In the 21st century, publishing organizations are increasingly inclined, as David Crystal put it, to use punctuation that helps readers understand “stretches of written language . . . by displaying their grammatical structure.”

11.1.1 Clauses in a Series

Let's begin by looking at clauses in a series. We saw on page 100 that the standard professional practice for punctuating **two clauses** joined by *and* is to put a comma before the conjunction. The comma tells the reader that we are coming to the end of one clause and moving on to the next.

Productivity in the manufacturing sector declined during the third quarter, and construction of new houses fell to a two-year low.

It follows that the same principle applies when we are dealing with **three or more** clauses.

Productivity in the manufacturing sector declined in the third quarter, unemployment among unskilled workers continued to rise, and construction of new houses fell to a two-year low.

There is **no logical reason** to apply this punctuation practice **only to independent clauses**.^{*} Suppose the sentence included noun clauses instead of independent clauses. Would leaving the comma out do anything to help the reader? Or would it just be one less thing for the writer to bother with?

- ❓ The Commerce Department reported that productivity in the manufacturing sector declined during the third quarter, unemployment among unskilled workers continued to rise and construction of new houses fell to a two-year low.
- ➡ The Commerce Department reported that productivity in the manufacturing sector declined during the third quarter, unemployment among unskilled workers continued to rise, and construction of new houses fell to a two-year low.

Remember that several clauses may have a single subject.

- ❓ Our organization offers counseling, provides training, reviews résumés and schedules job interviews for recent high school graduates.
- ➡ Our organization offers counseling, provides training, reviews résumés, and schedules job interviews for recent high school graduates.

When you are writing clauses in a series, semicolons may work better than commas.

We decided to go ahead with the project after the client agreed to a flexible work schedule; after our attorneys had reviewed the details of the contract carefully; and after we had determined how long it would take to make a profit.

* The “leave it out” practice in general, and the “no comma” before the *and* in particular, is largely a byproduct of the 20th-century newspaper industry, which sacrificed logic and consistency in an effort to fit lines of metal type into narrow columns in the rush to meet tight deadlines. Our 21st-century computer technology has rendered that rationale obsolete.

Virtually all of the book publishers in North America use the “comma before the *and*” technique, as do many of the most respected business and education publications: *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Wired*, *Harvard Business Review*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *U.S. News & World Report*. (See Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *The GPO Style Manual*, *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, *The MLA Handbook*, *The APA Style Manual*, *The Blue Book*.)

Most newspapers and newspaper-style magazines drop the comma before the *and* except in cases where a misreading might occur. (See the *AP Stylebook* or the *New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*.)

Appendix A

The Curious History of the English Writing System

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1.4. The Curious History of the English Writing System

Historians generally trace the roots of literacy in Western civilization to the ancient Greeks, who coined the term *gramma* more than 2,500 years ago to mean “something written” or “letter of the alphabet.” You may have learned in elementary school that the English word *alphabet* comes from the first two letters of the Greek alphabet: *alpha* and *beta*. In the strict sense of the word, then, **literacy** actually means **letteracy**.

Not coincidentally, both *graphic* and *gramma* are derived from *graphien*, the Greek word for “writing” — that is, “visual representation.” The Greeks didn’t invent *gramma*. They copied it from their rivals, modified it to suit their own purposes, and used it to create one of the most brilliant civilizations the world has ever known, producing the likes of Homer, Aesop, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, and Alexander the Great. By applying the term *gramma* to **writing** — as opposed to **talking** — the Greeks recognized that “writing skill” (*grammatike techne*) was a distinct technology, an organization of **visual language patterns** serving as the **basis of all literacy**.

When Greece became part of the Roman Empire, Greek culture and language had a profound influence on the conquerors: Zeus became Jupiter, Aphrodite became Venus, and *grammatike techne* became *ars grammtica* — the art of **writing**, not the art of **grammar**! In Latin, the dominant language of that era, *art* was a synonym for *craft* or *skill*.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Latin survived as the language of religion, scholarship, and diplomacy throughout most of Western Europe, but other languages flourished as well. When wave after wave of West German invaders began attacking and settling in the territory then known as Briton about 1500 years ago, they brought their language with them. Two of the invading tribes, the Angles and the Saxons, lent the collective name “Anglo-Saxon” to the culture (and the language) that materialized. Over the next four centuries, that culture was further influenced by a series of assaults mounted by other groups of Germanic invaders — the Vikings — from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

By the time of the reign of Alfred the Great (871-899), a more or less uniform written language had emerged, complete with its own complex and highly inflected grammar. In that language, which we now refer to as Old English, the ordinary activities of English society were conducted, including government, law, literature, historical records, and basic education. (See *King Alfred's Grammar Book* by Professor Michael D.C. Drout <http://acunix.wheatonma.edu/mdrout/grammarbook2005/kagrammar.html>) As in the other countries of Western Europe, Latin continued as the language of scholarship and the church.

French Becomes England's Official Language

But a little more than 150 years after King Alfred's death — at the famous Battle of Hastings in 1066 — an army led by the Duke of Normandy (a province in northern France) defeated the English, and the Normans took over as the rulers of England. In the years that followed, French replaced English as the country's official language.

“French became the language of the court, the law, the government. Educated men spoke and wrote both French and Latin. . . . English remained almost entirely a spoken language for about three centuries.”*

In other words, English as a medium of written communication virtually disappeared, surviving only as the “barbarous tongue” of the oppressed classes: peasants, laborers, serfs, and slaves.

Over time, though, the Normans became “Anglicized,” and after Henry V came to power in 1413, English once again became the government's language of record. But unlike the Old English, this “new” English had no clearly established structure — that is, no generally agreed-upon grammatical principles. When young William Shakespeare began attending school in Stratford about a century and a half later, not a single book on English grammar had been published for more than 500 years.

* *A History of England* by Goldwin Smith

Mix of Germanic Languages + Latin + Greek + French = English

When academicians and literary types finally got around to developing a formal framework for English, they looked to the structured language most familiar to them: Latin. Even during the centuries of Norman domination, Latin had remained the language of scholars. Although English and Latin are alike in some respects, there are also vast differences. To understand the underlying patterns of English, we need to consider some of those differences.

In Latin, a word's **inflection** (the **sound** of the word, represented in writing by the **form** of the word or its **spelling**) determines the word's grammatical **function** or **role**. For example, Julius Caesar's famous history of *The Gallic Wars* (Gallia, or Gaul, comprised much of what is now France, Belgium, and Switzerland) begins, "Gallia est omne divisa en partes tres. . . ." Translated literally into English, that clause tells us that "Gaul is all divided in parts three." Doesn't seem quite grammatical, does it?

But because the word endings — the inflections — determine the grammatical relationships in Latin, people reading Caesar's words in ancient Rome would have quickly grasped the sense of the statement as a whole: "All Gaul is divided into three parts. . . ." If I wanted to write, "My brother teaches at a school in London," I would have to use the Latin word *frater* (meaning *brother*) because *brother* is the subject of the sentence. But suppose I decided to write, "A school in London hired my brother." The roles have changed; *school* is now the subject, and *brother* is a verb complement (or object). In Latin, I would have to change the inflection of the word from *frater* to *fratrem*.

English doesn't work that way. The word endings change very little, often not at all. Most of the so-called rules of English grammar are based on word order — not word endings. As Robert Graves observed in *The Reader over Your Shoulder*, a book he coauthored with Robert Hodge in the 1940s, "English . . . tends to ambiguity in any but the most careful writing . . ." Consider the following:

My brother a teacher hired to edit the manuscript.

To most of us, this word order wouldn't meet the standard of "careful writing," but students of Latin run into thousands, of sentences similar to this one. Is my *brother* hiring a *teacher*, or is a *teacher* hiring my *brother*?

In Latin, the inflection would remove any doubt about the intended meaning; if *frater* — my *brother* would be the subject of the verb; if *fratrem* — my *brother* would be the complement (or object). The word endings for *teacher* would also change, depending on whether the *teacher* is a man or a woman (*magister* or *magistra* as subjects; *magistrum* or *magistram* as objects). But in English, **word order rules**. The problem of expressing ideas in “plain” English (meaning “uninflected” English) is largely a matter of making sure that you put your words in the right place — that they fit into logical and recognizable patterns:

My brother hired a teacher to edit the manuscript.

or

A teacher hired my brother to edit the manuscript.

Let’s look at another example: “A school in London gave my brother a job.” I would have to change the form of the word *brother* again, this time to *fratri*. In Latin and many other languages (including Old English), inflection is the mechanism that enables people to understand one another. Latin nouns are not “plain”; they have multiple endings (*frater*, *fratris*, *fratri*, *fratrem*, *fratre*, *fratres*, *fratrum*, and *fratribus*). The **endings** of the words, not the **order** of the words, determine the grammatical relationships in a sentence — and consequently its meaning.

Over the centuries, the influence of Latin on English has been, quite literally, a mixed blessing. On the down side, there are Latin “rules” that don’t apply to English (you can’t end a sentence with a preposition, you can’t split an infinitive, you can’t make contractions out of verbs, etc.) and the tendency on the part of many self-appointed language police to insist on certain subjective standards of “correctness.” On the plus side, as it became more readily available to the disadvantaged classes, particularly in North America after 1800, this regimented method of grammatical instruction served as an instrument of social mobility, enabling people of humble origins to improve their economic station in life to a degree that had not previously been possible.

In the study of the English language, as in the study of many other technical and scientific disciplines, **Latin-based terms** are often used to identify certain characteristics or conditions. But that doesn’t mean we should be bound by the limitations of linguistic concepts that are ancient history — any more than we should accept classical concepts of the relationship between the earth and the sun.

So although English may use Latin-based terms such as *sentence*, derived from the Latin *sententia*), we need to be aware that from a grammatical perspective, the two languages are almost completely different. In Latin grammar, for example, a basic concept is that the **subject** and the **predicate** are separate entities. (The predicate includes the verb or verbs, the “direct” object — frequently referred to erroneously as the “accusative”— and everything else in the sentence, except for the subject and words directly related to the subject.) The predicate (from *predicare*, which means *to announce*) “announces” something (that is, makes a statement) about the subject. If you find that approach to understanding how to write an English sentence a bit confusing, you have lots of company. <http://painintheenglish.com/?p=985>

Mixed-up English Becomes America’s Official Language

In the late ’60s and early ’70s, when I was teaching English at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California, the need to replace the Latin model with a less cumbersome approach — one that could clarify language relationships expressly associated with English — was long overdue. But it was a time that favored utopian rhetoric over practical solutions. Political biases affected, and often distorted, every educational discipline. Some respected academics were holding up Cuba and North Korea as examples of ideal economic systems. Others were paraphrasing the theories of America’s most outspoken anarchist, Noam Chomsky, who alleged that there is a specific “grammar-generating” organ in our brains and that human beings are hard-wired to acquire “grammar” intuitively, without any kind of formal instruction.

Since children intuitively “know the grammar” of their language, many influential educators concluded that there is no need to teach it. By extension, that line of reasoning led to the assumption that teaching grammar actually interferes with the natural learning process, serving instead as a despoiler of creativity and innovation.

To understand how this intellectual twaddle became the mantra of organizations that oversee the teaching of writing in this country, it helps to recall the mindset of Humpty-Dumpty in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. “When I use a word,” Humpty-Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean...”

In the first sentence of *The Sound Pattern of English*, published in 1968, Chomsky and his coauthor, Morris Halle, do a clever little Humpty-Dumpty routine on the word *grammar*.

We may think of a language as a set sentences, each with an ideal phonetic form and an associated intrinsic semantic interpretation. The grammar of the language is the system of rules that specifies this sound-meaning correspondence.

At the time, few critics noticed that defining a system of “sound patterns” as the “grammar” of a language was a shameless distortion — that the *grammar* of a language refers to the organizing principles established through the development of a *writing* system. (This is what Marshall McLuhan meant when he quipped, “Nobody ever made a grammatical error in a non-literate society.”) By implication, Chomsky’s definition specifically excluded the true meaning of the word. Thirty years later, he was redefining grammar, *à la* Humpty Dumpty, as the “representation of the knowledge . . . of ideal speaker-hearers . . .” If you’re not quite sure what that means, he explains (in *Introducing Chomsky*, written and edited by John Maher) that there are actually two grammars:

“Grammar” (1), in the sense of a structure postulated in the mind, means I-language, and (2) a theory of the I-language, composed by a linguist (in the same sense in which a theory of the visual system is about the visual system.) . . . [Y]ou can get a clearer picture of the operations which generate language by developing theories of I-language (= grammar 2) that generate expressions with their structures, that is, by developing grammars (2) of these languages; grammar (2) being a theory of I-language (grammar 1).

Then as now, most leaders in the academic community didn’t understand much of this Humpty-Dumpty verbiage. But apparently intimidated by the “scornful tone” of the rhetoric, often accompanied by complex formulas and elaborate, upside-down tree diagrams, they meekly accepted these problematic speculations — along with political posturing that identified English grammar as a form of cultural oppression — and caved.

Efforts to incorporate this Humpty-Dumpty grammar into the K-12 English-Language Arts curriculum have failed miserably. How can you teach stuff if you can’t understand it? The result has been **no grammar** — or what’s even worse, a watered-down form of **monkey-see, monkey-do grammar**, accompanied by a litany of glib generalizations about creativity and process strategies — from grade school through graduate school. It’s an anarchist’s dream come true. <http://struggle.ws/rbr/noamrbr2.html>

Chomsky's long-winded meanderings about how people develop the ability to talk, through a gradual process that includes making sounds and hearing sound patterns, is not without value to anyone who has an interest in language. But it's all about *talk* — not writing. Ironically, the complicated, upside-down tree diagrams employed by this “revolutionary” thinker (and by many other linguists as well) follow the clunky, outdated Latin model, complete with a strict line of separation between subject and predicate.

How We Learn: From Synapse to Syntax

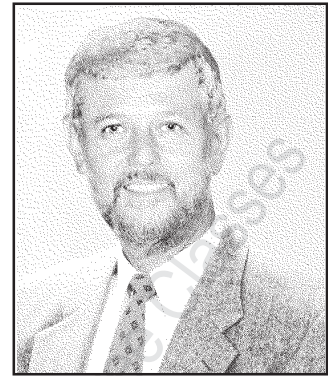
In 2000, the neuroscientist Eric Kandel, a professor at Columbia University, was awarded a Nobel Prize for his findings that there is a direct physiological relationship between memory and long-term learning. Virtually all learning, Kandel demonstrated through decades of documented laboratory experiments, is the result of recurrent stimulation that produces physical connections between neurons in the brain. Each connection — or synapse — is strengthened by the repetition of explicit learning experiences. Asked to explain this process in layman's language during a 2004 NPR interview, Kandel said, “practice makes perfect to produce long-term memory....”

In his critically acclaimed 2007 book *The Brain That Changes Itself*, Norman Doidge, M.D., a colleague of Kandel's at Columbia, challenged the notion that the brain is a strictly compartmentalized device (as Chomsky and many others had claimed), with certain parts hard-wired to perform specific tasks. Doidge presented compelling evidence that the brain is remarkable in its plasticity and its ability to develop “like a muscle that grows with exercise . . .” For centuries, Doidge observed, “educators did seem to sense that children's brains had to be built up through exercises of increasing difficulty that strengthened brain functions.”

Then in the 1960s educators dropped . . . traditional exercises from the curriculum because they were too rigid, boring, and “not relevant.” But the loss of these drills has been costly; they may have been the only opportunities that many students had to systematically exercise the brain function that gives us fluency and grace with symbols. . . .

Here, our concern is not with **sound** patterns, which may or may not be generated by some kind of innate biological capability. Our concern is with learning how to recognize a limited number of **visual** language patterns — as they exist in 21st century English — and how to organize those patterns in ways that enable us to communicate ideas clearly.

Mike McClory has taught writing to people of all ages and backgrounds, from fourth graders to Ph.Ds. In the 1990s, he began developing **Write Smart**[®] — a step-by-step system based on the techniques used by America's top professional writers and editors. Since then, thousands of participants in his classes have learned how to make their reports (letters, proposals, legal and technical documents, e-mail messages, etc.) as interesting and easy to read as a magazine article.



After graduating from Northwestern University, Mike began his career with the *Congressional Digest*, a publication that has earned a reputation — over a span of 88 years — for presenting different sides of complex political issues in lean, unpretentious language. Years later, in a 1996 interview, he recalled the experience:

Working with seasoned professional editors was full of surprises. I found, for instance, that people in the publishing business expend an enormous amount of time and energy applying the fundamentals of grammar and punctuation. In a few weeks, I learned more about writing than I had learned in four years of college.

As an instructor, Mike is not a dull ivory-tower type. His background includes . . .

- Developing writing training for staff professionals from more than 100 U.S. House and Senate offices.
- Editing the Department of Veterans Affairs' FY 2000 *Annual Performance Report* — ranked first by the Mercatus Center at George Mason University among submissions from all federal departments.
- Editing the *Hill Rag*, a Capitol Hill newsmagazine, from 1980 to 1982. The publication grew from 36 pages to 98 pages, and advertising revenue increased 300 percent.
- Making television commercials in New York for *Fortune* 500 companies.
- Teaching secondary school English in Washington, D.C.; Berkeley, Calif.; Calvert County, Md.; and Washington Depot, Conn.

Participants in his classes have come from a cross section of business, government, and nonprofit organizations:

Academy for Educational Development	General Dynamics	WilmerHale
Association of American Medical Colleges	Newsweek Magazine	Pepco
Department of Veterans Affairs	Department of Justice	IBM
U.S. House and Senate (both parties)	Group Health Association	ITT
Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts	Prince George's County	FBI
Public Health Foundation	Research Institute of America	CACI
National Association of Homebuilders	Princeton Capital Corporation	ACTION
Department of Agriculture	The Nature Conservancy	Peace Corps
Government Technology Services Inc	US West (now Quest)	Marine Corps Institute
U.S. Government Printing Office	King & Spalding	WOR – TV
Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan	Cassidy & Associates	NASA
Environmental Protection Agency	Department of Commerce	US Airways
Department of Transportation	State Justice Institute	ANSER
Department of Defense	Wheat First Securities	Burdock Group
National Audobon Society	National Urban League	Capital Care
American Psychological Association	Congressional Hispanic Caucus	Amtrak
National Waterways Conference	Department of Treasury	Century 21
Bureau of Indian Affairs	Chronicle of Higher Education	Warner-Lambert
Educational Testing Service	Library of Congress	Meridian Corporation
Commodity Futures Trading Commission	U.S. Supreme Court	AARP
Federal Trade Commission	Baker & McKenzie	TRW
American Gas Association	General Services Administration	Tracor
American Ecology Corporation	General Accounting Office	MCI
The Smithsonian Institution	The Learning Group	FH2M
American Horticultural Society	National Defense Magazine	AT&T
National Petroleum Council	National Public Radio	AKORN
American Pharmaceutical Association	Phoenix Systems	ZAI
National Association of Securities Dealers	Fanwall Corporation	AMS
Wider Opportunities for Women	National Institutes of Health	EG & G
American Association of Architects	Life Cycle Engineering	WMATA
Social Security Administration	LCC International	Contel
Federal Communications Commission	Burson-Marsteller	U.S. Mint

With more than 25 years of experience in business, government, editing, and education, Mike McClory has a unique understanding of your writing problems — and how to solve them.