

The Writing Habit, Part II

ELEMENTS OF GRAMMAR

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

—Lewis Carroll,
Through the Looking Glass

Grammar has nothing to do with being right or wrong. Its real function is to provide a structure of words between people who wish to communicate. When understanding takes place in the mind of your readers, when they see exactly what you want them to see and experience exactly what you want them to experience, communication has taken place. The goal of communication is to enjoy, even if only briefly, an experience of sharing the same awareness.

If you think for a moment about a landscape painting, you know that the grass, trees, flowers, and so on are only part of an illusion created by paint and brushstrokes. In order to create a masterful illusion, one that evokes a strong response in the beholder, an artist needs more than talent. He or she also must have a firm grasp of the rules by which colors, lines, and shapes may be combined to create visual effects.

Writers use words rather than paint, of course, but the principles that govern their combination are actually quite similar. Words combined incorrectly evoke muddy, confusing images. Moreover, unless a writer’s intention is very clear, one word by itself doesn’t ordinarily convey much information. If you were to see only the word *tree* on a page, for example, some sort of image of a tree would probably come to mind. You might wonder, though, what kind of tree is meant. What’s so important about the tree, anyway? What’s it doing, or what’s being done to it? By itself, the word *tree* conjures up only a vague and confusing image. If only the word *falls* were to appear on a page, even more questions would be raised. What falls? Who falls?

In addition to providing a system for putting words together, grammar also serves to distinguish kinds of words. Some words name, some describe, some connect, and some make things happen to other words. A grammatical system shows you what to look for in order to make those distinctions.

You’re probably familiar with the eight categories into which words are divided according to English grammar:

- Nouns
- Pronouns
- Verbs
- Adjectives
- Adverbs
- Prepositions

- Conjunctions
- Interjections

Collectively, those categories are known as *parts of speech*. Breaking any language into parts of speech simplifies the process of figuring out how the language works. Rather than analyze each word separately, you only have to learn how all the words that belong to a certain category function in a sentence.

This is an especially convenient system for working with a language such as English, in which the same word can function as several different parts of speech. In its most familiar sense, the word *tree* signifies a large, woody plant with many branches. Yet it can also refer to the act of chasing something up a tree, or the act of stretching a shoe or boot on a shoe tree. The same word can both name an object and describe an action, and the meaning of a word can change according to the part of speech it's being used as.

Nouns

Nouns are naming words. In fact, the word *noun* comes from the Latin verb *nomen*, to name. Nouns identify people, animals, places, and things, as well as more abstract conditions such as emotions, qualities, and events. Broadly speaking, if a word answers the question *what*, *who*, or *whom*, it may be classified as a noun. Let's take a look now at some of the most common types of nouns.

Proper vs. Common Nouns

When a noun is capitalized it's known as a *proper noun*. Proper nouns can be the names or titles of specific people, places, and even things like holidays and months of the year. *Common nouns* don't refer to specific individuals or places. Unless they're the first word of a sentence, common nouns are never capitalized. They're often, but not always, preceded by *a*, *an*, or *the*. The same word may be a common noun or a proper noun, depending on whether it's capitalized or not:

How good a *king* was good *King* Wenceslas?

The *city* of Island *City* isn't really an island.

Collective Nouns

Collective nouns identify groups or collections. Words such as *team*, *unit*, *crew*, and *club* all represent a number of people or things gathered together for a common purpose or classified together because of some common tendency or characteristic. In general, collective nouns use a singular verb form, suggesting that all members of a group are acting in unison:

The von Trapp family rarely *performs* madrigals.

However, if you wish to convey that the members of a group are acting separately, you would use the plural form of a verb:

The family *were* always arguing about the repertoire.

Some collective nouns end in the letter *s*, which would suggest the need for a plural verb form. The singular verb form is actually correct, however:

The news *comes* on at five o'clock.

Rabies *is* contagious.

If you're uncertain whether a noun is plural or collective, consult a dictionary. You wouldn't like to be caught saying that the World Series *are* being held in Boston!

Compound Nouns

Compound nouns are made up of two or more nouns. Some compounds may be written as one word, while others are written separately, and still others are connected with hyphens. No rule governs how compound nouns are written, so the only way to determine the correct form is to look in the dictionary. Some common compound nouns are *heart attack*, *living room*, *housekeeper*, *viewpoint*, and *walkie-talkie*.

Plurals

Singular nouns indicate an individual person, place, or thing. *Plural nouns* indicate more than one person, place, or thing. The plural of most nouns is formed by adding *-s* or *-es* to the end of the word. Nouns that end in *-y*, however, form the plural by dropping the *-y* and substituting *-ies*, as in *mystery - mysteries*. Nouns ending in *-f* usually change to *-ves* in the plural, but this shift isn't always consistent. Both *hoofs* and *hooves* are correct plural forms of *hoof*. The plural of *roof*, on the other hand, is always *roofs*, never *rooves*. Again, if you're unsure of the plural of a particular noun, you should use a dictionary to determine the correct form.

Many nouns form the plural in an irregular manner. Some of the more common of these are *foot - feet*, *tooth - teeth*, and *child - children*. The word *sheep* is the same in both the singular and the plural. Nouns that have been adopted into English from other languages often form their plurals according to the rules of the original language. Common examples are *crisis - crises*, *alumnus - alumni*, and *analysis - analyses*. Some foreign words, however, may take either their original plural form or an Anglicized plural, as in *index - indices/indexes* and *amoeba - amoebae/amoebas*.

Case

Case indicates the role a noun plays in relationship to other words in the sentence. English uses three different cases. The *nominative case* indicates the subject of a sentence. The subject either initiates an action or experiences a state of being:

The *cow* jumped over the moon.

The *cupboard* was bare.

The *objective case* indicates that a noun is affected by the action initiated by the subject. Nouns in the *objective case* are referred to as objects:

Tom stole a *pig*.

George kissed the *girls*.

The *possessive case* indicates ownership or connection:

Miss Muffet's curds and whey were delicious.

The *spider's* arrival unnerved the poor girl.

Nouns in the nominative and the objective case don't change form to reflect a change of case. The possessive case, however, is indicated by adding an apostrophe and an *s* to nouns that don't end in *s* or *z*. Nouns ending in either of those two consonants normally use only an apostrophe to show possession:

The *girls'* dresses are both pink.

Tennessee Williams' birthplace is St. Louis.

One-syllable proper nouns that end in *s* or *z* form an exception to this rule, however:

John Keats's poetry is divine.

With compound subjects, the apostrophe is attached to the part of the subject closest to the object:

The Thin Man didn't care for *Nick and Nora's* lifestyle.

Inanimate things can't really be said to possess anything, and grammarians often insist that the preposition *of* should be used in place of *'s* in order to indicate relationships among or aspects of inanimate things. Common usage has relaxed this rule over time. Constructions such as *the computer's hard drive*, *the car's performance*, and *the sun's heat* are becoming more accepted.

Pronouns

Pronouns replace nouns in sentences. Sometimes they replace whole sentences or parts of sentences. The noun, sentence, or part of a sentence replaced by a pronoun is called the *antecedent* of the pronoun. Pronouns allow us to express complex ideas more efficiently. *The kittens have lost their mittens* flows much more smoothly than *The kittens have lost the kittens' mittens*. We'll examine five common types of pronouns:

- Personal
- Relative
- Interrogative
- Demonstrative
- Reflexive

Personal Pronouns

The *first person* indicates the speaker or initiator of an action; the *second person* indicates whoever or whatever is spoken to; the *third person* refers to the person, place, or thing spoken of or acted upon. *Personal pronouns* take the place of nouns representing any of the three persons.

Personal pronouns take different forms, depending on the following four factors:

- Person
- Number
- Gender
- Case

Person, naturally, refers to the person of the antecedent. The first person pronouns are *I* and *we*. The second person pronoun, *you*, uses the same form in both the singular and the plural. The third person pronouns are *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they*.

Number indicates whether the antecedent is singular or plural. If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun must be singular as well:

Edith Wharton was a brilliant writer.

She was a brilliant writer.

The *book* won a Pulitzer Prize.

It won a Pulitzer Prize.

Plural or compound antecedents, on the other hand, must be replaced by plural pronouns:

Scott and Zelda were unhappy.

They were unhappy.

Gender indicates whether a pronoun replaces a noun that's considered to be feminine, masculine, or neuter. Take another look at the first pair of statements. *Edith Wharton* is female and must be replaced by the feminine pronoun *she*. An inanimate object such as a book is considered neuter and must be replaced by the neuter pronoun *it*. In the plural, however, all three genders use the same pronoun *they*.

The same rules of case that govern nouns also govern pronouns. However, whereas nouns only change form to indicate the possessive case, pronouns take different forms in all three cases. The following table lists all of the personal pronouns, classified according to person, case, gender, and number.

FIRST PERSON				
Case	Singular			Plural
Nominative	I			we
Objective	me			us
Possessive	mine			ours
SECOND PERSON				
Case	Singular			Plural
Nominative	you			you
Objective	you			you
Possessive	yours			yours
THIRD PERSON				
Case	Singular			Plural
	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	
Nominative	he	she	it	they
Objective	him	her	it	them
Possessive	his	hers	its	theirs

Notice that *possessive pronouns* can function as both subjects and objects:

His was a more fascinating speech than Cicero's. (*His* is the subject of *was*.)

My chariot was broken, so I borrowed *theirs*. (*Theirs* is the object of *borrowed*.)

A final word about possessives may help dispel a bit of grammatical confusion. Nouns, as we've seen, usually add an apostrophe and an *-s* to indicate possession. Pronouns don't. Many people mistakenly express the possessive form of *it* as *it's*, which is actually a contraction of the statement *it is*. The correct form of the possessive is *its*. Consider the following example in which both the contraction of *it is* (*it's*) and the possessive adjective *its* are used.

It's the cat that hurt *its* foot, not the dog.

Relative Pronouns

Relative pronouns relate different parts of a sentence that contains more than one idea. For example, two simple sentences may be combined to express a more complex thought:

The mall was only recently completed. The mall burned down.

The mall, *which* was only recently completed, burned down.

In this case, the relative pronoun *which* replaces one instance of the word mall and links two separate but related ideas in a single sentence.

The relative pronouns are *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, and *whose*. The pronoun *that* replaces masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns in both the singular and plural form, and may refer to people, places, animals, and things. The pronoun *which* also replaces nouns of all genders in both the singular and the plural, but may only refer to animals, places, and things. *Who* refers only to people. It has three forms, depending on the case of the noun it replaces. The nominative form is *who*, the objective is *whom*, and the possessive takes the form *whose*.

Variants of the relative pronouns add the suffix *-ever* to the root form. The most common variants are *whichever*, *whatever*, *whoever*, and *whomever*. All replace antecedents that are either unspecified or unknown:

You can put those cans on *whichever* shelf is empty.

He will return the book to *whoever* gave it to him.

Interrogative Pronouns

The *interrogative pronouns* *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, and *what* are all used to form questions. *Who*, *whom*, and *whose* refer to people; *what* refers only to animals, places and things; *which* refers to people, places, animals, and things. The interrogatives may function either as subjects or objects in a sentence.

Demonstrative Pronouns

The *demonstrative pronouns* are *this*, *these*, *that*, and *those*. Demonstratives indicate spatial or conceptual relationships. *This* and *these* refer to things near in time, space, or thought; *that* and *those* refer to things further away:

This is my cat and *those* are her kittens by the window.

The above example signifies a spatial relationship; the cat is closer to the speaker than the kittens. Demonstratives may also relate ideas or parts of a sentence:

Lucy walked in her sleep and *this* made Stella anxious.

Here, the pronoun *this* refers to Lucy's walking in her sleep.

In addition, demonstrative pronouns may refer to a subject so general as to have no specific antecedent at all:

Mother told us to be kind to *those* who are less fortunate.

Finally, demonstratives may be used to modify or describe nouns:

This telescope

That astrolabe

Reflexive Pronouns

Reflexive pronouns are formed by adding the suffix *self* or *selves* to some of the personal pronouns. The reflexive pronouns are *myself*, *yourself*, *himself*, *herself*, *itself*, and *themselves*. These pronouns serve two different functions. The first is to emphasize or intensify the meaning of the antecedent:

The king *himself* baked that cherry pie.

The second identifies the initiator of an action as the object as well:

Alfred corrected *himself*.

Pronoun Etiquette

Using pronouns incorrectly or inaccurately can bewilder your readers. Unfortunately, modern speech habits have blurred the rules governing pronoun usage. As a result, many writers are hard put to decide which pronoun is appropriate in a given situation. Here are a few of the most common areas of confusion, together with some of the ways to work through them.

Who or whom? Confusion often arises over which case to use in different situations. Following a simple rule of thumb can prevent embarrassing mistakes. If the relative pronoun precedes a verb, it's treated as a subject. If there's no verb, the relative pronoun functions as an object:

To *whom* did you sell your short story?

You shouldn't give your phone number to *whoever* asks for it.

Too much distance between antecedent and pronoun. Most readers instinctively link a pronoun with the noun or pronoun that immediately precedes it:

Delia's cat had kittens when she was three years old.

That statement doesn't precisely identify who was three years old when the kittens were born. For the sake of clarity, make sure the pronoun and its antecedent aren't separated by a word or words that might be considered the antecedent:

When Delia was three years old, her cat had kittens.

The amended statement gives a clear idea of the situation.

Comparisons. Many people become confused over whether to use the nominative case (*I, he, they*) or the objective (*me, him, them*) in comparative statements. If a pronoun follows the words *as, than, or like*, you can determine the correct case by mentally filling in any missing or implied words:

Duncan bakes better cakes than I (*bake*).

Eloise writes to Abelard but not (*to*) us.

After expressions using the verb to be. In everyday conversation, it's acceptable to use the objective form of the personal pronoun in expressions beginning *It is, It was,* and so on.

It might have been *me* on that subway train.

In formal writing, however, the nominative case is preferred, since the pronoun is actually a restatement of the subject:

It was *she* in the pumpkin coach.

You can easily resolve any uncertainty by imagining the pronoun in front of the verb:

Her was in the pumpkin coach. (incorrect)

She was in the pumpkin coach. (correct)

The only exception to the rule concerns the infinitive form of the verb *to be*. Pronouns that follow an infinitive are always in the objective case:

I would not like to be *him*.

That, which, or who? When combining two or more ideas in a single sentence, it's sometimes difficult to choose among relative pronouns. Use *that* when introducing information essential to the meaning of a sentence:

Where is the map that Christopher drew?

Use *which* to introduce information that's important but not essential to the meaning:

The map, *which* Christopher drew for Isabella, was on the table.

In general, commas are used to distinguish nonessential information from the rest of the sentence.

Always use *who* when referring to persons, whether or not what you have to say about them is essential:

My aunt, who loves cucumber sandwiches, is coming. (correct)

My aunt *that* loves cucumber sandwiches is coming. (incorrect)

Verbs

A *verb* is a word or group of words that expresses an action or a state of being. There are several different types of verbs:

- Transitive
- Intransitive
- Active
- Passive
- Linking
- Helping
- Verbals

Transitive vs. Intransitive Verbs

Transitive verbs need an object in order to complete their meaning. Something must be affected by or connected to the action expressed by the verb or else the sentence won't make sense:

Nicholas enjoys *movies*.

If you omitted the word *movies* from the first example, the meaning of the sentence would be lost.

That's not true of the following statement, however:

Olga ran *the meeting*.

If you removed *the meeting*, the resulting statement would still express a complete thought:

Olga *ran*.

Intransitive verbs need no objects in order to express a complete idea. Omitting the object, however, changes the meaning of the verb. The revised statement indicates that Olga has performed an entirely different action.

Some verbs, like *to enjoy*, are always transitive. Most, like *to change*, can be used in either a transitive or intransitive sense. Others, such as *to waddle* or *to soar*, are always intransitive. You can't, for example, *waddle* an object.

Linking Verbs

Linking verbs are a special type of intransitive verb that don't express action. Instead, they link the subject with the rest of the sentence:

Fortinbras *was* Norwegian.

She *will be* queen someday.

Linking verbs express the subject's state of being. Thus, the most common linking verb is *to be*, followed by verbs of the senses, including *to taste*, *to feel*, *to look*, and *to smell*; also the verbs *to seem*, *to appear*, and *to become*.

Helping Verbs

Helping verbs alter the meaning of the verbs to which they're added. The following are some of the most commonly used helping verbs: *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *being*, *been*, *has*, *have*, *had*, *shall*, *will*, *can*, *may*, *should*, *could*, *might*, *must*, *do*, *did*, *does*. Each subtly changes the meaning of the verb it accompanies. The verb *can*, for example, emphasizes ability:

Iphigenia *can light* the funeral pyre.

The verb *may* indicates permission:

You *may go* to Thebes.

Active vs. Passive Verbs

Transitive verbs may express either an active or a passive quality, often referred to as the active or passive voice. The *active voice* indicates that the subject performs the action:

Hector *tamed* the horse.

The *passive voice* is expressed through the use of the helping verb *to be* and the word *by*. In addition, the passive voice exchanges subject and object:

The horse *was tamed by* Hector.

Whereas the first statement emphasizes Hector, the second directs our attention to his horse.

Tense

Helping verbs may also be used to indicate whether an action occurred in the past or will occur in the future. The time in which an action takes place is called a verb's tense. The three principal tenses are

- Present
- Simple past
- Future

Present Tense

The *present tense* indicates actions or states of being occurring right now. It's normally expressed by the root form of the verb. In most cases, an *-s* is added to the end of the root to distinguish the third person singular:

I, you, we, they *eat*.

He, she, it *eats*.

Verbs ending in *-o*, like *do* and *go*, add an *-es* in the third person singular. Changing the form of a verb in this way is called conjugating the verb, and each altered form is called a conjugation.

Many English verbs don't form the present tense in the normal fashion, however. Unfortunately, there's no accurate way to predict these exceptions; they must simply be learned. Verbs conjugated in the normal fashion are called *regular verbs*, and the exceptions are known as *irregular verbs*. The most common irregular verbs are *to be* and *to have*:

I *am/have*.

You, we, they *are/have*.

He, she, it *is/has*.

Simple Past Tense

The *simple past tense* indicates an action or state of being that was completed in the past. For most regular verbs, the past tense is formed simply by adding *-ed* to the root form a verb:

I, you, he, she, it, we, they *played*.

Some verbs may be regular in the present, but irregular in the past. The past tense of the verb *to eat*, for example, doesn't add *-ed*, but changes form altogether:

I, you, he, she, it, we, they *ate*.

Future Tense

The *future tense* indicates actions or states of being that will occur in the future, or a determination to perform an action or experience a state of being in the future. There are no irregular conjugations of the future tense. It's formed simply by adding the helping verb *will* to the root form of the verb:

Scarlett *will go* to the party.

Ashley *will be* warm in that coat.

Participles

You may also express the present tense by using the helping verb *to be* and adding *-ing* to the root of the accompanying verb:

Leonardo *is painting*.

Callas *is feeling* unwell.

Verb conjugations that follow helping verbs are known as *participles*. Participles may express either past tense or present tense. The present participle is conjugated, as we've seen, by adding *-ing* to the root form of the verb. The past participle of regular verbs takes the same form as the simple past tense:

help (root)

helped (simple past)

helped (past participle)

Some irregular verbs use the same form for both the simple past and the past participle:

catch (root)

caught (past tense)

caught (past participle)

Other irregular verbs use different forms for the past tense and the past participle:

be (root)

was (simple past)

been (past participle)

Imperfect Tenses

The *imperfect tenses* express ongoing or incomplete actions or states. When used with a present tense conjugation of the verb *to be*, the present participle forms what's known as the *present imperfect*:

Martha *is dancing*.

Depending on the context of the sentence, the present imperfect may also be used to indicate events occurring in the near or immediate future:

Martha *is dancing* at Lincoln Center next week.

When used with a past tense conjugation of *to be*, the present participle forms the *past imperfect*, indicating an incomplete or ongoing action or state in the past:

I *was walking* to the gazebo when I heard the thunder.

When combined with the helping verb *will* and the root form of the verb *to be*, the present participle forms the *future imperfect*, indicating an ongoing state or action in the future:

Charles *will be flying* regularly from now on.

Perfect Tenses

The *perfect tenses* use the past participle to indicate actions or states completed at the time of speaking or at the time indicated by the accompanying helping verbs. When the past participle is combined with a present tense conjugation of *to have*, it forms the *present perfect*. This tense describes an action that began in the recent past and continues up to the present moment:

I *have enjoyed* talking to you.

This statement only makes sense if you're still involved in the conversation.

The *past perfect* expresses an action or state completed in the past, in relation to another past event that's either stated or implied. The past perfect is formed from the past participle and a past conjugation of *to have*:

Martha thought she *had heard* a prowler.

I *had decided* to go, but changed my mind when I thought it over.

The *future perfect* indicates an action or state will conclude at a definite time in the future. The future perfect uses the helping verb *will*, plus the root form of *to have*, plus the past participle:

They *will have finished* dinner by seven o'clock.

Compound Progressive Tenses

The *compound progressive tenses* combine the perfect and the imperfect to express several types of ongoing actions or states. The *past progressive* uses the past tense of *to have*, the past participle of *to be*, and a present participle to indicate ongoing actions completed in the past in relation to another past action:

George *had been chopping* down the cherry tree when his father asked him to come in for dinner.

The *present progressive* uses the present of *to have*, the past participle of *to be*, and a present participle to indicate actions begun in the past and continuing into the present:

Poor Abe *has been working* on that address for days now.

The *future progressive* combines *will*, *have*, the past participle of *to be*, and a present participle to express continuous actions initiated in the present or recent past and concluding at a definite point in the future:

By the time you get this letter, we *will have been traveling* for six straight days.

Mood

The *mood* of a verb indicates whether the action or state is to be regarded as a fact, a command, or a matter of desire or speculation. Several moods operate in the English language. The most frequently employed is the *indicative mood*, which is used to make statements of fact or to ask questions. So far, all of the examples we've cited have used the indicative mood.

The imperative mood expresses commands, directions, or requests:

Go to your room and sit there.

Turn left at the green house.

The *conditional mood* indicates probable actions or states; whether or not they'll actually occur usually depends on some other action or condition. The conditional uses the helping verbs *may*, *might*, *could*, *should*, and *would*, together with the root form of a verb:

She *might* attend, if her stepmother allows.

The conditional may also express past possible actions or states:

She *would have gone*, but her stepmother refused.

She *would have been going* too, if her stepmother hadn't been such a witch.

The *subjunctive mood* expresses states of urgency, formality, speculation, or nonreality. The subjunctive uses the present and past tense of verbs in unusual ways to express the unusual quality of the matter at hand:

I demand that he *listen* to me.

Here, the expected third-person conjugation, *listens*, is replaced by the imperative form, *listen*, to indicate urgency or desire. Unexpected use of the past tense of *to be* suggests a merely conceptual possibility in the future:

If she *were* to stay, she might regret it.

The same use of *were* may also indicate a situation that's completely contrary to fact:

If only he *were* ambitious, he would go far.

Verbals

Verbals are verb forms that function either as nouns or as descriptive words or phrases. English uses three types of verbals:

- Infinitives
- Gerunds
- Past participles

The *infinitive* form of the verb indicates pure action or state-of-being, unconditioned by reference to person, number, tense, or mood. Usually, it's indicated by placing the word *to* in front of the root form of a verb. The infinitive can function as a subject or an object:

To read was his passion.

She planned *to cook*.

Infinitives may also describe or modify other words:

His willingness *to gossip* made him an easy target.

Here, the infinitive form of the verb *to gossip* modifies the noun *willingness*.

The present participle used either as a noun or a descriptive is referred to as a *gerund*:

Jogging is good for the heart.

The *squirming* worm made him faint.

The past participle usually functions only as a descriptive word:

Mrs. Kong has *devoted* her life to that boy. (past participle)

She was a *devoted* mother. (Descriptive)

Adjectives

Words that describe other words are known collectively as *modifiers*. *Adjectives* are modifiers that describe nouns and pronouns. They usually answer one of the following questions:

- What kind?
- Which one?
- How many?
- Whose?

More than one adjective may be used to describe a single noun. In the phrase, *all those blue-green circles*, *all* indicates how many circles, *those* explains which ones, and *blue-green* describes what kind.

The quality or state expressed by an adjective may have three levels of intensity. The first level is indicated by the root form of the adjective, also known as its *positive* form. The second level is expressed by the *comparative*, normally formed by adding *-er* to the root form of the adjective, while the highest level is expressed by the *superlative*, normally formed by adding *-est* to the root:

sweet, sweeter, sweetest

Note that with adjectives like *pretty* or *silly*, the *-y* changes to *-i* before the comparative and superlative endings are added:

pretty, prettier, prettiest

silly, sillier, silliest

In addition, multisyllabic adjectives not ending in *-y* don't add any endings to the root form of the adjective. Instead, the word *more* is used to indicate the comparative and the word *most* is used to indicate the superlative:

submissive, *more* submissive, *most* submissive

A few adjectives, meanwhile, form the comparative and superlative irregularly:

bad, worse, worst

good, better, best

little, less, least

Adverbs

Adverbs are modifiers that describe verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. They answer the questions:

- How?
- When?
- To what degree?

While adjectives add dimension to nouns and pronouns, adverbs tend to enliven an entire sentence:

Joan fell *abruptly* to her knees.

Ludwig turned *sharply* and *quickly* left the room.

Like adjectives, adverbs may use comparative and superlative forms to indicate intensity. Single-syllable adverbs add *-er* and *-est*, respectively:

fast, faster, fastest

late, later, latest

Adverbs ending in *-y*, however, normally use *more* and *most* to achieve comparison:

fondly, *more* fondly, *most* fondly

Prepositions

Prepositions are words or phrases that express relationships of space, time, or purpose:

Carl ran *across* the street.

The mail will arrive *in* an hour.

Lucretia came *about* the job.

The most common prepositions are *in*, *as*, *by*, *to*, *for*, *beside*, *before*, *above*, *beyond*, *between*, *until*, and *with*. Some prepositions consist of two or more words: *for example*, *because of*, *in spite of*, and *in regard to*.

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are words that link words or groups of words within a sentence. The most common conjunctions are *and*, *but*, and *or*. All three are known as *coordinate conjunctions*, because they link similar parts of speech, such as two or more verbs or two or more nouns:

The Medici family eats *and* drinks.

Would you like ice cream *or* spinach?

A few coordinate conjunctions come in pairs, and are referred to as *correlative conjunctions*:

Both Lyle and Katie loved carrots.

The most common pairs of correlative conjunctions are *either/or*, *neither/nor*, and *not only/but also*.

Subordinate conjunctions, on the other hand, indicate a dependent relationship between words or word groups made up of different parts of speech:

Until he returned, she would scarcely touch food or drink.

In the second example, both parts of the sentence could conceivably stand alone. However, the meaning is made clear when they're joined by the word *until*.

Interjections

Interjections are words that have little or no connection with a sentence, and fulfill none of the functions of the other functions of speech. Some are forms of greeting, such as *hello*, *hi*, *good-bye*, and *so long*. Most interjections, however, express feelings:

Oh dear, I forgot to buy dental floss.

Good gravy, Marie!

Mild interjections are separated from the rest of the sentence only by a comma. Expressions of stronger feeling are separated by an exclamation point.

This concludes our review of the parts of speech. The material covered in this section, however, provides only a glimpse of the richness and variety of the English language. Later in the course, you'll be provided with several resources so that you can examine this subject more closely. In the meantime, stop by *Writer's Room 1* to see how much you've already learned.

Writer's Room 1

At the end of each section of your *The Writing Habit, Part II* text, you'll be asked to check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "Writer's Room." Writing the answers to these questions will help you review what you've learned so far. Please complete *Writer's Room 1* now.



1–3: Find the nouns and pronouns in the following sentences.

1. The controversial novel, *Ulysses*, was written by an Irishman named James Joyce.
2. In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in the middle of a dark wood.
3. Five summers have passed; five summers with the length of five long winters.
4. Which of the following does *not* determine the form of a relative pronoun?
 - a. Number
 - b. Person
 - c. Tense
 - d. Case

5–7: Choose the correct form of the pronoun in each of the following sentences.

5. Miranda and (me/I) survived the storm.
6. Everyone thought (we/us) four had been lost.
7. In time, Oberon and (she/her) agreed to disagree.
8. *True or False?* Adverbs describe verbs, nouns, adjectives, and other adverbs.
9. Which of the following is an example of the past perfect tense?
 - a. I helped.
 - b. I have been helping.
 - c. I had helped.
 - d. I have helped.
10. Which of the following moods is used to express statements and questions?
 - a. Indicative
 - b. Subjunctive
 - c. Imperative
 - d. Conditional
11. Which of the following is a preposition?
 - a. And
 - b. Near
 - c. Or
 - d. Fiercely
12. *True or False?* Collective nouns may use either the singular or the plural form of a verb.

Check your answers with those on page 55.
