

Grammar and Writing

What is grammar?

Grammar is that thing that frustrates and confounds every writer at one time or another. Essentially, in writing, grammar provides the guidelines for readers to understand the words on the page. Grammatical marks (like periods, commas, semi-colons, parentheses) provide cues for us to pause, connect, or shift our thinking. If we didn't have grammar, the words and ideas would just run together on the page and it would become a confused mess. The ability to communicate through writing would be impossible.

Why is grammar so difficult?

First of all, grammar is not logical. There is no "natural" reason for a grammatical rule. Also, rules for written grammar were set up a long time ago and sometimes those rules don't necessarily reflect the way we understand language now. For example, the rule that sentences should not end with a preposition came from Latin. This rule makes some sense in Latin, but it makes no sense in English. However, when the rules for written English were laid down, Latin was the language of the intellectual class, so the "rulemakers" decided to use some of Latin's rules.

Also, some rules of grammar are flexible, but not everyone understands that. So, you may get one explanation of how a comma is supposed to be used from one person, and then a completely different explanation from another person. This can be very confusing.

Why can't I just write like I talk?

It may be surprising to realize that grammar in writing is VERY different from grammar in speech. Unfortunately, too often "grammar" has been used as a "catch-all" for both types of communication. Spoken language is constantly evolving, and even though there are some rules that will always be around, new grammatical rules enter into language at a regular pace. Writing is different because of the simple fact that it is written down. This makes it somewhat permanent, and therefore, more "standardized" rules are necessary. Also, in spoken language, we have our facial gestures, body language, and other communication methods to get our point across. In writing, all we have are words, and we need the grammar to support our communication goals.

So how do I improve my grammar?

By the time you are an adult, really the only thing you can do to improve your grammar is to read and read and read and write and write and write. People who are "good" at grammar, or who find grammar very easy tend to have read a lot as they were growing up. Reading anything and everything will help you to recognize how sentences are structured, where to put periods and commas, how to use semi-colons...and so on. However (and this is very important), when you read, you should just READ. Don't spend time analyzing the grammar; just soak the written language in.

But I really want to work on my grammar now!

In addition to reading, you can slowly improve your grammar by working on a single issue at a time. For example, you can explore how semi-colons are used. You can use the grammar reference books in the CWC and read the sections on semi-colons and then do the exercises they suggest. In your reading, you can pay attention to when you see a semi-colon and note how it is used. Spend about two weeks to a month on this before you move onto another issue. Since you are an adult, your brain is busy processing lots of information at all times; isolating a single area of grammar will allow your brain to absorb this new knowledge.

The Community Writing Center has several books that provide full overviews of grammar and style in writing. Stop in or sign up for an appointment with a writing coach.

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