

Everything You NEVER Wanted to Know about Grammar and Mechanics in Writing

By Karen Keyworth

Let's just admit it - grammar is a bore. If it isn't a bore, it's a bother. When I was in high school, I hated grammar because I didn't understand it and didn't see a need for it. So I thought I'd start this packet with the **WHY** of it all:

"Ours is not to question why. Ours is but to do and die." Tennyson ☺

Why?

It's hard to believe, but grammar touches almost every aspect of our lives - business, culture, war, politics, etc. In many societies, your family's reputation or name "marks" your social status. However, in the US, your language - specifically, your *dialect* - is the most telling mark. If you speak/write **Standard English**, you are considered educated, not a "hick" or a "cracker." You will find it easier to obtain a job and easier to advance in your job if you know the standard.

The type of English you learn to "sound educated" is called Standard English, but it's really just a variation of Northern dialect. Northern dialect became the standard because the North won the Civil War. The North had power and wealth, so it became the center for publishing. The editors spoke Northern dialect, so naturally they used that to make decisions. Therefore, we teach students to write: "I should have *eaten*," and not, "I should have *ate*." If the South had won the war, we would be teaching you the opposite. Both sentences give the same information, so linguistically they communicate equally well. We just *value* one over the other.



Now that you understand how language is connected to war, status, and power, you can see that learning Standard English is a **choice** you make for reasons that have nothing to do with right and wrong. There is no right and wrong; there is only "appropriate." If you learn Standard English, you will gain flexibility and choice. Keep, cherish, and respect your own dialect - it's a valuable and important part of your identity - but use Standard when it will benefit you: choose, don't lose.

The Ground Rules

I think that before we get started with this complicated subject of grammar and mechanics, there are a few things we have to understand.

☒ **Rule #1:** English grammar doesn't make much sense. That's right; it's confusing and sometimes just plain crazy. This insanity began waaaaay back around 600 CE when the Anglo-Saxons in England were converted to Christianity (about 10 years before the Angel Gabriel first appeared to the Prophet Mohammed). This is when the English language was first written down - when a few Catholic monks with a lot of time on their hands decided to make life tough for students like you. Up until then, the English language had been only a spoken language. (Imagine, no essays to write!) But all of that was about to change.



The Catholic monks knew Latin, and Latin was the language of the new religion and government. You could say that Latin was the boss of all the other languages in England at that time. The monks also knew English, and English was the language of the serfs, slaves, and losers who had lost the last war. It was the "loser" language. What the monks didn't know, however, was that English is an entirely different language, completely unrelated to Latin. That little bit of missing information is one of the reasons English grammar is so crazy. (Other reasons add to our language's lunacy - for example, borrowing thousands of words and their spellings from other languages. About 38% of our everyday (high frequency) vocabulary words come from other languages while a whopping 86% of our total vocabulary comes from other languages - mostly French and Latin.)



English is a Teutonic (German)-based language with its own set of rules and a vocabulary to talk about those rules. Latin has different rules and a different vocabulary to talk about those rules. It's like trying to talk about a record player when you only have the understanding and vocabulary to talk about CD players. You don't know exactly how the record player works, but you know how a CD player works. So when you try to describe the inner workings of the record player, you will make mistakes explaining how it works and using accurate vocabulary. That is the problem with English grammar. It does a good job talking about Latin, but it does a crazy job talking about English.



☒ **Rule #2:** When we say mechanics, we are not talking about people who fix your car. We are talking about the periods, commas, semicolons, and other marks we use in sentences.



If you attach these confusing marks to some funny ideas, you can remember them better:

- A period is pretty simple. . It means that your idea and sentence STOP. 
Think of it as a **red** light.
- A comma is more difficult, , but for now think of it as a **yellow** light - slow down, but don't stop. 
- A semicolon is the most difficult, ; however, try to think of it as a period sitting on top of a comma. It really can't seem to make up its mind whether to stop or go, so it does both! The period on top means that the sentence is complete. The comma on the bottom means that the idea continues. 



☒ **Rule #3:** When we talk about independent and dependent clauses, we are not talking about freedom, jail, or Santa. We are talking about parts of a sentence.

A full sentence must contain the following three (3) features:

1. subject
2. verb
3. complete idea/thought

☒ An independent clause (IC) is a full sentence that is inside a larger sentence. Let's take look at these:

Maryam cut the grass.

Maryam cut the grass and raked the leaves.

IC

Maryam cut the grass [and raked the leaves.]
 (subject) (verb) (rest of the sentence)

Actually, Maryam hates to work on the lawn. She prefers to read books.

Think of an *independent clause* (IC) as the part of the sentence that can stand alone - is independent of the rest of the sentence.



Maryam cut the grass can stand alone. It makes sense all by itself. However, **and raked the leaves** cannot stand alone because it has no subject (Maryam). It must have the subject in order for us to understand WHO raked the leaves.

Usually her sister and brother end up doing the job - and calling her "lazy."

☒ A **dependent clause** (DC) is another term you need to know. (A dependent clause is sometimes called a subordinate clause.) A dependent clause is created from an independent clause when we attach a subordinator word (see list at end). This affects the third requirement of a full sentence, the *complete idea* requirement.

Maryam cut the grass.

Mohammed raked the leaves.

IC
IC

Maryam cut the grass
+ while +
Mohammed raked the leaves.

(subject) (verb)
subordinator
(subject) (verb)

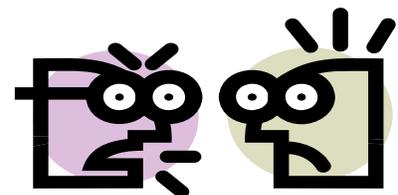
IC
DC

Maryam cut the grass
while Mohammed raked the leaves.

(subject) (verb)
(new dependent clause)

While Mohammed raked the leaves is not a full sentence because it does not have a complete idea. It has a subject and a verb, but the subordinator word "while" that we added has taken away the complete idea and made the clause dependent on the rest of the sentence to make sense.

You might find it easier to remember this if you think of a subordinator word as an angry parent and imagine the dependent clause as a rebellious teenager. The angry parent decides to punish the teenager by



Mohammed gets grounded all the time. **YOU** never get grounded, do you?

grounding him/her. The teenager used to be independent and could stand alone, but now s/he has to depend on parents to go anywhere or do anything.

Part A: Three Major Sentence Errors

✘ **Fragments:** These are incomplete sentences. Sometimes the subject, verb, or complete idea is missing.

Incorrect:

- Why does Hannah misbehave? *Because she thinks her Baba won't punish her.*

Correct:

- Why does Hannah misbehave? Hannah misbehaves because she thinks her Baba won't punish her.

Incorrect:

- *Swimming around in the pool. We all enjoyed ourselves.*

Correct:

- Swimming around in the pool, we all enjoyed ourselves.
- We all enjoyed ourselves swimming around in the pool.

✘ **Comma splice:** This error occurs when a comma is used to join two sentences.

Incorrect:

- *Hannah is a beautiful woman, she is also intelligent.*

Correct:

- Hannah is a beautiful woman. She is also intelligent.
- Hannah is a beautiful woman; she is also intelligent.
- Hannah is a beautiful woman; additionally, she is intelligent.
- Hannah is a beautiful woman, and she is intelligent. (** see Fanboys)

✘ **Run Together:** A Run Together sentence is two full sentences written as one. This usually happens when the writer wants to connect the **ideas** in the sentences but doesn't know how; consequently, an RT is often corrected with a semicolon.

Incorrect:

- *Ali was worried about the new math it was so difficult and complex.*

Correct:

- Ali was worried about the new math; it was so difficult and complex.
- Ali was worried about the new math. It was so difficult and complex.
- Ali was worried about the new math because it was so difficult and complex.

Part B: Transitions

These can be either a group of words or a word that shows a *relationship* between ideas or a *move* from one idea to another idea - sort of like a bridge. Use these words if you want your writing to really rock! A good rule of thumb is to use a transition word/group

- ◇ at the beginning of each paragraph
- ◇ and at least one time inside each paragraph.

At first, you might be most comfortable using a single word; however, as you become more confident, you will use more complicated transition word groups.

Here are some examples of transitions that can be used at the beginning of paragraphs and sentences:

Single Transition Words

- *First*, people are expected to remove their shoes at the door.
- *Second*, they should hand their coats to the host.
- *Initially*, students need time to learn the rules.

Transition Word Groups

- *Ten years after the war*, the city looked new again.
- *When people first enter our home*, they remove their shoes.
- *On the one hand*, Ali prays daily. *On the other hand*, he swears a lot.

There are several types of transition words, and each type has its own special mechanics/punctuation requirement.

✳ **Adverbial Conjunctions**: Some transitions are used *between* independent clauses and sentences inside of paragraphs and are usually adverbial conjunctions:

- Sarah wanted to be the best student in the class; therefore, she studied very hard. IC ; therefore , IC.
- Sarah wanted to be the best student in the class; however, she never studied very hard. Consequently, she was the worst student in the class. IC ; however , IC. Consequently, IC.

If an adverbial conjunction is squeezed *between* two independent clauses, you must use a semicolon (;) and a comma (,).

IC; therefore, IC.

If the adverbial conjunction is used at the beginning of a sentence, you must follow it with a comma.

Consequently, IC.

The following transitions are called **adverbial conjunctions**. Learn their meanings!

accordingly	finally	likewise	similarly
also	furthermore	meanwhile	specifically
anyway	hence	moreover	still
besides	however	nevertheless	subsequently
certainly	incidentally	next	then
consequently	indeed	nonetheless	therefore
conversely	instead	otherwise	thus

☒ **Coordinating Conjunctions**: This is another type of conjunction. An easy way to remember these special conjunctions is to remember the word **FANBOYS**.



****FANBOYS**: These coordinating conjunctions connect two full sentences (or two independent clauses) with a comma.

For Ali was a lucky boy, *for* his parents were rich and happy. (*because*)

And Sarah was intelligent, *and* she was beautiful. (*also*)

Nor Ali was not intelligent, *nor* was he handsome. (*also not*)

But Sarah was rich, *but* she was not happy. (*opposite meaning*)

Or Ali has only \$5.00. Ali can see a movie, *or* he can eat lunch. (*not both*)

Yet Sarah was short, *yet* she was a great basketball player. (*but still*)

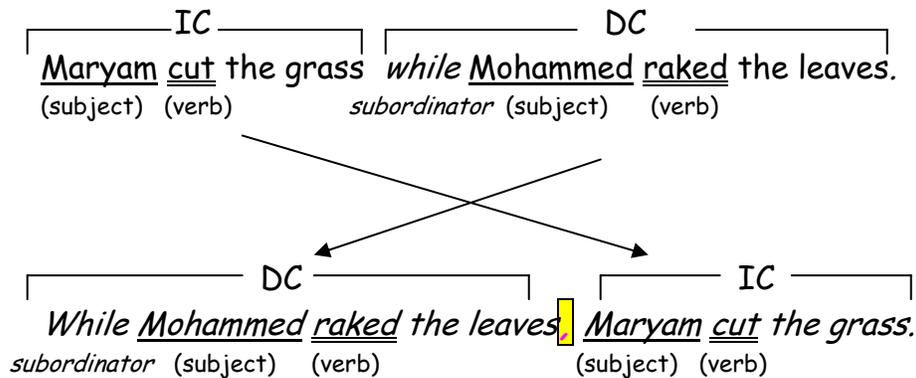
So* I couldn't move the car, *so* the delivery worker was required to walk around it. (*So has the same meaning as therefore.*)

NOTE: When *so* is a part of a clause with an implied *that*, do not use a comma. It is similar in meaning to *in order to*. Example: I couldn't move the car *so* (that) the delivery worker could deliver the couch. Therefore, she had to return the next day.

☒ **Subordinators:** These transition words are often confused with adverbial conjunctions, *but they are very different*. Remember the angry parent?

A subordinator word takes an independent clause (IC) and turns it into a dependent clause (DC). For more explanation, see previous section on Dependent Clauses (**Ground Rule #3**).

When a dependent clause (DC) comes **after** an independent clause (IC), you do **not** use a comma after the independent clause. However, when the dependent clause is *shifted* from the back to the front of the independent clause, you **do** use a comma. You can call this a **front-shifter**. It's sort of like cutting in line.



The following transitions are called **subordinators**. Learn their meanings!

after	if	that	whereas
although	in order that	though	wherever
as	in order to	unless	which
as if	now that	until	while
as though	once	what	who
because	rather than	whatever	whoever
before	since	when	whom
even if	so that	whenever	whose
even though	than	where	why



Yahoo! You have read this all the way through. Do you know that I teach this same information in college? It's true. If you learn this now, you won't have to take my course later. Salams!