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THE GRAMMAR DEVOTIONAL

Daily Tips for Successful Writing
from Grammar Girl™



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MIGNON FOGARTY

The
Grammar
Devotional

Also by Mignon Fogarty

*Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips
for Better Writing*

The Grammar Devotional

DAILY TIPS for
SUCCESSFUL
WRITING from
GRAMMAR GIRL™

MIGNON FOGARTY

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“A rule is just a style with an army.”

—ANDREW SCHWALM

(A play on the more well-known quotation from an unknown student of the Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich: “A language is just a dialect with an army and navy.”)



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The
Grammar
Devotional

Introduction

People are often moved and challenged by nuggets gleaned on a daily basis—whether from a spiritual devotional, a tip-a-day calendar, or a regularly e-mailed newsletter. But there are few groups who need constant encouragement more than writers—it is, after all, a mostly solitary practice. *The Grammar Devotional*, then, is here to help you: it has daily reminders of our basic tenets (*who* versus *whom*, anyone?); inspiring profiles of writers and grammarians who have helped English evolve to what it is today; and quizzes, word scrambles, and word searches to help solidify newly learned tips.

English is a messy language. Unlike French, we don't have a council to decide how we should write or speak. We only have a multitude of competing college handbooks, dictionaries, and usage and style guides, such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The Associated Press Stylebook*, which frequently disagree. Space is tight in this book, and I like to keep things simple, but wherever possible I point out when something is a style rather than a rule. Too many people go around believing the way they learned to do things is the only way to do things, when really it's just one of the acceptable choices.

As you will see, the book is organized by generic weeks so you can start any time. It's meant to be read through, just like a devotional, but we've also included an index so you can use the book as a reference guide and quickly find specific tips when you need them. Most of the time, punctuation is on Monday, Language Rock Stars are on Wednesday, quizzes and word scrambles are on Friday, and word search puzzles and cartoons are on Sunday, although I occasionally deviate from this pattern to keep related entries together.

It may seem like a trivial endeavor, a tip each day, but at the end of a year the knowledge adds up. A year's worth of new knowledge can imbue your writing with new confidence. Here's to better e-mail messages, essays, marketing materials, articles, and novels.

THE BURGER OF McDONALD'S: MAKING POSSESSIVE NAMES POSSESSIVE

Have you ever wondered how to make a possessive name such as *McDonald's*, *Carl's*, or *St. Anthony's* possessive?

The short answer is don't! Rewrite the sentence to avoid such a construction because, technically, you're supposed to add another apostrophe or apostrophe and s on the end—which looks ridiculous.

**McDonald's earnings were super-sized last quarter.
(technically correct)**

**McDonald's' earnings were super-sized last quarter.
(technically correct)**

**McDonald's reported super-sized earnings last quarter.
(better)**

See page 75 to learn why there are two competing technically correct answers.

I LOVE YOU: SUBJECT VERSUS OBJECT

To figure out things such as when to use *who* or *whom* or *lay* or *lie*, you need to be able to identify the subject and object of a sentence.

Fortunately, it's easy! The subject is the person or thing doing something, and the object is having something done to it.

Just remember the sentence *I love you*. *I* is the subject. *You* is the object of the sentence and also the object of my affection. How's that? You are the object of my affection and the object of my sentence. It's like a Valentine's Day card and grammar trick all rolled into one.

LANGUAGE ROCK STAR: JED HARTMAN AND THE LAW OF PRESCRIPTIVIST RETALIATION

Hartman's Law of Prescriptivist Retaliation, coined by technical writer Jed Hartman in his Web-based column, Words & Stuff (<http://www.kith.org/logos/words/words.html>), states that "any article or statement about correct grammar, punctuation, or spelling is bound to contain at least one error." It is sometimes also known as McKean's Law after lexicographer Erin McKean or Skitt's Law for *alt.usage.english* (<http://www.alt-usage-english.org>) contributor Skitt, both of whom appear to have independently made the same observation. Any errors you find in this text were put there intentionally as a test to see if you are paying attention. Honest.

SO MANY TALENTS: NOT ONLY . . . BUT ALSO

When *not only* is followed by *but also* (or simply *but*), it's considered good form to make sure the parts that follow each set of words are formatted the same way.

He is not only a great swimmer, but also a great musician. (Good: the sentence uses two noun clauses, which are underlined.)

He is not only a great swimmer, but also plays amazing music. (Bad: the sentence uses a noun clause and a verb clause. It's bad because they don't match.)

You could make the second example better by rewriting it with two verb clauses:

He not only swims with ease, but also plays amazing music.

QUIZ: YOU'RE WELCOME

Which of the following is incorrect?

- a. Squiggly received a warm welcome.
- b. Please welcome Squiggly.
- c. Squiggly's arrival was a welcome distraction.
- d. You're welcomed.
- e. They welcomed Squiggly to the family.
- f. Welcome!

The answer and an explanation are on page 211.

A SUPPOSED RULE: SUPPOSEDLY VERSUS SUPPOSABLY

It would be much easier if I could tell you that *supposably* isn't a word, but I can't. It is a word, but the problem is that *supposably* doesn't mean the same thing as *supposedly* and most people use it incorrectly.

The word you usually want is *supposedly*, which means roughly "assumed to be true" and almost always includes a hint of sarcasm or disbelief:

Supposedly, he canceled our date because of a family emergency.

She supposedly sent the check, but it was lost in the mail.

Supposably means "supposable," "conceivable," or "arguably." It is only a valid word in American English; the British wisely refuse to accept it.

THAT PROBLEM

Always make sure your *thats* are necessary. For example, these two sentences mean the same thing, so you can leave out the *that*.

The sandwich that I ate yesterday was delicious.

The sandwich I ate yesterday was delicious.

If your sentence has multiple *thats*, see if you can take some out without changing the meaning.

I know that she would prefer that people call her Cookie.

I know she would prefer that people call her Cookie.

Unfortunately, many people delete *thats* even when they're needed for clarity. Here's an example of a sentence that could initially confuse readers when you omit the word *that*:

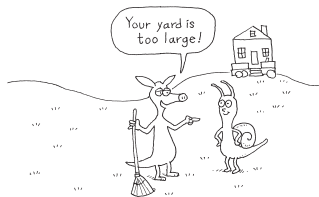
**Aardvark maintains Squiggly's yard is too large.
(wrong)**

Because there's no *that* after *maintains*, readers could initially believe that Aardvark takes care of (maintains) Squiggly's lawn until they reach the phrase *is too large*. A *that* makes it clear Aardvark has an opinion, not a job.

Aardvark maintains that Squiggly's yard is too large.



Aardvark maintains Squiggly's yard.



Aardvark maintains that Squiggly's yard is too large.

AND PER SE AND: AMPERSANDS

The ampersand (&) is a symbol for *and*. Unlike the percent or degree symbol, you generally shouldn't use the ampersand except in the most informal situations. Some style guides allow them as part of a formal company name (Smith & Wesson, Tiffany & Co.). Other style guides recommend spelling out the *and* in such cases. Most style guides recommend using the ampersand when the rest of the name is also an abbreviation (AT&T) and in common expressions (R&D). As you see here, there are no spaces on either side of the ampersand when it is used in that way.

In common phrases, *and* can also be abbreviated using apostrophes for the missing letters: rock 'n' roll.

SHIBBOLETH

People can be as passionate about language as they are about religion, and sometimes the two intersect. For example, linguists sometimes describe a word as a *shibboleth*. It means that the word tags you as a member of a certain group or class. For example, if you say *irregardless*, it tags you as someone who is poorly educated or doesn't use proper language.

Shibboleth is a Hebrew word, and its linguistic meaning stems from the Biblical story of the Gileadites, who used the word to identify Ephraimites. The Ephraimites could not pronounce the "sh" sound, so *shibboleth* came out sounding wrong, making them instantly identifiable.

LANGUAGE ROCK STAR: SAMUEL JOHNSON

Samuel Johnson was the lone author of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which was arguably the most influential English dictionary from its publication in 1755 until the publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1928. It took Johnson nine years to write the nearly forty-three thousand entries. Although Johnson's dictionary was the first attempt at a comprehensive English dictionary and embraced the inclusion of multiple definitions and the use of illustrative quotations in a way no previous dictionary had, it also had biases and humor. For example, the definition for "lexicographer" included "a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge."

WHO? WHAT? WHICH? INTERROGATIVE PRONOUNS

It may seem odd that question words are pronouns. Don't pronouns stand in for nouns? Well, not all of them. The interrogative pronouns (*who, whom, what, which, whose, whoever, whomever, whatever, whichever*) are used to ask questions. Usually you can rewrite the answer to the question as the question itself with a noun or adjective in place of the pronoun.

Who wants chocolate? Squiggly wants chocolate.

Whom should we invite? We should invite Aardvark.

What is that class called? That class is called Fondue Basics.

Which car did they take? They took the green car.

WORD SCRAMBLE: TYPES OF PRONOUNS

There are six major types of pronouns. See if you can unscramble their names.

espalron _____

ssiseposve _____

dnsetmoivatre _____

ndiitnefei _____

riaetvel _____

tgteivoirrae _____

The answer key is on page 211.

HOW MANY BLONDES DOES IT TAKE? BLOND VERSUS BLONDE

It sounds like a joke, but it's actually a legitimate question: How do you spell *blond*?

The word comes to English from French, in which it has masculine and feminine forms. As an English noun, it kept those two forms; thus, a blond is a fair-haired man and a blonde is a fair-haired woman. When you're using the word as an adjective, there is only one spelling: *blond*.

The blonde was delighted when Squiggly presented her with a dictionary.

She wondered whether Squiggly could be considered a blond. He was yellow, after all.

She had yellow-blond hair, but Squiggly only had yellow skin.

MYRIAD

I like myriad 10,000 Maniacs songs—“These Are Days,” “Candy Everybody Wants,” “Few and Far Between,” and probably more that I can’t think of right now. But do a few make a myriad?

The word *myriad* is derived from the Greek word for ten thousand and has long since come to mean “a whole bunch” or “an uncountable multitude,” so it’s hard to argue that *myriad* is a good way to describe three or four songs. *Various*, *a few*, or *many* would probably be better choices.

Another hot debate is whether it is correct to say, “The forest contains myriad species” or “The forest contains *a* myriad of species.” You commonly hear “a myriad of” and just as commonly hear people railing that it should be simply “myriad” because the word is an adjective and essentially equivalent to a number. You wouldn’t say “There are *a* ten thousand of species,” so you shouldn’t say “There are *a* myriad of species,” so the argument goes.

Believe it or not, most language experts say that either way is fine. *Myriad* was actually used as a noun in English long before it was used as an adjective, and today it’s considered both a noun and an adjective, which means it can be used with an *a* before it (as a noun) or without an *a* before it (as an adjective). Nevertheless, if you choose to say or write “a myriad of,” I must warn you that you’ll encounter occasional but vehement resistance. You may want to cut out this entry, laminate it, and carry it in your wallet as a defense.

SALUTATION SOLUTIONS: *HI* VERSUS *DEAR*

Technically, those e-mail messages you write should begin *Hi, John*—with a comma after *Hi*.

You see, *Hi, John* is different from *Dear John* because *hi* and *dear* are not the same kind of word. *Hi* is an interjection just like *wow* and *ugh*, and *dear* is an adjective that modifies John.

In *Hi, John* you are directly addressing John, which means the punctuation rules of direct address apply. From a comma-rules standpoint, *Hi, John* is no different from *Thanks for coming, John* or *Wow, John, what were you thinking?* You can end *Hi, John* with a period or, if you continue the sentence, a comma.

A BOOK FOR EVERYMAN: *EACH* AND *EVERY*

Each and *every* mean the same thing and are considered singular nouns so they take singular verbs. (Note the singular verbs in the following example.) If you want to get technical, you can use *each* to emphasize the individual items or people:

Each car is handled with care.

Inspectors scrutinize each egg to make sure it isn't cracked.

And you can use *every* to emphasize the larger group:

Every car should use hybrid technology.

The Egg Farmers of America want eggs on every table for breakfast.

People often say “each and every” for emphasis, but it is redundant, and I almost always advise brevity when it comes to usage.

EAGER BEAVER: ANXIOUS VERSUS EAGER

To some, *anxious* has more of a negative connotation than *eager*. You're eager for your long-distance boyfriend's plane to arrive, unless you're going to break up with him. Then you're more likely to be anxious for his plane to arrive so you can get it over with. *Anxious* is evolving, though. The distinction between the two terms was much stronger in the seventeenth century. Today, many people use the words interchangeably.

I'm eager to see the dessert tray. (standard)

I'm anxious to see my ex-wife. (standard)

I'm anxious to get our new puppy. (fine, but sometimes disputed)

MANNERS BEATS GRAMMAR: ORDERING PRONOUNS

"Me first" is a bad attitude in life, and so it is in grammar, too. When you put yourself in a list with others, it's a rule of politeness to put yourself last:

Squiggly and I are shopping.

Please send the recipe to Squiggly, Aardvark, and me.

When you're combining nouns and pronouns, the rule is to put the pronouns first, unless that pronoun is *I* or *me*. (Politeness trumps the other rule.) Although the sentences below illustrate the rule, they sound awkward. In most cases, you'd probably use plural pronouns such as *they* and *us*.

She and Squiggly went shopping.

Please send the recipe to her and me.

WEEK 3 FRIDAY

QUIZ: *DISC* VERSUS *DISK*

Circle the correct sentences below.

- a. I stored my data on a compact disc.**
- b. I have a slipped disc in my back.**
- c. Does anyone use floppy disks anymore?**
- d. The disk failed in my external hard drive.**

The answer and an explanation are on page 211.

WEEK 3 SATURDAY

AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION: *HISTORIC* VERSUS *HISTORICAL*

Historical refers to anything from the past, important or not. For example, any past presidential inauguration would be a historical event, and any book that focuses on history or past events would be a historical book.

Grandpa collects historical inauguration photographs.

Sir Fragalot enjoys historical novels.

Historic refers to something important or influential in history.

Obama's inauguration was a historic event.

The Gutenberg Bible is a historic book.

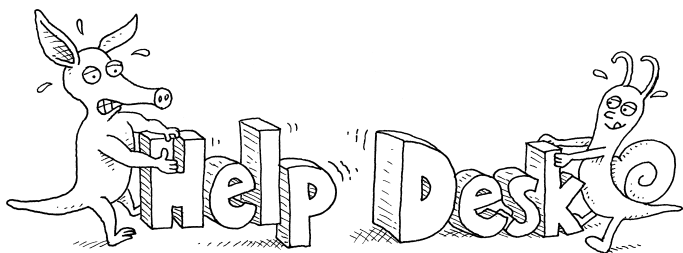
You can remember the different meanings of *historic* and *historical* by thinking that the ending “ic” means important, and they both start with *i*, and “al” is “all in the past,” and those both start with *a*.

CAMELCASE

CamelCase (also known as medial capitals, intercaps, hump-backing, CapWords, and BiCapitalials, among other names) is the practice that has now become trendy of promoting a letter in the middle of a word to uppercase. Most often the capital letter in the middle seems to result from squishing two words together that would normally be separated by a space (e.g., MySpace), but occasionally the capital just seems to pop up at a convenient syllable (e.g., OutKast).

Although the phenomenon can be traced back to at least the 1950s, it gained steam among computer programmers (probably because spaces are often discouraged or disallowed in programming, so a convenient way to highlight multiple words in a file name or variable is to capitalize the first letter of each squished-together word). More recently, marketers decided it was a trendy way to make a company name stand out.

If a formal company name uses CamelCase (e.g., YouTube, PayPal, TiVo), use that form in your writing. But other than honoring official names, leave the camel at the zoo—don't go around calling a plain old help desk a HelpDesk. It's definitely unnecessary!



Leave the camel at the zoo.

PARENTHESES AND PUNCTUATION

When a parenthetical statement falls at the end of a sentence, the placement of the terminal punctuation depends on whether the words inside the parentheses are a complete sentence.

If the words inside the parentheses *aren't* a complete sentence, the period, question mark, or exclamation point that ends the sentence goes after the parenthesis:

Squiggly likes chocolate (and nuts).

Could Aardvark bring home candy (quickly)?

If the words inside the parentheses *are* a complete sentence, the period, question mark, or exclamation point that ends the sentence goes inside the parenthesis:

Bring chocolate. (Squiggly likes sweets.)

Buy chocolate. (Bring it quickly!)

SOMETIMES I HATE GRAMMAR: SOMETIMES VERSUS SOMETIME VERSUS SOME TIME

Want to hate English while feeling dark and moody? Note that these mean different things: *sometime*, *some time*, and *sometimes*. As I'm writing this tip I have the Depeche Mode song "Sometimes" in my head. *Sometimes* means "now and then" or "occasionally," so when they wrote the lyrics "Sometimes I question everything," they used it properly. Thank goodness! I'd hate my college memories to be tainted by a love of bad usage. *Sometime* means "at some unspecified time" and *some time* means "quite a while." *I'll dig out that old Depeche Mode tape sometime and spend some time listening to it again.*

LANGUAGE ROCK STAR: NOAH WEBSTER

Noah Webster, of *Webster's Dictionary* fame, believed it was important for America, a new and revolutionary nation, to assert its cultural independence from Britain through language. He wrote the first American spelling, grammar, and reading schoolbooks and the first American dictionary. He was an advocate of spelling reform and is responsible for many of the differences between American and British English; for example, he introduced spellings such as *color* (versus *colour*) and *program* (versus *programme*). Merriam-Webster eventually acquired the rights to Webster's works and publishes the true descendants of the original Webster's dictionaries, but the term "Webster's" has entered the public domain and now also appears in titles of unrelated dictionaries.

THE HIM-LICH MANEUVER: WHO VERSUS WHOM

Do you choke when you have to decide when to use *who* and *whom*? Here's something I call the "him-lich maneuver." Ask if you could hypothetically answer the question with *him*. If you can, use *whom*. Him and whom both end with the letter *m*. This works because *whom* refers to objects, and *him* is an object pronoun, so it makes a good test case.

Who/Whom should we invite? (You could answer, "We should invite him." You've got a *him*, so the right choice is *whom*.)

Who/Whom is going? (You could answer, "He is going." *Him* doesn't work, so the right choice is *who*.)

QUIZ: FORMER VERSUS LATTER

In which sentence does Squiggly want chocolate?

- a. Aardvark found canned tuna and chocolates in the cupboard. Squiggly craved the former.
- b. Aardvark found canned tuna and chocolates in the cupboard. Squiggly craved the latter.

The answer and an explanation are on page 211.

YOU'RE ENTITLED TO YOUR OPINION: TITLED VERSUS ENTITLED

Some people think *entitled* shouldn't be used in this sense: *She sold her story, which was entitled "Squiggly and Aardvark Rule the World."* They are entitled to their opinion, but they are wrong. Of course, *entitled* can also indicate that someone has a certain right, but major dictionaries and usage guides state that *titled* and *entitled* are synonyms in the "name of a book, article, or speech" sense. Simpler is almost always better, though, and since *titled* is simpler than *entitled*, it's often the better choice. Better yet, rewrite the sentence without either word; it usually results in a simpler, more direct sentence: *She sold her story, "Squiggly and Aardvark Rule the World."*

WORD SEARCH: PREPOSITION ME!

Prepositions are words, such as *on*, *in*, *at*, and *by*, that describe relationships between other words—relationships such as position and time. These are some of the most difficult words for people learning English to understand; often, there's no reason why we use one preposition in a common phrase instead of another. Find some of the longer prepositions in the puzzle below.

The answer key is on page 212.



ABOUT
ABOVE
ACROSS
AFTER
AGAINST
AROUND
BEFORE

BEHIND
BELOW
BENEATH
BESIDE
BESIDES
BETWEEN
BEYOND

DURING
EXCEPT
FOR
INSIDE
NEAR
OFF
OUT

OUTSIDE
THROUGH
THROUGHOUT
TILL
TOWARD
UNDER
UNTIL

UPON
WITH
WITHOUT