

Nuts and Bolts Grammar

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Punctuation

The most misused items of punctuation? Apostrophes

- Apostrophes are used for personal possessives: Jan's book, Carl's dog, Mike's idea
- Apostrophes are used for contractions: I'm leaving, he's happy, we're on our way
- NO apostrophes for plurals: Tacos, professors, moms and dads
- NO apostrophes for possessive pronouns: Your book, their house, its place

Tip: When you have a word like you're or it's, read it as two words – you are, it is – and if the sentence still makes sense, you have the right word. Did you send the package? It's (it is) on its way.

A little love for semicolons

Use a semicolon to separate two independent but related clauses and avoid a comma splice:

- Curt went to KU; Katy went to K-State.

Do not use a semicolon if you have a conjunction:

- Curt went to KU and Katy went to K-State.

Use a semicolon to separate comma-containing elements in a list (especially useful for cutlines):

- From left, Karl Swartz of Morris, Laing, Evans, Brock & Kennedy; Jeff Ronen of Kanza Bank; and A.J. Schwartz of Morris, Laing, Evans, Brock & Kennedy visit at the opening celebration of Kanza Bank's Regency Lakes branch.

Agreement

When your subject is singular, the verb and any pronouns that refer to the subject must also be singular:

The team is ready for its game Saturday. *BUT:* The Falcons are ready for their game.

The problem: Gender neutrality. Each student is expected to bring *their book to class.

The fix: Make it plural. All students are expected to bring their books to class.

The problem: Either/or. Either the physicians in this hospital or the chief administrator is/are going to have to decide.

The fix: Use the element of the subject closest to the verb to determine the number of the verb:

- Either the physicians in this hospital or the chief administrator is going to have to decide.
- Either the chief administrator of this hospital or the physicians are going to have to decide.

The problem: Multiple singular antecedents

- School board candidates said they would keep teacher recruitment and class-size reduction a priority, as *it has been in past years.

The fix: any time there's an "and," double-check the nouns. Are they a compound noun phrase? Are they antecedents for a later pronoun? Teacher recruitment + class-size reduction = compound noun phrase (i.e., plural), so the pronoun should be "they."

The problem: Plural prepositional object or relative clause that falls between a singular subject and the verb

- A small group of dedicated editors *continue to press for quality.

The fix: Take the intermediate clause out and the correct verb will be obvious

- A small group of dedicated editors continues to press for quality.

But be careful: Sometimes a clause goes with the prepositional phrase, not the subject.

- She's one of those people who insist/s on talking to the movie screen.

"She" is not the subject of the verb "insist" – "she" is the subject of the verb "is." The subject of the verb "insist" is "people," which is plural. So "insist" is correct.

Parallelism

With constructions such as "either ... or," "both ... and" and "not only ... but also" you need to make sure that the structure after each part is the same. If it's a noun phrase after the first, it should be a noun phrase after the second, etc.

Problem: Natural-gas prices have fallen as well, which not only affects the price homeowners pay for gas but also the price of electricity produced by power plants that run on gas.

Fix: Either give the second part a verb, or move the verb to before the "not only."

Problem: Complicating matters is that Wichita is dealing not only with locally produced ozone, but pollution that blows northward from the Gulf Coast, Dallas and Oklahoma, officials said.

Fix: move the “with” to before “not only,” or add a “with” after “but.”

Misplaced modifiers

What these are: Phrases that are disconnected from the nouns they are supposed to modify.

- Now 90 and the owner of an appliance company in Atlanta, Gunter's glider was towed in by airplane and released over the German lines where it came to earth inside France. (the glider is 90?)

Dangling participles

These are –ing forms of a verb that are not connected to the subject of the main clause.

- Being asleep at the time, his mother fell and woke him up. (who was asleep?)
- Arriving in the middle of the night, the neighbors were disturbed by her loud knocking. (who arrived?)

Subjunctive verbs

Grammatically, the subjunctive is a mood, not a tense.

Use the subjunctive when you are talking about something contrary to fact. This is the “If I were you” construction.

Past subjunctives

Use the “had ___” form of the main verb, and the “would have ___” form of the secondary verb.

- If he had told me the news (but he didn't), I would have come right over.

Present subjunctives

Use “were” or the “were ___-ing” form of the main verb, and “would ___” for the secondary verb.

- If she were still working here (but she's not), she would be mad at the crumbs all over her desk.

Future subjunctives

This is where things get tricky, because you want to distinguish between things that could happen and things that can't.

- If I win the lottery, I will buy everyone on the desk a new car. (remote, but possible)
- If I were to win the lottery (but I won't because I don't play), I would buy everyone on the desk a new car.

Be careful to distinguish a subjunctive from a conditional.

- The bill would make it illegal to smoke indoors. (it hasn't passed yet)
- If the bill becomes law (it might), smoking will be banned indoors.
- If the bill were to become law (it won't, because the governor has promised to veto it), indoor smoking would be banned.

'Who' vs. 'whom'

“Who” is a subject pronoun and “whom” is an object pronoun. Think “To whom it may concern.”

Trick: substitute “he” or “him” to determine the correct form of “who” to use

- Jenkins, who/whom police say was leading a drug and prostitution ring, was arrested Sunday.
- Vizzini, who/whom Fezzik and Inigo made fun of, loved the word “inconceivable.”

'Lie' vs. 'lay'

“Lie” cannot take a direct object. It's a state, not an action. Past tense: lay

- I'm going to go **lie** down. He **lay** down on the couch and slept.

“Lay” has to have a direct object. It's an action, involving motion. Past tense: laid

- **Lay** that proof on the desk. She's loved that puppy ever since she first **laid** eyes on it.

Not rules at all

- Splitting infinitives: It is fine to deliberately split an infinitive to avoid a clunky or unclear sentence.
- Ending sentences with prepositions: Also OK to preserve smooth sentence flow.
- Beginning sentences with conjunctions is acceptable for effect or transition.
- Sentence fragments: Can be OK if used for effect – and used sparingly.
- “Less than” vs. “fewer” / “More than” vs. “over”: Change only when you have nothing else more pressing to do.
- Passive voice: Sometimes who did an action isn't what's important. But beware of passive constructions that are weak or uninformative.