Grammar Review

What is grammar?

Grammar are the set of rules governing how the words in a language may be joined to make sense.

Hey, isn't there something wrong with that sentence?

Good catch. The noun "Grammar" is singular while the verb "are" is plural. According to the rules of English grammar, the sentence is ungrammatical. It should have been written:

> *Grammar is the set of rules governing how the words in a language may be joined to make sense.*

We may understand the grammar of a sentence, without understanding what the sentence means. For example:

> *The porturbs in the bigger torms have tanted the maret's rotment brokly.*

Without knowing what this sentence means, or many of the words in it, you should be able to pick out the **subject and predicate** (verb) in the sentence (Subject: *porturbs.* What have they done? They have *tanted.).* If you can do this, it means you have grasped much of the grammar of the sentence. You understand how the words are put together, even if you don't understand the words.

Next, consider the following "sentence," composed of perfectly legitimate English words:

> *If running successful cars bagels fans would have a standard enough doughnuts dripping killer watches.*

In this "sentence," even though you know the meaning of the words, it is difficult to grasp the role they play. What is the subject? What is the predicate?

Of course, neither of the last two "sentences" is meaningful. In the first example, although we can discern a grammar, the words are nonsense. In the second example, the words are recognizable, but they are not properly linked. In order for our sentences to be meaningful we have to have the right words linked in the right manner.

This workshop explores these basic elements of English grammar:
- Sentences (complete, run-on, and fragments)
- Tenses
- Pronouns
- Possessives
- Commas

An understanding and application of these fundamental elements of grammar will help you unleash the awesome power of the English language.

Sentences

What is a sentence?
A sentence is a group of words, with a definite subject and verb-predicate, that expresses a **complete** thought.

> *Jack is talking.* This is an example of a proper English sentence. There is a definite subject, *Jack,* and a definite predicate, *is talking.* Together these parts form a complete thought.

> *If Jack is talking* is not a proper English sentence. This fragment does not represent a complete thought. We wonder what will happen "If Jack is talking?"

Sentence fragments
If Jack is talking is a s**entence fragment.** A sentence fragment either has no clear subject or predicate, or does not state a complete thought, or both. Thus, **it can not stand alone as a sentence.** We often use sentence fragments in

conversation or informal writing. In these situations we can usually figure out what the fragment means by the **context** in which it is used. In formal writing, however, we don't want our readers to have to "figure out" what we've written. In these situations we should try to make our writing as clear as possible.

Let's turn this fragment into a proper English sentence that states a complete thought:
> *If Jack is talking, you should listen.*

Some other examples of sentence fragments:
> Although, you were sleeping.
> If you come over.
> The food, the drink, the silverware, the table.
> Because he went out.

How could you turn these sentence fragments into complete sentences?

Run-on sentences

Two or more **independent clauses** (clauses that can stand alone as sentences) improperly joined make a **run-on sentence.** There are two basic categories of run-on sentences:
- Comma splices (two independent clauses joined by a comma)
- Fused sentences (two independent clauses joined by no punctuation at all)

Examples:
> Comma splice: *I went to the store, I bought some milk.*
> Fused sentence: *I went to the store I bought some milk.*

There are a number of ways you can correct a run-on sentence:
- Create two separate sentences.
- Link the independent clauses with a semicolon.
- Combine the independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction.
- Subordinate one of the independent clauses by using a subordinating conjunction.

There is no one right method for all circumstances. Which method you choose will depend on what you intend to say with your sentence.

Some examples:
> Separate sentences: *I went to the store. I bought some milk.*
> Semicolon: *Aliens landed; they took me hostage.*
> Comma followed by coordinating conjunction: *Becky became a rock star when she was 17, but she never graduated from high school.*
>> Note: The **coordinating conjunctions are But, Or, Yet, So, For, And, Nor** (remember them with the memory device: **BOYS FAN**).

Each of these methods retains the equality of the clauses being joined. Which method you use will depend on the meaning you want to achieve. Creating two sentences separates the ideas more than using a coordinating conjunction with a comma, which is the closest way you can link two independent clauses.

You may also correct a run-on sentence by **subordinating** one of the clauses. If one clause is subordinated to another it means that one clause relies upon another to complete the thought it began.

For example:
> *Although I went to the store, I did not buy any milk.* Here the first clause, *Although I went to the store,* relies upon the next clause, I *did not buy any milk,* to complete the meaning in the sentence.

Words that signal **subordination:** After, Although, As, Because, Before, Despite, Even though, If, If only, Since, So that, That, Unless, Until, Where, While, Who, Whoever, Whom, Whose

Keep in mind that these terms are not interchangeable. You must choose the proper word for each context.

How could you correct these run-on sentences?

I am a millionaire I've never been happier.

The dentist called your teeth are ready.

The cheerleaders quit the squad they turned in their pom-poms.

Summer is my favorite season the heat still bothers me.

Tenses

The tense, or form, of a verb reflects the time when an action occurs. English has six tenses: **present, past, future, present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect.** In the table below, the verb in parentheses in each example represents the **progressive** form of the verb, which indicates an **ongoing** action.

Tenses at a Glance

TENSE	TIME FRAME	EXAMPLES
Present	Occurring now Habitual action or universal truth	We *work* (*are working*) on the project. Doctors put in long hours.
Past	Action that occurred in the past and hasn't continued to the present	We *worked* (*were working*) for two months. (Note: The progressive form of all the tenses uses the same root word [the present tense] but uses different forms of the helping verb.)
Future	Action that will take place in the future	We *will work* (*will be working*) on the project tomorrow.
Present Perfect	Action (or state of being) occurring at no definite time, or continuing to the present	We *have worked* (*have been working*) on this project before.
Past Perfect	Action completed in the past before some other past action	We *had worked* (*had been working*) for weeks before they signed the contract.
Future Perfect	Action that will be completed in the future before another action	We *will have worked* (*will have been working*) for two weeks once the contract has been signed.

Consistency of tenses

Mastering the use of tenses is crucial to clear communication. Slips in the use of tense can jumble up the actions you're describing, leaving your readers dazed and confused. It is, therefore, crucial that you maintain the consistency of your tenses when describing the same action. For example:

Last night I had gone to the movies with Mary and Stacey. They say they want to see the *Blair Witch Project,* but I had said they are nuts, that *The Sixth Sense* is a better movie. So, we will go to see *Stigmata,* that seemed like a good compromise.

The verbs and verb phrases in the passage above are

Had gone – past perfect

Say – present

Had said – past perfect

Will go to see – future

Seemed – past

Since this passage describes actions that occurred the night before, it calls for the simple past. Only one of the verbs, "seemed," is in the correct tense. As you can see, the variety of tenses makes this passage very difficult to follow.

How could you correct this passage?

Pronouns

Pronouns are words that stand in place of nouns. There are eight types of pronouns in English.

Type	Function	Examples
Personal pronouns	Refer to people or things	I, you, he, she, it, we, they, me, my, his, hers, hers, this, these, that, those
Demonstrative pronouns	Point to specific things	this, these, that, those
Indefinite pronouns	Point to general things; do not specify a particular person or object	another, everybody, anybody, nobody, nothing, several, few, both
Relative pronouns	Introduce clauses that modify nouns	who, whom, whose, whoever, whomever, which, whichever, that
Interrogative pronouns	Begin questions	who, what, which, whoever, whomever, whatever, whichever
Reflexive pronouns	Refer to nouns or pronouns – the subject of a clause	myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves
Intensive pronouns	Stress the noun or pronoun referred to earlier in the sentence	I *myself* am going (in place of someone else)
Reciprocal pronouns	Express mutual relationships	each other, one another

As you will notice, many of the pronouns, such as *who, whoever, myself,* fall into more than one category. What role these words play in any given sentence is determined by their use in that sentence.

Pick out the **pronouns** in the following sentences:
      They're playing our song.
      I get a kick out of you.
      You do something to me.
      Everybody's got something to hide except for me and my monkey.

Pronoun use: Make sure that each pronoun you use has a clear antecedent. An antecedent is the noun that the pronoun stands for. You must also make sure that each pronoun agrees in person, number, and gender with its antecedent.

Pronoun/antecedent clarity: You may know what the pronoun you're using stands for, but if your reader doesn't, then you have failed to adequately communicate. You don't want to leave your reader guessing which pronoun goes with which noun.

Some examples of pronoun/antecedent confusion:

Marilyn told her mother that her pills were on the dresser.
>   Whose pills are on the dresser, Marilyn's or her mother's? We don't know, because we don't know whether *her* refers to *Marilyn* or Marilyn's *mother.*
>   We could clarify this sentence in either of the following ways (which way is correct depends on whose pills they are):
>   *Marilyn told her mother, "Your pills are on the dresser."*
>   Or
>   *Marilyn told her mother, "My pills are on the dresser."*

Take a look at this sentence:
>   *Jesse and Frank told one funny story after another at the party last night. He kills me.*
>   Which brother does "he" refer to? Jesse or Frank? We don't know. How could you correct this sentence to eliminate the confusion?

Pronoun/antecedent agreement: Along with making sure that we have a clear reference for our pronouns, we must also take care to have the pronoun agree in **person, number, and gender** with its antecedent. For instance, in the following passage, the pronoun is plural, while the noun to which it refers is singular:
>   *The V- 12 Jaguar E-type is a great car. They are my favorite automobile.*
>   "They" is **plural,** but only **one** type of car is spoken of. Thus, the pronoun does not agree in number with the noun.
>   Corrected:
>   *The V-12 Jaguar E-type is a great car. It is my favorite automobile.*
>   Note: we also have to change the verb following the pronoun in the second sentence, from "are" (plural) to "is" (singular).

Mistakes of number, such as these, are the most common type of pronoun problem in English.

Let's look at another example:
>   *Many words in our language can claim television as its birthplace.*
>   What's wrong with this sentence? How can you correct it?

Gender agreement: Traditionally, abstract nouns relating to people have taken the male pronoun. For instance:
>   *A student should do **his** work if **he** wants to pass the course.*

>   Although this construction is grammatically correct, there is an implied sexism in the generic use of the masculine pronoun. The solution, to use **he or she** in the place of **he**, yields the following:

>   *A student should do **his** or **her** work if **he** or **she** wants to pass the course.*

>   This is grammatically correct, but it's wordy and leads to clunky sentences.

>   A more elegant solution is to change the singular nouns to plurals, as in:
>   ***Students** should do **their** work if **they** want to pass the course.*

Possessives

1. Most English nouns form their possessives with an apostrophe s ('s) if they are singular, and an s apostrophe (s') if they are plural.
    Singular possessive: The **car's** hood.
    Plural possessive: The **cars'** hoods.

    Remember, just because a possessive adds an s to a word, it does not make that word plural. On the other hand, both singular and plural nouns can be made possessive.

2. For nouns that form their plural in ways other than the addition of an s, form the possessive plural by adding 's. For example:
    Woman's/women's, man's/men's, child's/children's, ox's/oxen's, deer's/deer's, mouse's/mice's

3. You have a couple of options in forming the possessive of singular nouns that end in s. You can either:
    Add an apostrophe to the end of the word:
    Jesus' miracles
    Keats' odes
    Dickens' novels
    …or add an apostrophe s to the end of the word:
    Jesus's miracles
    Keats's odes
    Dickens's novels

    Choose the form that seems easier to pronounce or more natural. Nouns that end in s and have their possessives formed by an apostrophe s can be difficult to pronounce; think of Homer's struggles with his neighbor's last name: **Flandereses'**.

4. The possessive of pairs:
    a. To show joint possession, add 's only to the second member of the pair:
        John and Mary's mother (John and Mary have the same mother.)
    b. To show individual possession, add 's to each member of the pair:
        John's and Mary's tennis rackets (John and Mary each have their own tennis rackets.)

5. Form the possessive of group and compound nouns by adding 's to the end of the unit:
    commander in chief's, someone else's, son-in-law's

6. We usually reserve the 's or s' for the possessive of nouns naming living creatures (human beings and animals). For inanimate objects we usually show possession with the of phrase:
    The roof of the house instead of **The house's roof**

    Some common exceptions to this rule:
    A **day's** wages, a **week's** work, the **year's** (storm's, weekend's) death toll, the **school's** policies, the **government's** meddling, the **car's** performance, the **ship's** crew

Possessives without an apostrophe
The following pronouns show possession without the use of an apostrophe:
His
Hers
Yours
Theirs
Whose

Its

Note: An all-too-common mistake among writers is to write the possessive of "**It**" as **It's.**"
Remember, the possessive of **"It" is "Its." "It's"** is the contraction of, "**It is**" or "**It has.**"

Commas

How important are commas?

Look at the difference a comma makes:
> Comma omitted: *Mr. President is our worst nightmare about to come true.*
> Comma inserted: *Mr. President, is our worst nightmare about to come true?*

When to use commas

1. With a coordinating conjunction to separate two independent clauses
    Put a comma in front of the coordinating conjunction (but, or, yet, so, for, and, nor) that joins the independent clauses of a compound sentence:
    The alien robots are our masters, **but** *they are kind and benevolent.*

2. To separate introductory phrases or clauses from the rest of the sentence
    Introductory words, phrases, or clauses should be separated from the main (independent) clause by a comma.
    Before, *the colors were all mixed together.*
    Although there was almost certainly a second gunman, *no solid proof has been produced.*

3. To separate items in a series
    Use commas to separate a series of coordinate words, phrases, or clauses.
    If you consider each of these people as four individuals you're inviting to the party, then separate their names with commas:
    I am going to invite Bob, and Carol, and Ted, and Alice to the party.
    If you consider them as two couples you're inviting to the party, separate them with commas:
    I am going to invite Bob and Carol, and Ted and Alice to the party.

4. To set off non-restrictive clauses
    A non-restrictive clause supplies additional information about the noun it modifies, but information that is not needed to identify or specify the particular person, place, or thing being talked about. For example, if I only have one brother, then the information about his age is not necessary to uniquely identify him. In that case, the clause in this sentence is **non-restrictive,** and should be set off by commas.
    My brother, **who is two years younger than I**, *is my best friend.*
    If, however, I have more than one brother, then the information about his age could uniquely identify him, and thus should not be set off with commas, because it is **restrictive.**
    My brother who is two years younger than I is my best friend.

Grammar websites

Online English Grammar
www.edunet.com/english/grammar/index.cfm

Modern English Grammar
www.cod.edu/dept/kiesdan/engl 126/bookl26.htm

Guide to Grammar and Style
http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/

Grammar Slammer
http://englishplus.com/grammar/index.htm

Guide to Grammar and Writing
http://webster.commnet.edu/hp/pages/darlina/grammar.htm

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Levin, Gerald. The Macmillan College Handbook. 2nd. Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1991.
Salient Holdings, Inc. Grammar For Smart People: A Grown-Up Guide to Speaking and Writing Better English. Salient Holdings, Inc. Westport, CT: 1998.