

Be a Grammar Superstar!

Answers to the 25 Most Common Grammar, Punctuation, and Usage Conundrums

Arlene Miller - The Grammar Diva

Author of

- *The Best Little Grammar Book Ever!*
- *Correct Me If I'm Wrong*
- *The Best Grammar Workbook Ever!*
- *Fifty Shades of Grammar*
- *The Great Grammar Cheat Sheet*
- *Beyond Worksheets*
- *The Grammar Diva Blog (weekly posts)*

Arlene Miller



THE GRAMMAR DIVA

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TO THE READER: The tips included here are not meant to be a complete lesson on grammar or punctuation. For more complete information about grammar, punctuation, word usage, and writing, you are encouraged to buy the following paperbacks or e-books!

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1. I or Me? He or Him?

The pronouns *I, we, he, she, and they* are used as a sentence subjects (often at or near the beginning of the sentence and before the verb); the pronouns *me, him, her, us, and them* are used as objects (often after the verb or after a preposition like *for* or *to* or *with*). Sometimes confusion about which one to use occurs when there is another noun or pronoun with the pronoun in question. Take the other person out, and you will find your answer.

Examples:

(He and) *I* went to the movies.
She gave the tickets to (him and) *me*.
They gave a gift to *us* (teachers).

P.S.

Wrong: *between you and I.*

Right: *between you and me.*

2. Singular *They*

They is generally a plural pronoun. The singular forms are *he*, *she*, and *it*. However, sometimes we run into a problem where we need to use the singular form, but we don't want to specify a particular gender, so we are stuck with using the awkward "*he or she*" construction. It is now okay to use *they* as a singular pronoun. I don't like it and I won't use it, but you can if you want to. I would suggest rewriting the sentence to avoid the problem.

Examples:

Everybody is bringing *his or her* passport. (*Everybody*, although it may sound plural, is actually singular. You can tell because you use the singular verb *is*—as opposed to the plural verb *are*—with it. "*His or her*" is all we have to represent the singular when we are talking about both genders, or don't know the genders. If our "*everybody*" is all male or all female, we have no problem. We just use either *him* or we use *her*. Most people just use *they*, even though it is plural and doesn't agree with the singular subject, *everybody*. I think the best solution is to simply change the wording. For example

Everybody is bringing a passport.

All the passengers are bringing passports.

Of course, using "he or she" is still acceptable and fine (and technically correct).

P.S.

This is one of those situations where *he or she* is the "I am trying to impress the reader" style. If you want to use *they* in the singular, it is fine. Go ahead. But if you are writing a college admission essay or a cover letter, I wouldn't. I would rewrite the sentence to avoid the problem—just in case the reader hasn't heard (or hasn't accepted) of the use of the singular *they*.

3. That, Which, and Who

Who is used for people, so we have that one out of the way.

That is used to begin a clause that is needed for the meaning of the sentence; a "*that*" clause has no commas around it.

Which is used to begin a clause that contains added information that could be left out of the sentence. You would use commas around this clause.

Examples:

The towel *that I left out in the rain* belongs to my neighbor. "*That I left out in the rain*" identifies which towel and is needed.

This yellow towel, *which I left out in the rain*, belongs to my neighbor. "*Which I left out in the rain*" is added information. It is not needed to identify which towel in this sentence. Use commas around it.

This is the girl who lives next door. (tells which girl)

Mr. Jones, who used to be a math teacher, is loved by everyone at the school.

4. Subjunctive Mood

Verbs are complicated. They have tense and voice— and they also have *moods*. The subjunctive mood is used to say things that are not true. Always use subjunctive mood with the verb *wish*.

Examples:

I wish I was a princess. (Incorrect)

I wish I were a princess. (Correct)

If I was rich, I would buy a mansion. (Incorrect)

If I were rich, I would buy a mansion. (Correct)

If I was you, I wouldn't go. (Incorrect)

If I were you, I wouldn't go. (Correct)

5. *Me* and *Myself* (and *I*)

Many people get confused with *I* and *me*, but *myself* is also often used incorrectly, when *I* or *me* should be used. The rule is you generally cannot use *myself* unless the subject of the sentence is *I*.

Examples:

I made this dress *myself*. (Correct)

I myself baked this great pie. (Correct)

I sing myself a song when I am sad. (Correct)

He gave the books to my friends and myself. (Incorrect—use *me*.)

My friends and myself are going on a hike. (Incorrect—use *I* here.)

P.S.

Yourself, *herself*, etc., follow the same rule. For example, you can't use *yourself* unless *you* is the subject of the sentence.

Did you bake this pie yourself?

The cat gave himself a bath.

6. Quotation Marks with Other Punctuation

There are just a few things to remember about using other punctuation with quotation marks. However, British usage is the opposite of American usage, so I am going to give you the American usage. Here are the standards:

1. Periods and commas ALWAYS go *inside* quotation marks, no matter what.
2. Colons and semicolons always go *outside* quotation marks. no matter what.
3. With question marks and exclamation marks, it depends. If the question mark is part of the quote, it goes inside the quotes; if the question is the whole sentence, it goes outside the quoted part of the sentence. If both the entire sentence and the quote are questions, use one question mark and put it inside the quotes. Exclamation points are treated the same way.

Examples:

- She asked, "Are we there yet?" (Just the part in quotes is a question)
- Did she say, "I think we are there"? (Whole sentence is a question, but the quoted part isn't. Do not use a period after the sentence.)
- Did she ask, "Are we there yet?" (Both quote and entire sentence are questions, but use only one question mark—inside.)

7. Italics or Quotes?

Let's say you have a book title—or maybe a song title. Do you italicize it or put it in quotes? The general rule is that whole things are italicized, and parts of things are quoted. Of course, in handwriting you cannot italicize, so you underline instead.

There are some variations in some particular style guides, so if you are using a particular style guide (MLA, AP, Chicago), it may disagree. My advice usually agrees with *Chicago Manual of Style* and most other grammar references. So, here is the usual method:

- Book titles are *italicized*; short story titles and poems are *quoted*.
- Magazine/newspaper titles are *italicized*; articles within them are *quoted*.
- Song titles are *quoted*, but the whole CD title is *italicized*.
- TV series names are *italicized*, but the name of an episode is *quoted*.
- Opera titles are *italicized*, but the name of an aria would be in *quotes*.

Names of paintings are also in italics, as are names of boats and planes (if their owners give them an actual name).

8. Apostrophes

1. One use of apostrophes is to indicate possession or ownership. To make a singular noun (or a plural noun that doesn't end in *s* already) possessive, add *apostrophe s*. To make a plural that already ends in *s* possessive, just add *s*.

Examples:

My *sister's* bike is broken. (one sister)

My *sisters'* bikes are broken. (more than one sister)

The *children's* bikes are broken. (plural word that doesn't end in *s*)

If a singular word already ends in *s*, it doesn't matter. You still add *apostrophe s*. You can usually go by how you would pronounce the word; spell it the way you say it.

Examples:

Thomas's bike is broken.

My *boss's* bike is broken.

My *bosses'* bikes are broken. (plural *boss* —both the singular and plural possessives are pronounced the same way, but they are spelled differently, following the rules.)

P.S.

There are a few exceptions to the rule, but most of the time that is how we do it! When a word ends in *es* that is pronounced *ez*, we just add an *apostrophe*. *Jesus* and *Moses* also do not take the extra *s*.

Examples:

Socrates' words are written here.

Jesus' words are written here.

Moses' words are written here.

2. Another use of apostrophes is in contractions. They take the place of the letter that is left out. For example: *we're* (we are), *isn't* (is not), *I'm* (I am)

P.S.

This must be where we talk about *its* and *it's*! *It's* is a contraction. The contraction takes the place of the *i* in *is*. Therefore, the possessive is *its* without the apostrophe. The other possessive pronouns don't have apostrophes either: *ours*, *yours*, *theirs*, *hers*.

3. Another use of apostrophes is in plurals. Or so many people seem to think. The best thing I can say here is **don't**. Hardly any plurals have apostrophes. Apostrophes are primarily for possessives and contractions. Even 1990s doesn't get an apostrophe (unless you are using it as a possessive rather than a plural). However, *the '90s* does because you have left out the first two numbers.

The only time you would use an apostrophe in a plural is if the plural might be misread any other way.

Examples:

- I got all *A's*. (Otherwise, it looks like the word *As*.)
- You should capitalize all your pronoun *I's*. (Otherwise, it looks like the word *Is*.)

P.S.

When you use a word as itself (like the *A* and *I* above), you italicize it. However, the *s* to make it plural is not in italics. (Example: There are too many *ands* in your sentence. I suppose you could put an apostrophe in there, but you don't actually need to.)

9. Hyphens and Dashes

These punctuation marks come in three sizes.

Hyphens are the short ones (-) that are used to split words, either compound words or words that cannot fit on the line.

En dashes (–) are the medium-length ones that are used as the minus sign and to separate ranges of numbers (for example, pages 81–92).

Em dashes (—) are the long ones that are used to indicate a break of thought in a sentence (I just hope—and I don't think it will ever happen—that I win the lottery.)

None of these three marks generally has a space on either side. Good luck trying to make that em dash on your computer! On my Mac, I press Shift/Option/Hyphen (on the number line) to make the em dash. Some people use two hyphens in a row to indicate an em dash. Sometimes your computer will put them together, but what you have is really an en dash (no big deal).

Hyphens in Compound Modifiers

Compound modifiers are two-or-more-word modifiers. They are hyphenated when they come right before the word (noun or pronoun) they modify, but not usually if they come after the word.

Examples:

I like well-done steak. (*but*, I like my steak well done.)

He is a three-year-old boy. (*but*, The boy is three years old.)

She is an often-quoted poet. (*but*, The poet is often quoted.)

10. The Oxford Comma

The Oxford comma is otherwise known as the *series comma*, the comma that is used before the **and** at the end of a series (I like cereal, toast, and eggs for breakfast.) It is optional. Use it if you like; don't use it if you don't like it. I like it, and I recommend you use it. It sometimes clears up something that might be misleading. It occasionally makes something unclear, but I think it more often clears things up.

Examples:

The supermodels, President Lincoln and his wife were at the party. (Huh?)
The supermodels, President Lincoln, and his wife were at the party. (Oh!)

11. Using the Semicolon (semicolons rock!)

Do not be afraid of the semicolon! It is easy to use and really has only two uses.

The first use of a semicolon is to separate two complete sentences that are closely related. You can also use a period or a comma with a conjunction:

Examples:

I went to Harvard; my sister went to Yale.

I went to Harvard. My sister went to Yale.

I went to Harvard, but my sister went to Yale.

It doesn't matter which way you write it. However, remember that there is no capital letter after the semicolon.

Semicolons are also used to straighten out a series where the individual items already have commas in them (or you can rewrite the series).

Examples:

Mr. Johnson, the major, Mrs. Hammond, the vice-mayor, the police chief, and Michael Arnold, the fire chief, were present at the council meeting. (How many people is that? Who knows?)

Mr. Johnson, the major; Mrs. Hammond; the vice-mayor; the police chief; and Michael Arnold, the fire chief, were present at the council meeting. (Now we know that five people were there.)

12. Commas After People's Titles

No, you don't need to use them.

Example:

Martin Luther King, Jr. made a very famous speech. **Yes.**

Martin Luther King, Jr., made a very famous speech. **No**

13. Punctuating and Capitalizing Salutations and Closings of Letters/Emails

The salutation, or greeting, of a business letter or email should be followed by a colon; the greeting of a friendly letter or email uses a comma.

Examples:

Dear Dr. Patterson:
Dear Sue,

The closing of a letter or email is followed by a comma; only the first word of the closing is capitalized.

Example:

Sincerely yours,

*I don't recommend using *Thank you* as a closing by itself. It is fine to use *Thank you.* (as a sentence followed by a period) before your closing.

Example (yes):

Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Joe Doe

Example (no):

Thank you,

Joe Doe

14. Capitalizing Headings and Titles

There are a few ways to capitalize headings and titles: capitalizing the first letter of every word, capitalizing the first letter of only the first word, not capitalizing anything (newspapers seem to have the most variety).

Here is the standard way:

1. Always capitalize the first and last words no matter what they are.
2. Capitalize all words except:
a, an, and the (unless they are the first or last words)
conjunctions (*and, but, or*)
prepositions of four letters or fewer (*in, out, by, to, at, up, down, with, etc.*)

P.S.

Don't forget to capitalize *Is, Are, Am, Was . . .* they are verbs.

Examples:

Tender *Is* the Night

I Heard *It* Through the Grapevine (*It* is a pronoun and must be capitalized)

Whose Life *Is* It, Anyway?

15. Starting Sentences with Conjunctions/Ending Sentences with Prepositions

So (just kidding!), can you start a sentence with *and*, *but*, or *so*? Yes and no. Sometimes, there are separate rules for "informal speaker and writing" and for "cover letters and college applications." By all means, if you are writing a novel, creative nonfiction, or even a technical manual, use a conjunction at the beginning of a sentence. However, in formal writing where you are trying to make an impression on someone who has your future in his or her hands, I wouldn't. It is never really necessary in business writing.

Similarly, it is fine to end a sentence with a preposition—usually. *Where are you at?* is still not an acceptable sentence! However, sometimes a sentence becomes awkward when you try not to end it with a preposition.

Whom are you going with? (That is fine. However, you could say, *With whom are you going?* And yes, I realize that most people would use *who* instead of *whom*, but that is another whole story!)

Whom is that car for? (Same thing.)

16. Big Words or Short Ones?

Although my publishing company is called *bigwords101*, I am not telling you to use big words all the time. Some people like to write with big, or uncommon, words to impress others. However, many times they come off sounding pompous. Yes, it is nice to have a big vocabulary and therefore some choice in the words you want to use, but it is not necessary, or even desirable, to use big words when small ones will do.

Sometimes you need a more "sophisticated" word to get your idea across, and that is fine; however, good writing doesn't mean using fancy words, one after the other. In fact, shorter words actually have more punch, particularly if they are at the end of a sentence.

Example:

Are you really buying the wedding dress with that huge bow? (Say the sentence and see how *bow* is emphasized because it is at the end.)

I will be utilizing several strategies to repair the vehicle. Why not just say I have several ideas about how to fix the car?

17. Parallel Construction

Parallel construction means that when you write things that are similar, you use the same type of grammatical construction for them.

Examples:

I like to fish, swim, and camping in the woods. (not parallel)

I like to fish, to swim, and to camp. (parallel)

We enjoyed shopping with my friends, sightseeing, and we took the train. (not parallel)

We enjoyed shopping with my friends, sightseeing, and taking the train. (parallel)

Parallel construction applies to lists too. If you have a list and one of the list items is a complete sentence, then all the items should be complete sentences. If each item in the list begins with an infinitive (*to* and a verb), then they all should.

Example:

You will learn the following things in the training class:

- To train your dog
- To choose a competent vet
- To housebreak your dog
- Socializing your new dog (This item is not parallel. It should be *To socialize your new dog*)

18. Redundancy

Be careful to avoid redundancy in your writing. Here are some examples of redundancy.

Examples:

8 a.m. in the morning (8 a.m. is enough)

very unique (It is either unique or it isn't; you don't need *very*)

he jumped off of the bed (*off the bed*)

each and every one of you (*Each* is enough, or *every* is enough; don't use both.)

collaborate together (just *collaborate*)

due to the fact that (use *because*)

for the purpose of (use *to*)

19. *Affect* and *Effect*

The difference between these two words is their parts of speech. *Affect* is a verb (action word) and *effect* is a noun (thing). You can remember this because *action* and *affect* both begin with *a*.

Examples:

The hot weather *affects* my mood.
The hot weather has an *effect* on my mood.

However, occasionally, the roles are reversed, and *affect* is a noun (meaning a *way of being*) and *effect* is a verb (to bring about). I wouldn't worry about it; it doesn't happen often.

Examples:

He had a strange *affect*. (way of acting)
The President will *effect* change in our healthcare system.

20. Principle and Principal

This can be a tricky one. There are actually five uses of *principal/principle*, and four of them end with *al*.

Examples:

She is the new *principal* of the school. (school leader)

He has the *principal* role in the play. (adjective meaning *the main* or *primary*)

He is a *principal* in the dance company. (noun meaning *the main one*)

My mortgage includes *principal* and interest. (the *money* meaning)

Eating meat is against my *principles*. (ethics or rules)

21. Lay and Lie

These two are the bane of many people's existences! The difference is that *lay* is transitive (has a direct object), meaning you must *lay* something down.

Examples:

Go *lay* your blanket on the sand. (*lay a blanket*)
I am going to *lie* on the blanket.
I am *laying* this book on the top shelf. (*lay a book*)
The rocks are *lying* in the yard.

The major problem comes in the simple past and past participle forms. The past tense of *lay* is *laid*, and the past participle is *laid* also. Not too difficult. However, the past tense of *lie* is *lay*, and the past participle is *lain*.

Examples: (These are all correct.)

Yesterday, I *laid these books* on the top shelf.
All of my life, I *have laid my coat* on the sofa when I come home.
Yesterday, I *lay* on the blanket. (yup, past tense of *lie*)
All week, I have *lain* in the sun after work. (yup, *lain* is a word)

22. e.g. or i.e.?

These two abbreviations are from the Latin.

e.g. stands for *exempli gratia*, or *for example*.

i.e. stands for *id est*, or *that is*.

Examples:

I love all team sports, *e.g.*, baseball, hockey, and basketball.

I am using the expensive dishes for the holidays, *i.e.*, the real china.

You can always just use *for example* or *that is* instead of the abbreviations. If you use the abbreviations, remember to put a period after each letter and commas around the abbreviations. If you use the words, put commas around them.

Examples:

I love all team sports, *for example*, baseball, hockey, and basketball.

I am using the expensive dishes for the holidays, *that is*, the real china.

23. *Imply* or *Infer*?

Imply and *infer* go in opposite directions. To *imply* something means to hint at it without coming out and saying it directly. To *infer* something means to take an educated guess from what someone is *implying*. So, *implying* goes outward, while inferring comes inward.

Examples:

Her smile *implied* that she was happy.

I *inferred* that she was happy from the big smile on her face.

24. *Than* or *Then*?

This is an easy one. Most of the time, an error in usage is really just a careless typo.

Than is used for comparison:
I am taller *than* you are.

Then is an adverb and refers to *time*:
I went to the store, and *then* I came home.

P.S.

Remember that *then* is not a conjunction and cannot connect sentences by itself. You still need a conjunction:

I went to the store, then I came home. (incorrect: run-on sentence)

I went to the store, and then I came home. (correct)

25. Toward or Towards?

You pick. They are both correct and mean the same thing. Americans tend to use *toward* without the *s*, while the British tend to use *towards*.

26. Who and Whom

Yes, I know the subtitle is Answers to the 25 **Most Common** Grammar, Punctuation, and Usage Conundrums. But how could I let you go without clearing up *who* and *whom*?

Who and *whom* are like *I* and *me*, which are right at the beginning of this booklet. Who is used for sentence subjects, and whom is used for objects. There are a few ways to try to figure out whether to use *who* or *whom*:

- If you are a grammar whiz, you can figure it out grammatically and see if the word is being used as a subject or some type of object.
- You can make the sentence a question and answer it, or in some other way substitute *he* or *him*. If you would use *he*, use *who*; if you would use *him*, use *whom*. Here is an example: Who/Whom are you taking to the movies? I am taking **him**. So use **whom**.
- You can find all the verbs in the sentence and then find their subjects. Every verb needs a subject. You can then determine if the *who* or *whom* in question is a subject, in which case it would be *who*. Here is an example: I know who/whom is lying. The verbs are *know* and *is lying*. The subject of *know* is *I*. Where is the subject for *is lying*? It must be *who*.

P.S.

If you are deciding on *who* or *whom* after a preposition like *with*, *by*, *for*, *to*, always use *whom*: by whom, with whom, for whom, to whom.

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