WHEN

WORDS

COLLIDE

A Media Writer's Guide to Grammar and Style

Lauren Kessler   Duncan McDonald

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From the Wadsworth Series in Mass Communication and Journalism

NINTH EDITION

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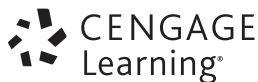
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Contents

Preface

Online, on paper, on the air. Where will your writing appear?

Apps, podcast scripts, blog posts, news bulletins, essays. Speeches, ad copy. Investigative reports, narrative features, video documentaries, multimedia presentations. What will you write?

You may not know yet, and if you do know (and even if you are *very, very* sure), it's more than likely you will change your mind and the direction of your career many times as you grow and change — and as the fast-paced world of communications grows and changes. What will remain, what is at the core of all of these endeavors, all these "delivery systems," all the new and changing technology that will always be a part of our lives is this: correct, crisp, compelling prose. Good, solid writing. Writing that sparks discussion, ignites emotions, captures experience, tells stories. And do you know what is at the core of that? Good grammar. This brings us to the book you hold in your hands. Welcome to the new edition of *When Words Collide*, your friendly (yes, really) and authoritative guide to grammar and word use.

Whether you're a veteran writer or a writer-in-training, a would-be, a wanna-be or a might-be, we welcome you to this book. We also welcome those of you brought kicking and screaming to a book on grammar. However you got here, we're glad to have you. We're glad to share our love of language and our commitment to great writing.

If you want to write well, *When Words Collide* can help you.

There are those who find the study of grammar endlessly fascinating. We wish them well, but we don't number ourselves among them. Rather, we are writers who understand a fundamental concept: The better we know the tools of our trade, the better writers we will be. We don't *love* grammar. We *need* it. We get frustrated, just like you, with its intricacies and inconsistencies, its sometimes finicky rules and occasionally exasperating exceptions. But we know from experience that the reward for mastering grammar is the ability to write with clarity, power and grace. And that means the ability to connect with an audience, to make people think and care—and maybe even laugh.

ix

It is from our perspective as committed writers, avid readers, and (we hope) thoughtful teachers that we offer this ninth edition of *When Words Collide*. We want you to stick with us, read the book carefully and use it as a reference while you write. Learn grammar not for its own sake, not—*please*—to pass some test, but rather because grammar is one of the foundations of good writing.

This is the best *When Words Collide* yet. We—your authors—have continued to grow and to challenge ourselves as writers and teachers. We've tracked, studied and been an active part of the new and ever-evolving world of cross-platform, multimedia journalism. This new edition comes out of our unshakable belief in and passion for the extraordinary power of crisp, clear, compelling prose. You will read, in the first chapter, why *honing language skills is more important in today's media world* than ever before. We think you'll be surprised why this is so. You'll find that we've *simplified grammatical rules and regulations* throughout the book without sacrificing the goal of mastery. You'll find that we talk to you. *We don't lecture or preach*. We talk. We offer *examples from a wide range of work* including song lyrics, advertising copy, blogs and (just for the fun of it) worst-writing-ever contests as well as straight ahead journalism. In this edition we include *boxed material to highlight, illustrate and entertain*. We have also reorganized the grammar workbook so that it correlates more closely to the chapters in the text.

Reading a book about writing should be a pleasure. We hope this one is. We hope this book helps you become the best writer you can be. We hope you keep it on your desk for years to come.

Resources

This text is accompanied by a printed student workbook that features detailed, hands-on exercises designed to reinforce each chapter's key grammar and style concepts. The workbook is available for purchase at www.cengagebrain .com. Instructors can find the answer key to the workbook on the book's Instructor Companion Site, at www.login.cengage.com. If students would like additional practice with the book's grammar and style concepts, tutorial quizzes are available on the Student Companion Site, at www.cengagebrain.com.

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PART 1

Understanding Grammar and Style

1

Grammar.

I know, right?

If you winced when you read, "I know, right?" (and we hope you did), it's because, although that expression is common in conversation, it is eminently wince-worthy in writing. Actually, it's wince-worthy in conversation too, but that's another matter. The point is, conversation and written expression, though they both use words, phrases and sentences, are very different beasts. We have much higher expectations for written expression—and not just "writerly" writing like the high-class prose found in prize-winning books and "New Yorker" magazine stories.

Clear, concise, focused writing is essential in reports and proposals, in emails and blog posts and, yes, even in tweets. Correct and careful language use not only leads to solid (efficient, meaningful) communication in all of its many forms, it also directly reflects on your character.

Yes, your *character*. By taking the time and the care to use language correctly, you show yourself to be the kind of person who knows the value and importance of taking time and taking care. Your crisp use of language shows you to be a clear and direct thinker, the kind of person someone would like to mentor or hire or promote, the kind of person whose project some organization might want to support and fund.

Is there a secret to writing with clarity and crispness? Is there a key to crafting the kind of powerful yet conversational, information-rich yet occasionally witty writing valued in traditional media, digital media, social media and just about everywhere else? Happily, yes: The key is the mastery of grammar.

But wait a minute. We've all heard and read so much about the gutting of newsrooms and the demise of traditional book publishing and the increasingly fickle world of magazines. We've been deluged with reports about how *social*

media is more important than media, about how "citizen journalists" are usurping the duties of *journalist* journalists and how this thing we call journalism is gasping its last breath. Given all this, how important is writing well anyway? Do we really need to study and perfect our use of words?

In a word: Yes.

In fact, now more than ever.

Let us explain. We (that is, the trustworthy, hardworking, media-savvy authors of the book you are reading) would like you to consider these three compelling reasons that mastery of grammar and word use is more important and more relevant today than ever before.

Why Grammar is More Important Than Ever

1. **Learned disregard for correct word use.** An entire generation—yours—has grown up using words in ways past generations have not. You write more in your personal life than your parents or their parents did (although perhaps less in your academic life). Texting, messaging, tweeting, posting updates: You use the written word where past generations used the spoken word. That is, they gabbed and gossiped face to face and on the phone. For them, casual communication between friends meshed nicely with the casual way we use speech, the *I know, right?* construction.

   But consider what can happen when we consistently use the written word to communicate immediate, off-hand remarks, when most of our daily practice in written communication is in dashing off super-casual quips and comments. Here's what happens: an erosion of, even a disregard for, the niceties of language. When you're in a hurry, when the communication is taking place between people who know each other, when the stakes are pretty low—all those factors conspire against careful construction, correct grammar and precise wording.

   They are almost never priorities—or even considerations. That's probably just fine for casual communication. But if you're serious about a career in any field that involves writing (which is just about every field, from journalism and communications to law and business), you are faced with this challenge: Learn to distinguish between how you are accustomed to using written language to communicate casually from how you must learn to use written language to communicate publicly and professionally.

2. **The culture of traditional journalism versus the culture of online journalism.** There's a clash of cultures going on right now between the embedded, time-honored values of traditional journalism and the newer,

emerging values of today's uber-mediated world. People have been talking and writing about this clash of cultures for years, mostly from the point of view of economics and, more recently, ethics. But there's also a clash in the trenches, where journalism is reported, written and produced.

Traditional journalism has long depended on the "luxury" of time— the need to produce only *one* newspaper a day, *one* evening broadcast, *one* magazine a month—and sizable trained staff to oversee the creation and crafting of material. This careful crafting depends on time to report, write, edit, revise and rewrite. But in the new world of journalism, time has been redefined. Or obliterated. The news cycle is 24/7. Reports and images zip around the globe almost instantaneously via social media. The Pope tweets. Immediacy is the core value.

Amid this often frantic activity and the rush to get out news and information at lightning speed, attention to correct, concise word use and clear, grammatical construction may seem like a luxury. It isn't. Given the constant bombardment of information, it is even more of a necessity.

Also, let's face it: The barriers to publishing work on the Web are much lower (almost nonexistent) compared to publishing work in traditional media. Hooray for low barriers when it comes to expanding ideas and including diverse voices and views! But low barriers also mean nominal— or no—expectations for correct, concise, powerful language use. You quickly learn that, in terms of written expression, you can get away with almost anything on the Web. This is not a lesson to take to heart.

3. **The decline and fall of editing.** It used to be that a grammatically challenged journalist could count on—not to mention fear—the long arm (and keen eye) of an editor. Editors, from section editors to departmental editors, to copy editors, to proofreaders would comb through the journalist's prose for clutter and clunkiness, for weak word choice, for misplaced modifiers and lack of parallelism and for errors of both fact and usage. But at today's struggling newspapers, buyouts and layoffs have vastly reduced the number of editors on staff. In the musical-chairs worlds of magazine and book publishing, editors come and go with dizzying regularity. Increasingly, it is difficult to find an experienced, long-time editor who has both the time (now that there are so few of them) and the expertise to make weak prose strong.

Veteran journalist and University of Maryland Professor Carl Session Stepp calls this the "quality-control quandary." Quality control as it relates to the accuracy and veracity of information and the correctness of language use is an issue—a big issue. The safety net in terms of catching and fixing poor, incorrect or otherwise flabby language use is either

nonexistent (on the Web) or disappearing (in traditional media). Guess what? That means it is up to us—journalists, writers, communicators, creators of content—to step it up. Now is absolutely the time to commit to mastering the tools of the trade.

You don't have to wait for an assignment in class. You can start right now. You can start close to home, with email and your personal media habits.

What Does Your Email Say About You?

Compared with texting and messaging, email seems old fashioned, stodgy even. Although not as impossibly quaint as an actual letter placed in an actual envelope and deposited in an actual mailbox, email is nonetheless comparatively prim and proper. You may have moved away from email as a primary means of communicating with friends, but you should know that close to 2.5 billion people use email worldwide and that on an average day these folks send about 150 billion emails. Email is vital to global communications, commerce and conversation.

Emailers spend far more time (and use more words) constructing messages than texters. They are more likely than texters to write in full sentences and less likely to use shortcuts (b4, gr8), abbreviations (lol) or contractions that may, with enough use, confound correct spelling (thx, ur). Adhering to grammatical conventions makes sense because email is, in fact, more formal than texting. It is an integral part of the business and professional world.

Dependence on email in the workplace combined with its limbo-land status—less formal than the business letters or memos of old, more formal than friend-to-friend texting—is creating big problems, say those in the business world. In a lengthy story on the subject in "The Wall Street Journal," the headline of which read "Thx for the IView! I Wud (heart) to Work 4 U!!," recruiters and personnel managers railed against too casual communication. One national recruiter quoted in the story said that she had interviewed a particular candidate and thought she had found the perfect intern until she received the candidate's thank-you email. It was laced with words like "hiya" and "thanx" along with three exclamation points and a smiley face. The candidate did not get the job. What some think of as "casual," business people think of as *unprofessional*.

The laid-back, offhand (choose your adjective), short-cut way of communicating that many millions of us use everyday is, when used in the workplace, considered a mark of immaturity and thoughtlessness, an indicator

of a more generalized slapdash attitude. (As a related issue, you might want to consider—or reconsider—your email address, which should be straightforward and professional, not the cute, quirky one you created for yourself when you were in middle school.)

Other emails, according to the consultants and writing coaches in the corporate trenches, are just the opposite: inflated and flabby, stuffed with polysyllabic words, cluttered phrasing and tortured sentence structure. And then there are the incoherent emails whose meaning eludes—or, worse, misguides—their receivers. These emails are riddled with incorrect punctuation, misplaced or dangling modifiers, incorrect word choice or syntax so tangled that it would take a machete to cut through it. The grammar—or lack thereof—prevents people from understanding one another.

The lessons to be learned from the corporate experience are important ones. The first one, of course, is that clear written communication matters—not just for those in the communication business but for everyone in the world of work. The second is that the cavalier attitude toward grammatical conventions that comes from, and is daily reinforced by, texting, messaging and posting quirky updates is decidedly not the attitude a media writer (or any working professional) should adopt. And here's a third lesson we'll just throw in: *Just because you can type fast doesn't mean you should write fast.*

Beware the Media Multitasker

We'd like to offer this final idea as you navigate the terrain between casual and professional communication: Media multitasking may be dangerous to your (professional) health—and most certainly to your growth as a writer.

In high school or college you may have become accustomed to media overload. You message a friend while listening to music, doing a homework assignment and checking out a cat video on YouTube. You hop between Facebook and Craigslist (maybe Zappos too? Admit it!) while texting. That may work for you, or you may *think* it works for you, but now that you're on the road to becoming a writer, it's time to reconsider. Decades of research have shown that the more tasks multitaskers attempt, the worse they do at them. An eye-opening Stanford university study of more than 250 college undergrads reinforced this conclusion, finding that the more media multitaskers used, the poorer their performance. Memory, ability to focus and ability to switch between tasks all suffered—mightily.

In fact, brain research shows that there is no such thing as multitasking. The brain cannot do two tasks simultaneously, unless one is what researchers call a "highly practiced skill." That means—not to worry—you *can* walk and chew gum at the same time. But the brain cannot simultaneously perform

tasks that require focus, like writing, reading or carrying on a conversation. Instead, a kind of toggle mechanism allows the brain to switch from one activity to another. You may think you are talking to a friend and checking out a website simultaneously, but your brain is really switching rapidly between one activity and the other.

The bad news? When you try to perform two or more related tasks, either at the same time or alternating quickly between them, you not only make far more errors than you would if you concentrated on each task individually, but you actually take far longer (as much as double the time) to complete the jobs than if you had focused on each in sequence. Multitasking is not a time saver; it's a time waster.

Learning to use language correctly, crisply, gracefully, powerfully—which is what this book is about—takes focus and concentration. Our advice: Regardless of the habits you may have developed, when it comes to writing, become a *uni-tasker*.

We hope we've been persuasive in this first chapter. We hope we've given you sensible, realistic—and compelling—reasons to care about the quality of your language use. Your attention to this book, and the energy and focus you decide to devote to mastering grammar, depend on your belief in the power of written expression. We need you to understand how important it is to be skillful in your use of written language. It is important to your success in your career—*in having a career in the first place*—and it is vital to the health and welfare of writing in all its forms.

And it's in your hands.

For additional resources go to **www.cengagebrain.com**

Here's what grammar is not: It is not a palette of precepts produced to perplex. It is not a catalogue of caveats created to confuse. It is not a docket of dogma designed to discombobulate. (This is fun! Let's do one more.) It is not a litany of lessons to be listlessly learned. No! Grammar is the essence of good, clear, powerful (occasionally, appropriately jocular) writing. It is the all-important instruction manual that will help you master the tools of the writer's trade: words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs. It is, believe it or not, the key to writing everything from a pithy 140-character tweet to a memorable 140-word blog post, to a compelling 140-page novella.

We're not saying that knowing grammar will automatically transform you into a great writer any more than knowing how to read a script will transform you into Jennifer Lawrence. We are saying that fundamentals underlie the process, both the craft and the art of doing most anything. We are saying that there can be no craft, no art, without the fundamentals. We are saying that a broader focus on the worthy goal of writing well gives meaning to learning the fundamentals. With that in mind, let's focus for a moment on writing and what it takes to write well.

The 10 Secrets of Writing Well

Are there really 10 secrets to writing well? Not likely. Search the Web for "the secret to good writing," and in less than quarter of a second you'll get "about" 517,000,000 results that range from Ernest Hemingway's tough-love approach ("There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit at a typewriter and bleed.") to Marge Piercy's marching orders ("A real writer is one who really writes.")

But maybe there is only one secret: Write. And keep writing. Or is that two? Surely there is more specific helpful advice. Here it is.

9

Secret #1: Read

"If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time to write." Stephen King wrote that, and you'll get no argument from us.

Reading is not just a way to find out about the world, or yourself; it is an immersion in language. Whether you read a microbiology textbook or a murder mystery, a science blog or a sci-fi story, you are swimming in words, awash in sentences, carried along by a stream of paragraphs. Whether you know it or not, you are learning language along with whatever else you are reading. You are learning vocabulary and syntax, words and how they are put together. You are learning how language flows (or doesn't).

The lessons can be positive and obvious, as when you marvel at a passage that transports you to another time or place, or when, mid-paragraph, you feel in the grip of ideas or emotions. That's a writer forging a connection with words, and it's a lesson you take with you, consciously or not. The more you read, the more you have these experiences, and the more embedded becomes the beauty and the precision of language.

Of course, the lessons can be negative as well—the book that puts you to sleep (not this one, of course), the news story you don't scroll down to finish reading. You are learning something here too: You are learning what doesn't work, how not to put words together, how not to tell a story.

Imagine wanting to be a musician and not listening to music. That's as odd and wrongheaded as aspiring to be a writer and not reading.

Secret #2: Have Something to Say

That sounds too obvious, doesn't it? But how many times have you sat in front of a screen, mind numb, unable to write a single intelligent sentence? You tell yourself you have writer's block. You don't have writer's block. You are more likely suffering from a dearth of material, a paucity of ideas—the lack of something to say. Perhaps you haven't worked your ideas through in your head. You aren't clear about what you think. Or maybe you haven't done the necessary research. You don't know your subject well enough yet. You can't write well if you are not in command of the material. A great writer is smarter than his or her material. A great writer writes from a place of knowing. Simply put: You can't write well if you don't know what you want to say.

Consider how all of us, at times, are reduced to babbling. Sometimes our lips seem to be moving faster than our brains. Words come out. We sputter, stop and start, ramble, backtrack, circumlocute. The lips keep moving, but there is little sense and less meaning behind the words because we haven't stopped to figure out what we want to say. Friends may indulge us, but readers don't.

It's hard to lose a reader if you're tweeting 140 characters. But if you don't have something to say—and you're not Beyoncé, Bieber or the Pope—you're not going to snare, and keep, many followers.

Secret #3: Organize Your Thoughts

Without a plan, writing well is much more difficult than it needs to be. It is not, however, impossible. You can write without a plan if you want to rewrite and revise and restructure many times over. But it is much more sensible, more efficient and decidedly less stressful to think about how you will structure the piece—whatever its purpose or platform—before you begin writing. Some forms of writing have their own internal structure and provide a kind of template you can use. Basic news stories are like that. So are press releases. Advertising copy also often follows a certain pattern. Personal essays conform to a common shape. But even if the template is provided, you need to organize your thoughts and your material within it. And so, determined to write well, you sit with the material, review everything, scribble notes to yourself, look up missing details, check a few more sites, make a few phone calls. You don't rush to write. You take the time to understand the material. From that understanding can come good ideas about how to structure the piece.

You would think this might be a useful advice for longer pieces only. How much planning and structuring are necessary, after all, to write a 300-word blog post? One of your authors blogs regularly at three sites, and she will tell you: a lot. It is harder to write short than long. There's a famous quote about this, at various times and in various places attributed to Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Voltaire, Pascal, Winston Churchill, Woodrow Wilson and Bill Clinton: "If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter." (Pascal, a French mathematician, inventor and writer, said it first.) What he—and all who repeated it later—meant is that writing short involves planning, focusing, organizing and editing. The fewer words you have to work with, the more intensive (and time consuming) the process.

Secret #4: Consider Your Audience

Unlike your tweets or the texts you send to friends, media messages are meant for public consumption. But what public? How can you write well if you don't know who will be reading or listening? You can't—or at the very least you stack the deck against it. If you don't know the audience, you are not sure what your readers or viewers or listeners know or need to know. You are not sure how to approach these folks, what level of vocabulary to

employ, what tone to choose, how to structure what you want to say. Should you use humor? Is word play appropriate? Will irony work? Who knows—if you don't know your audience.

That's why companies fund market research: to see who is out there and how best to reach them. That's why magazines conduct readership studies or run surveys to gauge what their readers think about certain issues. That's why serious bloggers track their readers using various diagnostic tools. That's why Facebook knows more about you than your mother. Knowing the audience is a key to good writing.

Secret #5: Know Grammatical Conventions and How to Use Them

Here we are, back to the fundamentals. Note that knowing grammar becomes important only when you have something to say, have figured out how you're going to say it, and know to whom you're talking. The rules themselves—memorizing verb forms or knowing when to use a comma—don't exist without a context. The context is writing. You learn the rules for one reason: to play the game. It's worth noting, for those of you squirming at our repeated mentions of rules, that knowing the rules does allow you to break them (when appropriate, for effect). Breaking a rule on purpose can be creative, artful and entertaining. There is, however, a word for breaking a rule you didn't even know existed, and it is "error."

Writing well means making countless good decisions, from choosing just the right word (see #6) to crafting phrases and clauses and sentences and paragraphs that say just what you want them to say, with precision, clarity and grace (see #7). This lofty but achievable goal is possible only if you understand the architecture of language, the building blocks of prose; if you are at ease with the tools of the trade. Imagine a carpenter who can't use a skill saw, a dancer who doesn't know the steps, a programmer who can't write code. That's a writer without a command of grammar.

Secret #6: Master a Solid Working Vocabulary

Sculptors have clay; painters have paint; writers have words. It's as simple as that. Writers have to figure out how to connect with an audience—spur thought, evoke emotion, inform, educate, entertain, tell a story, set a scene, promote a product, sell an idea—and all they have are words. Yes, words can and do exist within a rich multimedia context. And of course sound and image matter. But what the writer has control of, what the writer revels in, are words. Words are some of the most potent tools around, perhaps the most potent. (Remember the saying "The pen is mightier than the sword"?)

Words carry not only meaning but shades of meaning. What variety, what nuance, what tone! Look up "talk" in a thesaurus and you will find "chatter," "mutter," "mumble," "gossip" and "schmooze," each with its own connotation, each with its own feel. And words not only have meaning and nuance but also sound and rhythm.

Building a good vocabulary means reading widely. It means both appreciating the smorgasbord that is the English language and learning to use words with proper respect. It means choosing the correct word, the word that means exactly what you mean, and spelling it correctly. Building a vocabulary does not mean seeking out multisyllabic tongue twisters or collecting fancy or elaborate expressions. It means being able to use words like "chatter," "mutter," "mumble," "gossip" and "schmooze" when called for.

Secret #7: Focus on Precision and Clarity

If you think clear, crisp writing just flows naturally from fingertips to screen, you couldn't be more wrong. Good writing (even bad writing) doesn't just happen. Regardless of comments like "the story just wrote itself," believe us, stories do not write themselves. Writing with precision and clarity—saying exactly what you mean, no fuzziness, no confusion, no second or third reading necessary—is hard, purposeful work. But it's work your readers, viewers or listeners expect you to do. If you don't, they are a click away from forgetting you ever existed.

Clear, powerful writing is the result of good decisions, from choosing the right word to crafting just the right construction, to relentlessly slashing clutter from your prose. Redundancies? Euphemisms? Jargon? These are obstacles to precision. Misplaced modifiers? Split constructions? Run-on sentences? These are the enemies of clarity. In fact, every grammatical decision you make either enhances or detracts from clarity. That's how important a working knowledge of grammar is to writing well.

Secret #8: Hear Language

"Write for the ear," scriptwriters, podcasters and broadcasters are told, but this is good advice for all writers. It doesn't matter whether the audience actually hears aloud the words you write or just "hears" your prose when reading silently. In either case, the audience attends to the sound and feels the beat. If you can master the skill of writing for the ear, you are one step closer to writing well.

Listen to the words you use. What meaning is conveyed by their sound? Listen to how words sound together. Do they fight one another? Do they flow? Say your written sentences out loud. Do they have a rhythm? A long

sentence can lilt. A short sentence can tap out a staccato beat. Purposeful repetition of words or phrases can add rhythm, as can the emphatic use of parallel structure. Experimenting with and eventually mastering the aural nuances and subtleties of language is one of the joys of writing.

Secret #9: Revise

Think you're finished once you write it down? Think all you have to do is a quick once-over, a spell check, and it's out the door? Maybe ... if you're tweeting from an event in real time or pushing out urgent material in a 24/7 news cycle. But most writing is not like that. Most writing, from stories to scripts, blog posts to press releases, demand more than that. They demand revision. Having the patience and fortitude—and humility—to really revise is what separates the amateurs from the professionals. Revision is much more than tidying up, pruning and polishing prose. It is an opportunity to see whether the writing works. It is a chance to rethink what you are trying to say. Consider the word "revision": re-vision means to look again, to look with new eyes. This is what the revision process should be.

And so thoughtful writers, determined to produce clear, powerful, even memorable prose, take a deep breath after they have "finished" whatever it is they were writing. Now it is time to look at the piece and ask: Does it say what I intended it to say? Will my readers or viewers or listeners learn what I want them to learn? Have I written enough or too much? Do the ideas flow from one to another? Do my transitions work? Does my style fit both the subject and the audience? Taking revision seriously means asking the tough questions and being prepared to spend the extra time to answer them.

Even with the best intentions, it is very difficult to learn the art of revision on your own work. You know what you mean even if you don't write what you mean. Thus, when you read your own work, you read what you know

Getting it right

We love this snippet from an interview with Ernest Hemingway, the iconic American novelist who began his career as a journalist:

Interviewer: How much rewriting do you do?
Hemingway: It depends. I rewrote the ending of "Farewell to Arms," the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.
Interviewer: Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?
Hemingway: Getting the words right.

you meant and not necessarily what you have written. A talented and patient editor can help you see what you have and have not accomplished. If you are lucky enough to find one, be attentive, be humble and sponge up all you can.

Secret #10: Apply the Seat of the Pants to the Seat of the Chair

The final secret to writing well is the easiest to state and the hardest to accomplish: Put in the time. Just like mastering a musical instrument or a new sport, learning to write takes practice—lots of practice. This means time—good, concentrated, focused time over weeks and months and, yes, even years. Some people have a natural facility with words (probably because they are voracious readers). Others struggle. But everyone who wants to write well, talent notwithstanding, has to work hard at it. It is easy to get discouraged. It is easy to get distracted. It is *very* easy to get distracted. Multi-tasking and writing are wildly incompatible. Writing as a uni-tasker is hard enough.

Grammar is Everywhere

We wanted to make the case for writing before we got serious about making the case for grammar. We wanted you to have a reason to care about grammar. You don't have to feel warm and fuzzy about it. You don't have to join a grammar Facebook fan page. But you do have to attend to it. You do have to master it if you want to write well. The good news is that grammar is not rocket science. True, the English language can be challenging. And yes, there is much to learn on the way to mastering the rules that govern how we write. But there is no reason to be intimidated. We human beings are prewired to do this kind of work. Communication is our claim to fame, evolutionarily speaking. We're good at this. It's just that those of us who want to be writers have to be *very* good at this.

That's where grammar comes in. Grammar makes communication possible. Without the shared conventions of grammar, without the structure it creates and the patterns it plots, we could not speak to one another across time and space. Grammar binds us together whether we write status updates or serious journalism, blogs or bestsellers; whether we are veterans of the craft or mere beginners.

We know that grammar has a bad rap: It's confusing. It's picky. It's fussy. There are almost as many exceptions as there are rules. And it's, well, unnecessary, isn't it? "I never learned grammar in school, but it hasn't hurt me yet," you say. "I don't bother with grammar when I text, and no one seems to care—or even notice. Besides," you say, "I can always write around what I don't know. It's the ideas that count, not the grammar."

Sorry. Wrong on all counts.

First of all, grammar is not all that confusing. In fact, it is mostly logical and orderly, often commonsensical and very accessible (that's right: not rocket science). Most of the rules are straightforward, and, happily, good grammar almost always sounds right to those who read and have the patterns of prose embedded in their brains. Second, grammar is absolutely necessary, not only to writing clearly but also to writing with style, creativity and pizzazz.

On this subject we never tire of quoting Joan Didion, journalist, essayist, novelist, memoirist, screenwriter and one of the finest modern prose stylists: "All I know about grammar is its infinite power," she writes. "To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about cameras today, but not so many know about sentences."

But we must know about sentences, about phrases, clauses, voices, tenses, singulars, plurals—all the patterns and constructions that make our language work. Language is how we spread ideas and information throughout society. The information we have to communicate as writers may be complex; the ideas may be challenging. The message will have to compete with countless distractions for the attention of the audience. It may even have to compete with its own format in multimedia presentations. This puts a tremendous burden on the language: It must be crisp and clear, easy to understand and inviting. It must carry the ideas effortlessly, even gracefully. It must enhance meaning. It must communicate tone and nuance, color and texture, sound and rhythm. But to do all this, the language must be—before all else—correct. It must be grammatical.

Making Mistakes

Learning to write well—and beyond that, to write compellingly, evocatively, gracefully—is a lifelong process. That's the challenge, and it only gets more interesting (and more challenging) the longer we do it. Throughout our lives as writers, we will grow; we will change; and, inevitably, we will make mistakes: judgments miscalled, questions unasked and language misused. Errors can be disheartening, not to mention embarrassing. (Egregious errors like fabricating facts, manufacturing sources or misrepresenting yourself can, and should, be career ending.)

Grammatical errors are particularly hazardous to the health of wannabe writers. "If I see a misspelled word on a résumé or a grammatical error, I

look no further. I immediately disqualify the applicant," says the personnel director of a large company. "We look at how much attention a person pays to detail," says the vice president of a major advertising firm. "Things like grammar, spelling and mechanics mean a lot to us. We figure, if the person can't accomplish these things, how can we expect him or her to move on to bigger jobs?" Says an online editor: "If a person can't use grammar correctly, it says either of two things to me—lack of intelligence or extreme sloppiness. Either way, it's not the person I want writing for me." A magazine editor agrees: "We get hundreds of email queries from writers proposing stories for us. For some reason, people think it's okay to write poorly when they write an email. We don't think so at all. We would never hire a freelance writer if that person emailed us a query with grammatical or spelling errors. And it's amazing how many of them do."

But mistakes do happen. It is precisely because professional writers know this—and understand the unpleasant consequences of making errors publicly—that they take editing (and editors) so seriously. Misspelled words, misplaced modifiers, lack of parallelism, shifts in voice—all the little errors that can creep into writing never make it past the editing process. It is during this process that experienced writers turn their uncertain, sometimes ragged prose into the polished material they can proudly present to their audience.

What You Don't Know …

You know the expression "What you don't know won't hurt you"? Forget it. What you don't know *will* hurt you when it comes to grammar. What you don't know will hurt the clarity of your writing, the understanding and respect of your audience, even your ability to land a job in the first place. What is it you don't know? Let's consider 10 of the most common grammatical mistakes and how knowledge of the language (and reading this book) can help you avoid them.

Mistake #1: Thinking You Don't Have to Know Grammar to Write Well

After reading our masterfully persuasive arguments in these beginning chapters, you're not likely to make this mistake again, right?

Mistake #2: Subjects and Verbs that Don't Agree

For a sentence to be grammatically correct and clearly communicative, a verb must agree with the intended number of its subject. That sounds

simple, as in: *The laptop* [singular subject] *is* [singular verb] *on sale* or *The laptops* [plural subject] *are* [plural verb] *in the store*. But it gets complicated when you're not quite sure what the subject is. There may be a number of nouns and pronouns in the sentence. Which is the true subject? *A box of books are/is on the table*. Is *box* (singular) the subject, or is *books* (plural)? There may be confusion about the intended number of the subject. "Five thousand dollars," as a subject, looks plural but acts singular; "everyone," as a subject, clearly implies the plural but acts as a singular subject. To sort this all out, you need to know the parts of speech (Chapters 4 and 5), the parts of a sentence (Chapter 3) and the guidelines for agreement (Chapter 6).

Mistake #3: Subjects and Pronouns that Don't Agree

To communicate crisply and clearly, sentences must have internal harmony. Just as subjects and verbs must agree, so too must subjects and their pronouns. It's a simple rule that depends on your ability to identify the subject, recognize its number and choose a corresponding pronoun. This can be easy, as in: *The musicians* [plural subject] *and their* [plural pronoun] *fans*. Or it can be tougher, as in: *The band made* (their/its) *way to the stage*. But if you understand the parts of speech (Chapters 4 and 5) and the guidelines for agreement (Chapter 6), you should be able to avoid this pitfall.

Mistake #4: Lack of Parallelism

To be both coherent and forceful, a sentence must have parallel structure; that is, its elements must be symmetrical. Consider a construction like *I came. I saw. I conquered*. It is powerful because it sets out three ideas in three parallel grammatical structures (pronoun–past-tense verb). Consider the same idea expressed this way: *I came. I looked over everything. The enemy was conquered by my armies*. That's lack of parallelism. That's startlingly poor writing. You have to know the parts of speech (Chapters 4 and 5) to understand the concept of parallelism, and you must see parallelism as a form of agreement (Chapter 6), as vital to clarity (Chapter 8) and even as an element of style (Chapter 9).

Mistake #5: Confusing *Who* and *Whom*

Who/whom did the journalist contact first? She worked for whoever/whomever *could afford her fee. The blogger* who/whom *broke the story refused to reveal his sources*. Confused? You won't be once you understand the nominative and objective cases (Chapter 6).

Mistake #6: Confusing "That" and "Which"

Did you think these two words were interchangeable? Well, they aren't. Consider this sentence: *The full-body scan* that/which *the doctor recommended showed no abnormalities.* "That" is used to introduce material that restricts the meaning of the noun; "which" is used to elaborate on meaning. If you know about relative pronouns (Chapter 5) and the role of phrases and clauses in a sentence (Chapter 3), you will use these words correctly.

Mistake #7: Confusing Possessives and Contractions

That's a fancy way of saying that "your" (possessive) and "you're" (contraction) are not interchangeable. They perform very different tasks in a sentence. "Their" and "they're," "whose" and "who's," "its" and "it's" may sound the same, but they have decidedly different grammatical functions. If you text, you're probably accustomed to omitting apostrophes. Some smartphones insert apostrophes—sometimes incorrectly—themselves. You may also be accustomed to shortcuts: "yr" for "your" (possessive) or "ur" for "you're" (contraction). These are habits you'll have to break (Chapter 1). Learning parts of speech (Chapter 4 and 5) and case (Chapter 6) will help you make the distinction between possessive and contractions, and end the confusion.

Mistake #8: Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier (a word, phrase or clause) does not point clearly and directly to what it is supposed to modify. A modifier "dangles" when what it is supposed to modify is not part of the sentence. Both grammatical errors seriously compromise clarity of meaning. If you understand parts of speech (Chapters 4 and 5) and parts of the sentence (Chapter 3), this clarity, conciseness and coherence issue (Chapter 8) will make sense.

Mistake #9: Misusing Commas

Some novice writers liberally sprinkle their sentences with commas as if this important punctuation mark were a decorative tweak. Tweeters, texters and instant chatters, on the other hand, often eschew commas entirely. But commas have specific functions in a sentence, as do all marks of punctuation. Two specific errors stand out: One is neglecting to use a comma to separate two independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction. The other is using only a comma when trying to link two independent clauses (known as the comma-splice error). If some of this terminology is foreign to you, it won't be after you read about parts of speech (Chapter 5), the sentence (Chapter 3) and punctuation (Chapter 7).

Mistake #10: The Dreaded Passive Voice

Passive voice is one of the surest ways to suck the life out of a sentence, a one-way ticket to stilted, falsely formal or bureaucratic prose. Although passive voice construction is not technically a grammatical error and although there are a few defensible reasons for using it, most passive-voice sentences are not written knowingly or purposefully. Both the clarity (Chapter 8) and the liveliness (Chapter 9) of writing are at stake.

All these grammatical hazards—we could list dozens more—may seem daunting. Don't be daunted. Be respectful. Understand that language is alive, complex, fascinating—and full of potential pitfalls. That doesn't mean you should be intimidated. It means you should be careful. It means you should learn the tools of your trade. It means you should study the fundamentals and build your writing from this firm foundation. "When Words Collide" can help.

As you read, never forget that the point of grammar is not grammar. The point is writing well. Please don't lose sight of why you're learning grammar—and why you're reading this book.

The study of grammar is the key to the power of words.

Read on.

Write on.

For additional resources go to **www.cengagebrain.com**

The Sentence 3

Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes.

Behold the power of the sentence, the simple, purposeful, potent ordering of words that can change history. Now imagine how fuzzy, clumsy, cluttered, stumbling language could easily rob that masterful sentence of its force:

Don't fire your weapons at the approaching enemy until they are very close to you and you can almost make out their facial features.

Of course the Revolutionary War Army officer (historians can't agree on his identity) who delivered the famous "whites of their eyes" command would never have uttered a shambling, rambling sentence like the one we created. Why not? Was it because he had read a grammar book? Probably not. It was because he had to communicate quickly, clearly and powerfully. His message needed to be direct and forceful and leave no room for misinterpretation. Wait a minute ... doesn't this sound just like the job of the media writer?

Few of us write (or speak) sentences as memorable as the one that began this chapter, but all good writers work hard to craft their words into meaningful constructions that connect with readers. The sentence is the essential building block of memorable prose. To write it well is to know it well.

Learning how to construct a truly worthy sentence—grammatical and graceful, lively and memorable—is a challenge. But learning the basics is not. After all, we *know* sentences. We say them silently to ourselves and out loud to our friends. We text and tweet them. We scribble them on sticky notes. However, when it comes to studying exactly how sentences are created, it's easy to feel so overwhelmed with definitions, exceptions, rules and regulations that we forget we are already experts.

If you see unfamiliar grammatical terms in this chapter, don't panic. In the chapters following this one, you will learn all you need to know (well, almost) about parts of speech, the individual building blocks of sentences. Here, in this chapter, we wanted to give you a reason to *care* about these building blocks—and that reason is the sentence.

You will be reading about all kinds of sentences: simple, compound, complex, compound–complex, incomplete, run-on, subordinated, over-subordinated, passive voice. Don't be put off by these descriptors, and don't obsess about them either. Just think of them as shorthand or code, a common vocabulary that allows us to talk about how to craft prose, a useful way to explain and categorize the word patterns we call sentences. Learning these terms is not the goal. The goal, as always, is good writing—putting words together with precision and pizzazz. Should you find yourself caught up in the categories or puzzling over the patterns, remember that when we investigate the sentence, we are investigating a familiar subject, an old friend.

On, then, to the sentence. A *sentence* is a self-contained grammatical unit that ends with a full-stop punctuation mark (period, question mark or exclamation mark—but please, please, take it easy on the exclamation points!) A sentence must contain a verb and a subject (stated or implied), and it must state a complete thought.

A sentence can be as concise as a single word: *Go. Stop. Wait.* (The subject, *you*, is implied.) It can be as expansive (and exhausting) as the 4,391-word sentence James Joyce wrote in *Ulysses*. Regardless of length, grammatically correct sentences result from the same procedure: the selection, manipulation and coordination of sentence parts.

Sentence Parts

Predicates and Subjects

A sentence can be divided into two parts: the *predicate* and the *subject*. The *simple predicate* of a sentence is the verb. The *simple subject* is the noun or noun substitute that identifies the "actor" or initiator of action in a sentence, as in:

The telemarketer   called.
(simple subj.)   (simple pred.)

The *complete predicate* includes the verb plus all its complements and modifiers—words, phrases or clauses that add specificity and meaning. The *complete subject* includes the noun or noun substitute and all its complements and modifiers:

The fast-talking telemarketer	**called at dinner time.**
(complete subj.)	(complete pred.)

We can continue to describe and modify both the subject and the predicate parts of the sentence:

The insistent, fast-talking telemarketer	**always called at dinner time.**
(complete subj.)	(complete pred.)

In addition to modifiers and descriptive phrases, action verbs can be complemented by direct objects, indirect objects and prepositional phrases—all of which are considered part of the predicate. A *direct object* is any noun or pronoun that answers the question *what?* or *whom?* An *indirect object* tells *to whom* or *for what* that action is done. A *prepositional phrase* is a preposition followed by its object. These complements must be in the objective case. Recognizing them will help you avoid making errors in case:

The telemarketer was selling	**gym memberships.**
	(noun as dir. obj.)

I gave the telemarketer	**ten seconds of my time.**
(noun as indir. obj.)	(noun as dir. obj.)

I responded	**with profanity.**
	(prep. phrase)

I responded to	**him**.
	(pron. as obj. of prep., in objec. case)

The complement of a linking verb is a noun or an adjective describing the subject. These words are also considered part of the predicate:

The telemarketer was a	**jerk.**
	(pred. nom.)

I was	**annoyed**.
	(pred. adj.)

Phrases and Clauses

Phrases and clauses are the building blocks of sentences. A *phrase* is a group of related words that lacks a verb. Phrases come in two basic varieties: a *prepositional phrase* (a preposition followed by its object) and a *verbal phrase* (a form of the verb—infinitive, gerund or participle—that *does not act as a verb*, accompanied by its object or related material). Verbals are also discussed on p. 46.

<u>**During dinner every night that week,**</u> **another telemarketer called.**
(prep. phrase)

My one wish was <u>**to enjoy an uninterrupted meal**</u>**.**
(infin. phrase, acting as a pred. noun)

<u>**Turning off the phone**</u> **was the obvious solution.**
(gerund phrase, acting as a noun ... substitute "it" for the phrase)

<u>**Grabbing the phone with one hand,**</u> **I stirred the spaghetti with the other.**
(pres. participial phrase, acting as adj. modifying *I*)

<u>**Distracted by the noodles,**</u> **I dropped the phone in the pot**
(past participial phrase, acting as adj. modifying *I*)
of boiling water.

Recognizing phrases and knowing what functions they perform can help you build interesting sentences that not only say what you want them to say but say what you want them to say crisply, clearly and with style. Understanding phrases can also help you avoid at least two common errors in writing: fragments and dangling participle phrases. If you know that a phrase, however lengthy or complex, is not a sentence, then you will not mistake it for one, punctuate it as one and, in the process, create an ungrammatical fragment. If you understand what a participle phrase is and recognize that its purpose is to modify a noun, then you know the noun must be evident, and the phrase must be placed as close as possible to that noun.

A *clause* is a group of related words that contains a subject and a predicate. An *independent* or *main clause* is a complete sentence:

<u>**My housemate**</u> <u>**laughed**</u> **hysterically.**
(subj.) (pred.)

A *dependent* or *subordinate clause*, although it also contains a subject and a predicate, does not express a complete thought. It is not a sentence and cannot stand alone:

When she saw my phone slip into the noodle pot
(dependent clause)

When she saw my phone slip into the noodle pot, my housemate
(dependent clause) linked with (main clause)
laughed hysterically.

Dependent clauses come in three varieties, according to the function they perform in a sentence. A *noun clause* takes the place of a noun or a noun substitute; an *adjective clause* serves as an adjective; an *adverb clause* acts as an adverb.

That I was enraged did not surprise her.
(noun clause acting as the subj.)
(*It*, a pronoun, can be substituted for the clause.)

The telemarketers, who had mysteriously managed to get my cell phone number and had interrupted dinner every night for a week,
(adj. clause, modifies the noun *telemarketers*)
had obviously gotten on my nerves.

After I took a deep breath and ate a pint of Cherry Garcia ice cream,
(adv. clause modifies the verb by answering *when?*)
I regained my composure.

Note how subordinating an idea (that is, constructing a subordinate clause for the ice-cream eating frenzy) emphasizes the main idea (the act of regaining composure expressed in the main clause). When you recognize the variety and the many uses of dependent clauses, you enhance your ability to craft great prose.

Types of Sentences

Sentences come in four varieties, depending on the number and type of clauses they contain. Learn—and revel in—this variety. It will add spark and interest to your prose and help you write with both grace and rhythm.

Simple Sentences

A *simple sentence* contains one independent clause. The most common construction is subject–verb–object.

Reporters   **interview**   **sources.**
(subj.)   (verb)   (obj.)

We can add modifiers—single words or phrases or a combination of both—but regardless of the number of words, the sentence remains simple if it contains a single, independent clause:

Thoughtful **reporters** **intelligently interview** **informed** **sources**
(adj.)   (adv.)   (adj.)
during the course of research.
(prep. phrase)

Note that a simple sentence can have multiple subjects and/or verbs. What keeps the sentence simple is that is contains only one independent clause.

<u>**Reporters and their editors**</u>   <u>**check and recheck** facts.</u>
(multiple subj.)   (multiple verb)

Compound Sentences

A *compound sentence* has two or more independent clauses, each containing a subject and a predicate and each expressing a complete thought. The two complete clauses, equal or nearly equal in importance, are linked (coordinated) by a conjunction and a comma, semicolon or colon. *And, but, or, nor* and *yet* are the conjunctions, sometimes referred to as *coordinating conjunctions*:

<u>**The 24/7 news cycle is a reality,** but <u>that doesn't mean reporters and**</u>
(indep. clause)   (conj.)   (indep. clause)
<u>**editors should rush to publish before verifying the facts.**</u>

<u>**Readers expect accuracy;**</u> <u>**reporters must deliver or lose credibility.**</u>
(indep. clauses linked by semicolon)

<u>**Citizen journalists have an important place in world,**</u> **but** <u>**one thing is**</u>
<u>**clear**</u>: <u>**They will never replace professional reporters.**</u>
(three indep. clauses, linked by comma and conj., and colon)

Punctuation is probably the most common problem associated with compound sentences. Because the two (or more) clauses are independent—actually complete sentences on their own—they cannot be linked by a comma or a conjunction alone. A compound sentence needs both a comma and a coordinating conjunction. If you do not want to use a coordinating conjunction, use a semicolon or, occasionally, a colon. We'll focus on punctuation in Chapter 7.

Complex Sentences

A *complex sentence* contains one independent (main) clause and at least one dependent (subordinate) clause. The subordinate clause depends on the main clause for both meaning and grammatical completion:

<u>**Before she saw the documentary *Food, Inc.*,**</u>   <u>**she had never**</u>
(dep. clause)   (indep. clause)
<u>**considered raising her own chickens.**</u>

<u>**A backyard coop is easy to maintain,**</u>   <u>**although it is not a**</u>
(indep. clause)   (depend. clause)
<u>**pleasant chore.**</u>

In the two preceding complex sentences, conjunctions (*before, although*) introduce the dependent clauses. These words, sometimes called *subordinating conjunctions*, establish the relationship between the two sentence parts. Our language has a variety of such words, each with its own precise meaning that expresses a specific relationship between the dependent and the independent clauses. For example:

Relationship	Conjunctions
cause and effect	because, due to, as a result of, if
sequence	after, before, during, while
time, place	when, whenever, since, where, until, as long as

A dependent clause can also be subordinated to the main clause by relative pronouns (*who, whom, whose, which* or *that*). Note that the main clause can be interrupted by the dependent clause:

The farmer <u>**who sold us the baby chicks**</u> **assured us they**
(dep. clause)
were all female.

Compound–Complex Sentences

A *compound–complex* sentence contains at least two main clauses and one dependent clause. The construction seems to invite wordiness, but it also makes rhythm and flow possible if you are careful, precise and grammatical. Here is a four-clause sentence that works:

<u>**After the chicks were three months old,**</u>
(dep. clause)

<u>**the Golden-laced Wyondotte started crowing,**</u>
(indep. clause)

and <u>**we realized the sad truth:**</u>
(indep. clause)

<u>**We had a non-egg-laying rooster on our hands.**</u>
(indep. clause)

If you find that a compound–complex sentence is out of control—so complicated that readers will lose the thread, so long that broadcasters will gasp for breath—break the sentence into two (or more) parts, being careful to maintain the relationship between subordinate and main thoughts.

> ### A good sentence
>
> It's craft, but it's also art. It's hard, purposeful work, but there's a bit of alchemy to it. You begin by choosing words, respectful of their meanings, aware of their sounds and rhythms. You fit the words together, carefully, precisely, creatively, to build phrases and clauses. These you link with just the right word, the correct piece of punctuation. You rework, edit, revise.
>
> Then you read what you have written. It says precisely what you want it to say. It has grammatical unity. The idea is coherent; the statement, concise; the language, powerful. You sit back to marvel.
>
> You have written a good sentence.

Sentence Errors

Don't fall prey to one of the following ungrammatical or sluggish constructions: sentence fragment, run-on sentence, over-subordination, dead construction, passive voice. But if you do, don't panic. You can catch this at the editing stage if you know what to look for.

Sentence Fragments

Because fragments are common in casual communication, from tweets to texts, to emails, to blog posts, and because they are so often employed in advertising copy, it's easy to forget that fragments are, in fact, ungrammatical. A *fragment*, literally an incomplete piece, is a group of words sheared off from or never attached to a sentence. The group of words may lack a subject, a predicate, a complete thought or any combination of the three. No matter what it lacks, it is not a grammatical sentence. If you punctuate it as if it were a sentence, you have created a fragment.

Like this one.

Fragments can be single words, brief phrases or lengthy dependent clauses. The number of words is irrelevant. What matters is that the words do not meet the definition of a sentence. A common mistake is to look only for subject and verb and, having found them, to believe that you have written a complete sentence. Remember, a sentence must express a complete thought.

Although the video went viral.
contains a subject (*video*) and a verb (*went*) but does not express a complete thought. It is a dependent clause, a fragment.

Avoiding or rewriting fragments is not difficult. First, recognize that the word, phrase or clause you've written does not meet the definition of a sentence. Now you have two choices: (1) Rewrite this fragment to include all the parts it needs (subject, verb, complete thought); or (2) add to the fragment, making it a complete sentence. Here's how it works:

Although the video went viral.
(fragment)

The video went viral.
(fragment rewritten as a complete thought)

Although the video went viral, Hollywood agents still did not call.
(fragment now part of a complete thought)

Some accomplished writers will tell you that fragments serve a useful purpose. We agree. In appropriate instances, to achieve particular effects, certain grammatical rules can be broken—and this is one of them. *Purposeful fragments*—consistent with the subject, the audience and the medium—are a matter of style. *Accidental fragments* are a grammatical error. Put another way: To break the rule, you have to know the rule.

Run-On Sentences

A *run-on sentence* doesn't know when to quit. Rushing forward without proper punctuation, this construction may actually include two or three complete sentences. Length is not the issue here. A relatively short sentence, like this one, can be a run-on:

Her blog attracted thousands of visitors a day, she was offered a lucrative book deal.

This sentence is actually two independent clauses run together with a comma. Using commas to link independent clauses (without the help of a conjunction) almost always results in a run-on sentence. In fact, this comma-splice error is the most common cause of run-on sentences. But if you can recognize an independent clause, and if you understand the limitations of the comma, you can avoid the error.

The most frequently used of all punctuation marks, the comma serves a variety of purposes. But one job a comma rarely performs is linking independent clauses. This function is performed by the semicolon or, occasionally, the colon. When you force the comma to do a job for which it was not designed, you create a grammatically incorrect construction.

Occasionally—and knowingly—a writer might violate the comma-splice rule. When a sentence is composed of two or more brief, parallel clauses, commas might be used:

Be correct, be concise, be coherent.

Comma-splice run-ons, in addition to being grammatically incorrect, almost always lack clarity. A comma signals readers that they are reading one continuous idea interrupted by a brief pause (the comma). Readers expect the words following the comma to augment or complement what they have just read. But in a comma-splice run-on, there is not one continuous idea. New thoughts are introduced without the benefit of connections between them (for example, *but, and* or *or*).

You can easily correct a run-on sentence in four ways:

1. Change the run-on sentence to two (or more) complete sentences by adding periods and capital letters:

    Her blog attracted thousands of visitors a day. She was offered a lucrative book deal.

2. If the relationship between the two (or more) complete thoughts (clauses) is close and equal, insert a semicolon between them to express this. A semicolon shows this connection and allows the reader to move swiftly from the first sentence to the second. But semicolons are somewhat formal and a little stodgy. They may not work in all instances:

    Her blog attracted thousands of visitors a day; she was offered a lucrative book deal.

3. If the two thoughts are of equal weight and have a connection that can be signaled by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, yet* or *so*), use a comma and the appropriate conjunction to link the clauses:

    Her blog attracted thousands of visitors a day, so she was offered a lucrative book deal.

4. If the relationship between the two (or more) independent clauses is such that one clause depends on the other, rewrite the "dependent" sentence as a clause and place it in front of or after the main clause. Choose a subordinating conjunction that expresses the nature of the relationship, and place it appropriately. Subordinating conjunctions include *after, because, while, when, where, since, if* and *although*.

    Because her blog attracted thousands of visitors a day, she was offered a lucrative book deal.

Over-subordinated Sentences

Subordination, the fourth way just listed to correct a run-on sentence, is the technique of making one idea less important than, or subordinate to, another. Consider these sentences:

Lizzie Hager won the $200-million Powerball jackpot.

Lizzie Hager purchased only a single Powerball ticket.

Assuming the idea in the first sentence is the more important one, you can subordinate the idea in the second sentence by creating a dependent clause and attaching it to the main clause.

Although Lizzie Hager purchased only a single ticket,
(subordinate clause)

she won the $200-million Powerball jackpot.

Lizzie Hager, who had purchased only a single ticket, won the
          (subordinate clause)
$200-million

Powerball jackpot.

Subordinating one idea to another is a useful sentence-building technique. But do take care. A string of dependent clauses, or one excessively long dependent clause, placed before the main sentence can slow the pace. You make your readers or listeners wait too long to get to the important idea, and you risk losing and confusing them.

After losing her job and having her car repossessed, although she was not a risk-taker and despite the fact that she purchased only a single ticket, Lizzie Hager won the $200-million Powerball jackpot.
(over-subordination)

There are too many ideas here for one sentence. The three subordinate clauses that precede the main idea bog down the sentence and slow the reader's comprehension. The sentence needs to be rewritten, shortening and combining the introductory ideas or giving them a sentence of their own. Note that over-subordination can happen at the end of the sentence too, with the main clause coming first, and a do-not-know-when-to-quit string of dependent clauses tacked on at the end. A sloppy writer can also over-subordinate by sandwiching the main clause between two (or more) dependent clauses. These over-subordinated sentences may not be certifiably awful, but they are certainly not graceful—or reader-friendly.

Dead Constructions

Perhaps they are holdovers from term paper writing style, but these constructions have a limited place in good writing: *it is* and *there is*. In most cases these words merely take up space, performing no function in the sentence. They not only add clutter but also often rob the sentence of its

power by shifting emphasis from what could be a strong verb to a weaker construction—a linking verb (*is, was* and other forms of *to be*):

<u>**There was** a</u>   <u>**flood** downtown.</u>
                (verb potential)

Downtown   <u>**flooded.**</u>
                (stronger verb)

In addition to strengthening the sentence by using an action verb, avoiding *there is/there are* constructions has another benefit: simpler subject—verb agreement. (See our discussion of *There is/There are* as "false subjects" in Chapter 6.) *There* is not usually a subject. Whether you use *is* or *are* depends on what follows the verb:

There <u>is</u> a <u>sale</u> on smartphones.
                (subj.)

There <u>are</u> special <u>discounts</u> for students.
                (subj.)

Looking for the subject after the verb can create agreement confusion. Avoid both the confusion and the dead construction by restructuring the sentence. For example:

Smartphones are on sale. Students are eligible for special discounts.

It is/there is constructions are not entirely without value. You might purposefully choose this structure to create a particular rhythm and emphasis as in this memorable construction, the opening of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair …

A good rule to follow is this: If *it is/there is* merely takes up space in the sentence, restructure the sentence. Rescue the "hidden verb" and avoid agreement problems. If on occasion you want to emphasize the subject—or have fun parodying Dickens—use *it is/there is*—but sparingly.

Passive Voice

Awkwardness is caused when passive voice is used. Power is robbed from sentences, and stiltedness is caused. Strong verbs are weakened.

When writers use passive voice, they create awkward prose and powerless, stilted sentences with weakened verbs.

Read the first example again. Does the language sound clumsy and unnatural, lifeless and detached? We think so. This is passive-voice construction at work. Now read the second example, with the ideas rewritten in the active voice. If you can recognize the improvement—the leaner construction, the faster pace, the straightforward design, the strong, unencumbered verbs—you know why active voice is *almost always* preferable. We'll talk more about passive voice in our chapter on clarity and conciseness. Here, let's review what passive voice is and set you on a path that (mostly) avoids such deadening sentence construction.

What is passive voice?

Voice refers to the form of the verb. The subject acts when you use the *active voice* verb form. In the *passive voice*, the person or thing performing the action becomes instead the object of the sentence; it does not act, but is acted *upon* by the verb:

He photographed the homeless teens.
(active)

The homeless teens were photographed by him.
(passive)

Photographs were taken of the homeless teens.
(passive)

In the first sentence, the actor (*He*) is performing the action (*photographed*) on the recipient of the action (*the homeless teens*). In the second sentence, the recipients (*teens*) are having the action (*photographed*) performed on them by the actor (*him*). The second sentence is an awkward inversion of the first. Look at it this way:

Active Construction

who	did what	to whom
actor	performed action	on recipient
He	photographed	teens

Passive Construction

who	had what done to it	by whom
recipient	acted upon	by actor
teens	were photographed	by him

The third sentence is also in the passive voice. Here the actor—*who* took the photographs—is missing. The recipient (*teens*) is being acted upon (*photographed*), but we do not know by whom.

Unless something else is structurally wrong with a passive-voice sentence, it is not technically a grammatical error. In fact, all three of the examples above are grammatically correct. But the first sentence is lean and straightforward, and the second is clumsy and stilted. The third does not do the job we expect of a good sentence. It does not tell us all the information.

Keep in mind that although passive-voice construction does use *to be* verb forms, many *to be* forms are in the active voice.

She was posting status updates four times a day.
(active)

Here the actor (*she*) performs the action (*posting*). The order is straightforward: Who did what. The *was* does not signal passive voice; it is merely a *helping* or *auxiliary* verb. For this sentence to be in the passive voice, it would have to be constructed like this:

Status updates were being posted by her four times a day.
(passive)

Note that *status updates*, the recipient of the action, is now the subject of the sentence. The actor, *she*, who was the subject of the first sentence, now appears as the object. The order is inverted; the result is clumsy.

Don't try to identify passive voice by the tense of the verb or by the presence of auxiliary verbs. Instead, find the verb and ask: Who or what is performing this action? If the actor (the *who*) is missing, or if the actor is having the action performed on it rather than directly doing the action, the sentence is passive.

Take another look at one of the sentences from the beginning of this section:

Awkwardness is caused when passive voice is used.
(Who/what causes awkwardness? Who uses passive voice?)

When writers use passive voice, they create awkward prose.
(Active voice: who does what to whom)

Remember: Although passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, it is a roadblock on the path to good, strong writing. Why?

Passive voice tends to dilute the verb of its power because the relationship between action and actor is indirect rather than straightforward:
The rebels were surrounded by the militia. (passive)

The militia surrounded the rebels.
(active)

Passive voice can also bury the verb just as there is/there are constructions do. Look at what happens to the strong, direct verb *accused* in the following sentences:

> **The committee accused the athlete of doping.**
> (active)

> **Accusations were made by the committee about the athlete's alleged doping.**
> (passive)

The passive-voice sentence changes the verb *accused* to the noun *accusations*. The result is a flabby sentence.

Passive voice may intentionally or accidentally obscure who or what is responsible for an action by omitting the identity of the actor from the audience:

> **Mistakes were made.**

Who made these mistakes? The passive-voice construction masks the identity of the responsible entity, but who or what is responsible for an action may be vital information. It may be the *most* vital information! Consider the vastly different implications of the following sentences:

> **"Mistakes were made," the president said at the morning press conference.**

> **"I made mistakes," the president admitted at the morning press conference.**

The inclusion of the *who* makes quite a difference. We'll discuss other clarity-related reason to avoid passive voice in Chapter 8.

Correcting passive voice

Unless you have a specific reason to use passive voice (see p. 36), avoid it by constructing or rewriting sentences in the active voice. Remember: In the active voice, the actor performs the action. That doesn't mean that all sentences will be alike. You can vary sentences by placement of phrases and clauses, by length, by internal rhythm, by any number of stylistic decisions.

Correcting passive voice is simple once you recognize the construction. Here's how:

1. Find the verb in the sentence.

2. Ask yourself *who* or *what* is performing the action of the verb. When you do this, you are identifying the actor in the sentence. Keep in mind that

some passive-voice sentences omit the real actor (as in the *Mistakes were made* example.) You may not be able to find the person or thing responsible for the action in the sentence; you may have to add it.

3. Construct the sentence so that the real actor performs the action.

Now let's go through the three steps, beginning with the following passive-voice sentence:

An exposé of the doping scandal is being written by the young reporter.

1. The verb is *is being written.*

2. *Who* performed the action? *Who* is writing? *The reporter.* He or she should be the subject of the sentence.

3. Construct the sentence so that the actor performs the action:

The young reporter is writing an exposé of the doping scandal.

When passive voice is justified

Because passive-voice construction reverses the order of a sentence from actor–verb–recipient to recipient–verb–actor, it can be a useful and justifiable construction when (1) the recipient is more important than the actor, or (2) the actor is unknown, irrelevant or impossible to identify.

In certain instances, the recipient of the action is more important (in journalism, more *newsworthy*) than the performer of the action:

The athlete was ousted from the team by the investigating committee.

The verb is *ousted. Who* ousted? The investigating committee. But clearly the object of the indictment—the athlete—takes precedence in the sentence. It is the newsworthy element. Passive voice is justified here.

The athlete and his trainer were arrested this morning after a raid at a local gym.

The verb is *arrested. Who* arrested? The sentence does not tell us. The person or persons performing the action in the sentence are missing. But because arrests are almost always made by law enforcement personnel, the actor is far less important than the recipients of the action—the athlete and his trainer. Passive voice is allowable, even preferable, in this example as well.

Sometimes the *who* or *what* performing the action is unknown or difficult to identify. When the doer cannot be identified, the writer has little choice but to construct a passive-voice sentence. In this case passive voice is appropriate:

The pharmacy was burglarized sometime late last night.

The verb is *burglarized. Who* or *what* burglarized the pharmacy? The desperate athlete? His misguided trainer? A trio of 10-year-old girls? The doer of this action is unknown. The recipient of the action—the object of the burglary—assumes the prominent place in the sentence.

Shifting voices

Here's an easy rule: Do not change voice from active to passive, or vice versa, within a sentence. This muddled construction shifts focus and confuses the audience. Active voice emphasizes the doer. Passive voice emphasizes the recipient:

The team manager expressed concern over the doping scandal, but the athlete's arrest was not mentioned in his press conference today.

The focus of the first part of the sentence is *the team manager*, the doer or actor. The focus of the second part of the sentence is *the athlete's arrest* (the recipient of the action), resulting in a confusing and awkward shift that adds unnecessary words and robs the second verb, *mentioned*, of its power. (This sentence also lacks parallel structure, which we discuss in Chapter 6.) The sentence would be stronger and clearer if both parts were in the active voice.

The team manager expressed concern over the doping scandal in yesterday's speech but avoided any mention of the athlete's arrest.

Pay particular attention to shifts to the passive after an impersonal *one* or *you*:

If you exercise aerobically, mental acuity can be improved.

The first part of the sentence is in the active voice. The second part shifts the emphasis from the actor (*you*) to the recipient (*mental acuity*). Keep both sentence parts in the active voice for clarity:

If you exercise aerobically, you can improve your mental acuity.

Better yet:

Aerobic exercise improves mental acuity.

The Lead Sentence

Let's end this discussion of the sentence with a few thoughts about the single most important sentence you will write: the *first* sentence. Capturing someone's attention in our media-saturated environment is a tremendous

challenge. The competition for attention is staggering: Social media sites, news sites, 24/7 broadcast (or streamed) news, magazines (online and on paper), even—yes, they still exist—newspapers. There are so many millions of blogs that no one really knows how many million there are. A writer using any of these conduits and hoping to ensnare a reader, listener or viewer will have to do it in one quick, powerful motion: the first sentence.

That sentence can be a simple (but reader-enticing) question, like this one that begins a post at an environmental blog:

Are you sick of being awash in greenwashing?

It can be a bold, provocative sentence, like this one that introduces an eight-page advertising insert for the famous M.D. Anderson Cancer Center at the University of Texas:

Everything causes cancer.

It can be foreboding, the kind of sentence that compels a reader to keep reading, like this one that began a 5,000-word magazine feature:

Fourteen months ago, Tom McDonald heard the news no one wants to hear.

In a traditional news story (wherever it appears), the first sentence is designed to give the audience a concise, comprehensive summary of the most important elements of the story. With its admonishments to tell everything (who? what? when? where? how?) in one sentence, the summary lead approach can open the door to bad writing. Packing a sentence with all this material increases the chance that you will write an awkward, muddled, rambling or otherwise confusing sentence.

Did you hear that? That was the click of a reader exiting your story, the ruffle of a page being turned. That was an opportunity lost, a person who will not be reading (or listening to) your words because you didn't put sufficient thought, energy and grammatical know-how into your very first sentence.

We don't want that to happen to you. You have the power—the obligation!—to construct all your sentences both grammatically and gracefully. Let's get to it: the most important word in a sentence, the vibrant core, the verb.

For additional resources go to **www.cengagebrain.com**

Let's face it: Good writing doesn't come easily.

Talent and style are great allies, but mastering the anatomy of communication also is necessary for your success. In this and several succeeding chapters, we will outline and explain key components of writing, as well as some guidelines to help you avoid errors that will hurt your credibility as a writer.

As we discussed in Chapter 3, the sentence is an assemblage of words that play distinct roles. We call them "parts of speech." Although there are eight of them, one towers above the others: the *verb*.

You can't write a complete sentence without a verb. However, you will write a weaker sentence if you don't employ the strongest, most focused verb.

We must understand verbs in order to construct sentences that give power and precision to our communication. So, we will examine the verb according to forms and functions, number and person, tense, principal parts, voice, and mood. (Sounds like a lot of grammar, yes? *Trust us*—you need to know this!)

We'll conclude this chapter with a discussion of verbals, which may seem to have the power of verbs but in reality are nouns, adjectives or adverbs. *Don't be fooled!*

Verbs Propel Our Sentences

Verb comes from the Latin *verbum*, which means "the word." The verb is at the core of all writing: It is the powertrain of our communication.

A sentence goes nowhere without a verb. At a minimum, a complete sentence must contain a *subject* (a starting point) and a *verb* (providing the power or action), as in

The protestors   screamed.
(subj.)   (verb)

However, as you will recall from Chapter 3, the following cannot be a sentence:

The protestors' screams

Why? These three words contain an image but not a complete thought. They need a verb. *Screams* may seem like an action, but it's a label—a *noun*. So, this is not a sentence but a *phrase*—a group of related words that doesn't contain a verb.

Of course, a complete sentence can contain a single word, as in

Wait!
(The subject, the pronoun *you*, is understood)

The verb focuses, directs and commands. Let's examine how the verb functions in its three basic forms. As we do, note the role of a sentence's subject as well as the words that follow the verb.

Verb Forms and Functions

In most writing, a verb states an *action or effort*, which is expressed in *transitive* and *intransitive* verbs.

The blizzard	**struck**	**the city** with a fury.
(subject)	(trans. verb)	(direct object)

Note how *city* receives the action of *struck*. The verb is transitive because the action moves (crosses) directly from the verb to the object of its action.

The blizzard	**slammed** into the city without warning.
(subject)	(intrans. verb)

(The verb is called intransitive because the action does not go directly to an object or recipient. Although this verb has power, it tells us *where* or *how*, but rarely what. We call "into the city" a prepositional phrase.

The third verb form is called *linking*. Consider it a "softer" form of a verb that indicates a *state of being* or a *condition*. These verbs are often a form of *is*:

The blizzard	**is** the worst in the city's history.
(subject)	(linking verb)

The verb is links the subject to a descriptor—*worst*—to reflect a *condition* ("worst blizzard) rather than an action. In all of these examples, the verb directs the sentence.

These verbs are different in how they portray action, show direction or connect a sentence's subject to a description or qualification.

Understanding these forms is key to making correct choices of *case* (discussed in Chapter 6), to preventing the use of an adverb where an adjective belongs, and to avoiding errors with such troublesome verb pairs as *lay/lie* and *sit/set*. There are many more reasons to understand them, as you will discover.

Here's one more look at verb forms, to emphasize differences:

1. **Transitive verb.** In Latin, *trans* means "through" or "across." This verb moves action from the subject to an object, as in:

   <u>Helen</u>   **<u>wrote</u>**   **<u>100 emails</u> in four hours.**
   (subj.)   (trans. verb)   (dir. obj.)

   Remember that transitive verbs are always followed by a *direct object*—the recipient of the verb's action. When you can answer the question *what* or *whom* after a verb, you usually have a direct object.

2. **Intransitive verb.** As the prefix *in* suggests, this verb form is not transitive. Although there is no recipient of any action from this type of verb, sentences with intransitive verbs do convey action as well as a sense of location or some description of that action. Here is an example, with *write* in the past tense:

   <u>She</u>   **<u>wrote</u>**   **<u>promptly</u> to the impatient editor.**
   (subj.)   (intrans. verb)   (adverb describing the verb)

   Note that in intransitive verb constructions, the words following the verb generally reply to *where, how* or *when*. So, intransitive verbs do *not* take direct objects. These verbs are generally followed by prepositional phrases or adverbs.

3. **Linking verb.** This verb form may seem less forceful compared with its transitive and intransitive cousins, but it has an important role in linking the subject with a descriptor or a concept:

   <u>Writing</u>   **<u>is</u>**   **<u>difficult</u> for her.**
   (subj.)   (linking verb)   (pred. adj. describing *writing*)

   Nouns and pronouns can also follow linking verbs. They are called *predicate nominatives*, because they simply restate the subject or connect a related concept to it, as in:

   <u>Good writing</u>   **<u>is</u>**   **<u>her constant goal.</u>**
   (subj.)   (linking verb)   (predicate nom.)

   It is usually easy to have the subject switch places with the predicate nominative, to reflect the connection (linkage) between both, as in