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Improve You're English.

A simple, easy-to-use guide to

help improve your understanding of
everyday English grammar,
punctuation and writing

by Paul Parry



Improve Your English

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About the author

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I am a respected and trusted English language expert with special expertise in making the complicated appear simple and understandable.

I have written numerous articles (click [here](#) for a few examples), [a novel](#), a sitcom and corporate [marketing copy](#), as well as all the content for my website, www.EnglishLanguageExpert.com. My expertise has helped family, friends, business partners and associates over the course of many years grow their confidence in using the English language.

I am an Englishman and live just outside London. I have a degree in English and media, having been educated at De Montfort University, Leicester. I am a passionate writer on many subjects.

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Introduction

English is a fascinating and fun language. But it is also full of rules and exceptions which can be frustrating to learn.

What you are reading is a simple guide to the main points of the English language (for example, sentence construction, the different types of words and punctuation) and how you can apply these to:

- Write better English – every day
- Identify and avoid common mistakes
- Communicate more effectively and get results

Of course, there is a lot more to English than is contained in this guide. But this is not meant to be the most-detailed English language book available – simply a guide you can read over and over again, either on paper or on your computer, to help you whenever you need it.

While the software and other computer tools (such as spell-checks) which are available to help with your English do a good job, I firmly believe you cannot beat having the knowledge in the first place.

My aim when writing this was to create something that will provide assistance whatever your age, circumstances or first language.

Read this book for guidance and apply what you learn to **everyday** writing situations. It will help grow your confidence as you look to improve your circumstances through education and/or employment. It will make your blogs easier to read. It will help you write that book you've always dreamed of.

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Of course, if you come across paragraphs or indeed entire sections with which you are already comfortable, feel free to skip those parts. Just concentrate on the bits you don't know or are unsure of.

The important thing to remember is this: never be embarrassed or restricted by your English. Read through this guide – as many times as you like – and absorb what it contains. Your improved English can help you achieve results.

NB: This ebook refers to words and spellings used in UK English rather than American English.

A brief history of the English language

As the above title suggests, this section is deliberately brief. This is simply because I do not want to stray too far from the subject in hand: improving your English. The history of English is a subject that could warrant an entire book in its own right – maybe that is one for the future!

You may skip this section if you choose, but I did want to include some background just so you know perhaps why English can be such a confusing language to learn.

Let's begin...

Modern English is made up of a combination of words, phrases and spellings from four key sources:

- Latin
- Old English/Middle English
- Old Norse
- Old French

Invasion and occupation by the **Romans** (AD43 – AD410), the **Anglo-Saxons** (from north-western Europe, AD410 – AD800), the **Vikings** (800 – 1066) and William the Conqueror's **Normans** (1066) all left their mark on Britain and its languages.

In the northern and western extremes of Britain, where these immigrant tribes did not reach, local languages were able to develop relatively uninfluenced. Most notably, these were Cornish, Welsh and Scottish Gaelic.

But in the east and south of the country, the languages of all these invading peoples had a profound effect upon the native dialects.

Latin gave English some of its more complex, multi-syllable words – for example, 'litigation', 'ultimatum' and 'agenda'.

Old Norse, brought by the Vikings, gave English words such as 'window' and 'egg' (as well as the '...by' ending of place names often found in northern and eastern England – Wetherby, Selby and Grimsby, for example).

And English 'borrowed' many words from Old French. In fact, approximately 40% of all words in English – at least 30,000 – are derived from French.

Old English was made up of four main dialects: Mercian and Northumbrian (these were sometimes referred to as Anglian and were largely in use in the north of the country) while Kentish and West Saxon prevailed in the south.

Old English evolved into Middle English between the time of the Norman Conquest and the mid-to-late 15th century. This was influenced by the introduction of the printing press to England in the 1470s by William Caxton, and also the literary work of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), who is often credited as the first author to demonstrate the artistic legitimacy of English as a native language in its own right.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge provided two points of the most dominant triangular area of England at this time – the third point being London. And within this area, the south-east-midlands version of the Anglian dialect (the dialect of London) emerged to become the precursor of modern Standard English.

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Today, among numerous local accents and dialects which still prevail across the country, Received Pronunciation (or 'RP') and Standard English are accepted as the dominant standards of spoken and written English (for example, these have at times become known as 'BBC English').

It is worth noting that, as you can tell, the English language is continually changing and evolving. You only have to look to the latest technology to see the latest linguistic changes – mobile phones have brought text messaging which in turn has brought its own language (for example, 'txt spk' = text speak. You get the idea).

And as language changes, two schools of thought emerge: prescriptive and descriptive.

Prescriptive ideas suggest that language should have set rules which must be followed, regardless of the inevitable change.

Descriptivists, however, look at the way language is actually used by its speakers and then create rules accordingly. These people accept regional differences in language and also forms used in speech that prescriptivists would describe as errors (such as saying, "We *was* walking..." rather than "We *were* walking...", which is merely a form of regularizing a verb, making "We was" the same as "I was" and "You was" and so on).

Who is right? What I suggest is this: know the rules and maybe stick to them as best you can. But if you want to break them because something sounds better or looks better then do so. Your ultimate aim must always be to communicate with **clarity, brevity** and **impact**.

Word types – and the golden rule of sentence construction

The golden rule of sentences in English is that they always have the **subject first, followed by the verb**. (The sentence might then include an **object** and an **adverb**).

In the sentence, 'Andrew throws the ball', 'Andrew' is the subject (ie the sentence is actually *about* Andrew) and 'throws' is the verb. ('the ball' is the object). If the sentence read, "Andrew throws the ball well," then 'well' would be the adverb (it tells us *how* Andrew throws the ball).

In the sentence, 'Jenny helped the old lady', 'Jenny' is the **subject**, 'helped' is the **verb** and 'the old lady' is the **object**.

It is important to master this simple but tremendously important rule before we move on to the different types of words available in English.

Verbs: 'doing' words

The verb is probably the most important part of a sentence.

In the sentence, 'Johnny reads a book,' the verb is 'reads' and the sentence is written in what is known as 'the third person' (ie, Johnny is the third person because he is neither me nor you). The trouble is not every sentence is as simple *and* there are several different types of verbs:

- Regular
- Irregular
- Auxiliary
- Modal
- Compound
- Transitive
- Intransitive

I want to keep this as simple as possible, but it can be confusing and I urge you to stick with it.

Here goes...

Regular, irregular & auxiliary verbs

Regular and irregular verbs have six forms (often called 'principal parts') which are used to indicate tense, ie, **when** something happened or was done:

- The 'to' infinitive (eg 'to laugh')
- The base form (eg 'laugh' – ie the infinitive without 'to' in front of it)
- The simple present (eg 'laugh'/'laughs')

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- Simple past (eg 'laughed')
- Past participle (eg 'laughed')
- Present participle (eg 'laughing')

The difference between regular and irregular verbs is the formation of the simple past and past participle. Regular verbs are consistent – the simple past ends in 'ed', as does the past participle.

Here are some examples of regular verbs:

'To' infinitive	Base form	Simple present	Simple past	Past participle	Present participle
to laugh	laugh	laugh(s)	laughed	laughed	laughing
to start	start	start(s)	started	started	starting
to hope	hope	hope(s)	hoped	hoped	hoping
to roll	roll	roll(s)	rolled	rolled	rolling

Irregular verbs, however, can end in a variety of ways and with no consistent pattern.

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Here are some examples of the many irregular verbs in English:

'To' infinitive	Base form	Simple present	Simple past	Past participle	Present participle
to be	be	am, is, are	was, were	been	being
to drive	drive	drive(s)	drove	driven	driving
to run	run	run(s)	ran	run	running
to give	give	give(s)	gave	given	giving

The thing to remember here is that the simple past participle always has just one part. For example, 'I **was** hungry', 'He **drove**' and 'John **gave** it to me'.

But when you use the past participle of a verb, for example, 'I have **been**', you must also use an auxiliary verb (in this case, '**have**').

Modal verbs

In sentences like the one above, you sometimes need a **modal** verb as well (for example, 'I **might** have been'). Modal verbs often go unnoticed. Common examples of modal verbs are:

can	ought to
could	shall
may	should
might	will
must	would

Modal verbs behave differently from normal verbs. Here's why:

- Modal verbs do not take 's' in the third person
- You use 'not' to make modal verbs negative (eg, 'I should not drive', 'I should not have driven')
- Many modal verbs cannot be used in past or future tenses. For example, 'He will can go with us' and 'She musted studied hard' are not correct

'Had better', 'have to' and 'have got to' are not modal verbs, although they are closely related to modals and often interchanged with them.

For regular verbs (eg, 'to start'), knowing the difference between the simple past and past participle is unnecessary because both are identical. For example: 'I **started**' and 'I had **started**'.

However, when you use irregular verbs (eg, 'to give'), you must know the simple past and past participles because they are often different. For example, 'I **gave**' and 'I have **given**'.

Also, past participles can sometimes function as adjectives. For example, 'a **written** exam', 'a **rolled** pizza', 'the **stolen** case'.

Compound verbs

Good news! You have already read all about compound verbs. They are simply verbs which are formed by the combination of an auxiliary verb followed by a main verb – which of course is what has formed much of this section. So I shall go on no more about compound verbs. Just a couple of examples to make sure you know:

- In 'We are speaking', 'are speaking' is a compound verb made up of the auxiliary verb 'are', followed by the main verb 'speaking'
- In 'We have been speaking', 'have' and 'been' are auxiliaries and 'have been speaking' is the compound

Transitive & intransitive verbs

This bit's nice and straight-forward. Quite simply, transitive verbs take an object, intransitive verbs do not. For example, in the sentence, 'He opened the door', 'door' is the object of the action. 'Opened' is the action, therefore this is a transitive verb.

In the sentence, 'They arrived', the verb ('arrived') does not take an object. It is intransitive.

Active & passive verbs

What's the difference between the following?

'The boy threw the balls.'

'The balls were thrown by the boy.'

Not much? Quite right: both sentences say pretty much the same thing. The first sentence is **active** – the subject (the boy) performs the action expressed in the verb. The second sentence is **passive** – the subject (the balls) receives the action expressed in the verb.

However, what happens when you drop the agent in the second sentence? (The agent in the second sentence is the same as the subject in the first sentence – the boy). You are left with:

'The balls were thrown.'

Now we do not know who threw the balls.

This is a common tactic often used when newspapers or other media do not want us to know everything that happened in a particular situation, or perhaps when the reporter himself does not know everything but still wants to tell the story as best he can.

Knowing the difference between active and passive will not make you rich, but for the purposes of improving your understanding of the English language and the way it can be used (or manipulated), it is something well worth considering. So, to sum up:

Active

- Preferable to passive (because sentences can be shorter and easier to read and digest)
- Often clearer and more direct

Passive

- Can create awkward sentences
- Overuse of the passive voice can cause your writing to sound flat

Nouns: words which name someone or something

Nouns name things – people, places, qualities, actions, emotions and objects. Because nouns can name so many different types of things, it is no surprise that there are several different types of nouns. The main ones are:

- Proper nouns
- Common nouns
- Concrete nouns
- Abstract nouns
- Count & non-count nouns
- Collective nouns
- Adjectival nouns

Proper nouns

Quite simply, these are names of specific things. The name of a person, a pet or a place are all proper nouns, such as 'Mick Jagger', 'The Beatles', 'London' and 'Liverpool'. They should always begin with a capital letter, regardless of their position within a sentence.

Common nouns

These are words that name *general* varieties, for example, 'apple', 'emotion', 'restaurant', 'girl'.

Be careful with these – resist the temptation to begin a common noun with a capital simply because you think it should have one or looks better. Keep those capitals for proper nouns (unless, of course, you are starting a sentence).

Concrete & abstract nouns

Concrete nouns are objects and substances, including people and animals, that exist *physically*. For example, 'apple', 'clocks' and 'watches' are concrete nouns because you can actually touch these things.

Abstract nouns refer to states, events, concepts, feelings, qualities and other things that have no physical existence. For example, 'time' is a concept that has no physical existence. 'Freedom', 'happiness' and 'ideas' are all more examples of abstract nouns.

Count & non-count nouns

Both concrete and abstract nouns can be countable or uncountable.

Countable nouns have both a singular and plural form. The plural is normally made by the addition of an 's'. For example, 'horse' (concrete noun) or 'horses'; and 'feeling' (abstract noun) or 'feelings'.

Nouns that do not have plural forms are called uncountable or mass nouns. 'Music', 'air', 'happiness' (abstract nouns) and 'sheep' (concrete noun) are examples of uncountable nouns.

Quantifiers

Quantifiers are words that precede and modify nouns to tell us how many or how much of a particular thing (the noun) is being talked about. To select and use the correct quantifier, you must first understand the distinction between count and non-count nouns.

To explain this, let's use the count noun, 'buttons' and the non-count noun, 'music'. The following quantifiers will work with count nouns:

Many buttons
A few buttons
Few buttons
Several buttons
A couple of buttons
None of the buttons

The following quantifiers will work with non-count nouns:

Not much music
A little music
Little music
A bit of music
A good deal of music
A great deal of music
No music

The following quantifiers will work with count and non-count nouns:

All of the buttons/music
Some buttons/music
Most of the buttons/music
Enough buttons/music

A lot of buttons/music
Lots of buttons/music
Plenty of buttons/music
A lack of buttons/music

Collective nouns

A collective noun refers to a group of people, animals or objects. For example, 'family', 'company' and 'band'.

When a collective noun is used in the singular, the verb can be either singular or plural. For example:

- The company **has** decided to close its shops.
- The company **have** decided to close its shops.

If a singular verb is used (in the example above: 'has'), then the noun ('The company') is seen as a single entity.

If a plural verb is used ('have'), then the noun is seen as consisting of a group of individuals (ie 'the people in the company have decided...').

When talking about the police, however, be careful: 'police' has no singular form. Therefore, you would always use: 'The police **are** here', and never: 'The police **is** here'.

Adjectival nouns

An adjective can sometimes function as a noun. For example, 'the young', 'the gifted', 'the rich'. These are adjectival nouns, meaning 'the people who are young', 'the people who are gifted', 'the people who are rich'.

Pronouns: words that are used as replacements or substitutes for nouns or noun phrases

Or to put it another way, pronouns are used to avoid the repetition of a noun, and are used to refer to something that has been mentioned already (known as the pronoun's *antecedent*).

For example, look at the following sentences:

'Johnny liked chips. He ate them as often as he could.'

In the second sentence, the pronoun 'he' is used to refer to and replace the word 'Johnny' (the antecedent of 'he'); and the pronoun 'them' is used to refer to and replace the word 'chips' (the antecedent of 'them'). Without these, the sentences would read:

'Johnny liked chips. Johnny ate chips as often as Johnny could.'

Which version sounds better?

However, it is worth noting that not all pronouns refer to an antecedent. For example:

'Everyone likes chips.'

The word 'everyone' has no antecedent – it does not refer to or direct your thoughts towards anything else being written or talked about.

Of course, it doesn't stop there. There are many different types of pronoun:

- **Subjective**

A subjective pronoun acts as the subject of a sentence – it performs the action of the verb. The subjective pronouns are *I, it, he, she, they, you, we*: 'I love a good view'. 'After the show, *she* and *I* went home.'

- **Objective**

An objective pronoun acts as the object of a sentence – it receives the action of the verb. The objective pronouns are *her, him, it, me, them, us, you*. 'My mum gave *me* some sweets.' 'She kissed *him*.'

These subjective and objective pronouns are all examples of **personal** pronouns.

- **Possessive**

A possessive pronoun tells you who owns something. The possessive pronouns are *his, hers, its, my, mine, ours, theirs, your* and *yours*: 'It's *my* party.' 'That one's *ours* – *yours* is over there.'

- **Demonstrative**

A demonstrative pronoun points out a noun. The demonstrative pronouns are *that, these, such, this, there* and *those*: 'Now *that's* a good joke!' and '*Those* cakes were lovely.'

A common mistake when using possessive and demonstrative pronouns is to use the singular pronoun with a plural noun. For example: '*It* is lovely grapes' rather than '*They* are lovely grapes.'

- **Interrogative**

An interrogative pronoun is used in a question, in order to ask about something. *What, which, who, whom, where, how, when* are all interrogative pronouns, as are the compound words ending in 'ever' – *whatever, whichever, wherever, whoever, whomever*. For example: 'Whoever took it should give it back' and 'Where is Watford?'

- **Indefinite**

An indefinite pronoun refers to an indefinite, unspecified or general person or thing. Examples of indefinite pronouns include *everybody, anybody, somebody, all, each, every, some, none, one, something*.

'Everybody had fun.' 'Some people chose not to.'

Other indefinite pronouns are also quantifiers (as described above, and also known as determiners). Examples include: *more, most, all, both, every, each, few, fewer, enough, less, little, many, much, several, any, either, neither, none, some*.

- **Relative**

A relative pronoun introduces a clause (part of a sentence) that describes a noun. The relative pronouns are *that, which, who* and *whom*. 'My friend *who* drives a Porsche.'

I will talk more about clauses (including relative clauses) later.

- **Intensive**

An intensive pronoun emphasises its antecedent (the noun that comes before it).

The intensive pronouns are *myself, itself, yourself, yourselves, herself, himself, ourselves, themselves*

Examples of intensive pronouns in use would be: 'I had a visit from the Queen *herself*!' 'I hurt *myself*.'

- **Reflexive**

The reflexive pronouns (which are the same as the intensive pronouns) refer back to the subject of a sentence. They indicate that the sentence subject also receives the action of the verb.

Whenever there is a reflexive pronoun in a sentence there must be a person or thing to whom that pronoun can reflect.

Examples of reflexive pronouns within a sentence are:

'John brought it on *himself*,' ('himself' refers back to John) and 'Sally chose it *herself*.' ('Herself' actually refers to Sally).

The sentence, 'Please give it to myself' would be incorrect because there is no 'I' in this sentence for the 'myself' to reflect back to. So you would use 'me' in this case instead of 'myself'. (The inappropriate reflexive form is called the *untriggered reflexive*). I hope this makes sense!

- **Reciprocal**

The reciprocal pronouns are 'each other' and 'one another'. They can also take possessive forms, ie *each other's* and *one another's*.

Adverbs: words which tell us *how* something was done

An adverb modifies a verb, an adjective or another adverb. In this case, 'modifies' means 'tells more about'. Adverbs tell us *how* something is done, and can often answer questions such as 'How?', 'When?', 'Where?' and 'To what extent?'.

In the sentence, 'Johnny pushed his bike lazily up the hill,' *lazily* describes *how* Johnny pushed his bike while *up the hill* tells us *where* he pushed it.

Lazily and *up the hill* modify the verb part 'pushed'.

Many adverbs end in 'ly' (eg 'nicely', 'beautifully', 'badly') – although not all words that end in 'ly' are adverbs. Many, for example, are adjectives, such as 'lovely', 'lonely' and 'smelly'. Similarly, many words and phrases which do not end in 'ly' serve an adverbial function (such as 'tomorrow' and 'well').

Words such as *besides*, *however*, *indeed*, *moreover*, *nevertheless*, *otherwise* and *therefore* are all examples of **conjunctive adverbs**, which can join two ideas or clauses:

'I went to the park to play football; however, I came home when it rained.'

Adjectives: words which describe something

Adjectives at their simplest modify a noun or pronoun:

- 'The big dog.'
- 'A bright future.'
- 'Tall flowers in a small pot? You are funny!'

The adjectives here are:

- *Big* (modifying 'dog' – a noun)
- *Bright* (modifying 'future' – a noun)
- *Tall* (modifying 'flowers' – a noun), *small* (modifying 'pot' – a noun), *funny* (modifying 'you' – a pronoun)

Verb forms

Participles (verb forms) can also act as adjectives. For example, 'covered', 'blackened' and 'crafted'.

Degrees of adjectives

Adjectives can be very useful tools in English as they can indicate degrees of modification. By that I mean they can tell us if something (a noun or pronoun) is, for example, good, better or the best. Or perhaps old, older or the oldest.

Here's another example: 'Janet is wealthy but her sister is wealthier. Their mother is the wealthiest of all.'

These are known as the **positive**, the **comparative** and the **superlative**. The comparative is used to compare two things while the superlative is used for three or more things.

The word 'than' often follows the comparative (for example, 'better than') and the word 'the' often precedes the superlative ('the most').

An exception is when you say 'best': 'the' is not always necessary in this case – for example, my local hospital, when advising new mothers on feeding their babies: 'Breast is best.'

Suffixes

Suffixes – the endings of certain words – can be a little tricky to master in English when dealing with comparatives and superlatives. The 'er' and 'est' suffixes are used to form most comparatives and superlatives – 'brighter', 'brightest'.

However, when we deal with two-syllable adjectives which end with a 'y' (for example, 'friendly', 'happy' and 'shiny'), we should use 'ier' (comparative) and 'iest' (superlative). The alternative – and this is where many people get confused – is to use the words 'more' (for comparative) and 'most' (superlative).

If you, too, are confused, these examples might explain things a little more clearly:

Take the word 'friendly' – a two-syllable adjective which ends with a 'y'.

In order to express its comparative form, we can say either of the following...

Correct:

- Friendlier
- More friendly

...but not a mixture of the two:

Incorrect:

- More friendlier

So it follows that to express its superlative form, we can say either of the following...

Correct:

- Friendliest
- Most friendly

...but not a mixture of the two:

Incorrect:

- Most friendliest

I hope that is clearer now.

Where you have adjectives with more than two syllables, such as 'beautiful', it is best just to use 'more' and 'most': 'more beautiful' and 'most beautiful' sound so much better than 'beautifuller' or 'beautifullest'!

Irregularities

Of course, English would not be English without a host of irregularities to spoil things. Adjectives such as 'good', 'bad' and 'little' all have irregular forms in the comparative and superlative:

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good	better	best
bad	worse	worst
little	less	least

Other examples of irregular adjectives and their respective comparative and superlative forms are:

far	further	furthest
much many	more	most

Special cases

If something is **unique**, then I fail to see how it can be *very* unique, or indeed how something else can be *more* unique. 'Unique' – alone – tells the story.

Similarly, if there are two pregnant women and one of them happens to have been carrying her child for a longer period than the other, it cannot be said that this woman is *more* pregnant than the other. They are both **pregnant**. And that word describes their state. You are either pregnant or you are not.

There are several other adjectives that fall within this category: 'impossible', 'principal', 'stationary', 'whole', for example.

The position of adjectives

This can be tricky, particularly if you are learning English as a second language. But the good news is there is a pattern to help you. Of course, there are exceptions, too, but these will seem clearer and more easily-understood once you get the hang of the pattern.

While adverbs can comfortably be placed almost anywhere in a sentence, adjectives nearly always appear immediately before the noun or noun phrase that they modify. (There are exceptions – see below).

And of course, many sentences contain a series of adjectives which all modify the same noun. Here's an example: 'Her *beautiful, long, brown* hair' ('hair' being the noun, of course).

When this is the case, adjectives must appear in a set order according to category. Quite why these categories fall into this particular order I do not know, but written and spoken English both sound bad when this order is played around with.

For example, 'beautiful Italian shoes,' and 'a big, round, chocolate cake' sound better than 'Italian beautiful shoes' and 'a chocolate, round, big cake,' respectively.

The categories of adjectives are as follows and there is also a table below which gives examples of each:

- Determiners (read more on these below)
- Observation (subjective adjectives – ie how the object/noun is seen, subjectively)
- Size and shape (objective adjectives – ie how the object *actually* is)

- Age (adjectives denoting age)
- Colour (adjectives denoting colour)
- Origin (adjectives denoting the source of the object)
- Material (adjectives denoting what the object is made of)
- Qualifier (often regarded as part of the noun)

Determiners

These include the following types of words:

- **Articles** (*the, a and an*)
- **Possessive pronouns** (*his, hers, its, my, mine, ours, their, whose, your and yours*)
- **Possessive nouns** (for example, *Paul's, John's, U2's and Chicago's*)
- **Numbers** (*one, two, and so on*)
- **Indefinite pronouns** (*few, more, each, every, either, all, both, some, any, and so on*)
- **Demonstrative pronouns** (*this, that, these, those, such*)

It is worth noting that possessive nouns, when used as determiners, are sometimes accompanied by other determiners. For example: 'My brother's shirt' and 'A winter's tale'.

Adjectives and commas

If, within a sentence, you have two or more adjectives together then those specific adjectives might need to be separated by a comma. For example, 'His big, fat, red face'.

The best way to remember the rule for inserting commas between adjectives is this: if you could insert a coordinating conjunction (*and* or *but*) between the two adjectives, use a comma. For example: 'His big and fat and red face.'

However, you should not insert a comma between the final adjective and the noun itself. So this...

'His big, fat, red, face'

...would be incorrect.

Table showing the position of adjectives in English

Eg	Determiner	Observation	Size	Shape	Age	Colour	Origin	Material	Noun
1	A	gorgeous		slim		tanned			dancer
2	Three	handsome			young		Russian		sailors
3	Some	tasty	big	round				jam	doughnuts
4	Her		big			brown	Spanish		eyes
5	Those	tatty			old		Italian	leather	shoes

Positioning exceptions

When indefinite pronouns (eg 'something', 'someone', 'some') are modified by an adjective, the adjective comes after the pronoun: 'Something ugly created by someone beautiful.'

In phrases like 'president-elect' or 'heir-apparent', the adjectives are called 'postpositive' – ie, they come *after* the thing they modify.

While it may be tempting to load your writing with adjectives, be careful not to over-use them – this can be detrimental to your work.

Proper adjectives

Just as proper nouns should begin with a capital letter regardless of their position in a sentence, so too should proper adjectives, as in: *French* fries, *Christian* names and *English* breakfast.

As I mentioned earlier, in the section about nouns, please resist the temptation to begin a common noun with a capital letter, even if it follows a proper adjective. So French fries (incorrectly) becomes French Fries, and English breakfast becomes English Breakfast. I believe this looks sloppy and amateurish, particularly when it is over-used (in sales and/or marketing material, for example).

Adjectives whose first letter should remain in lower case (small letters) are those related to **directions** (north, northern, etc.) and the **seasons** – ‘autumn sun’, ‘summer rain’, etc.

Adjectival opposites

An adjective’s opposite can be expressed in a number of ways.

Perhaps the most common is to find another adjective to show the opposite (known as an **antonym**). For example:

- Light/dark
- Light/heavy
- Big/small
- Tall/short

Another method to express an adjective's opposite is by using one of a number of prefixes:

- `Un': *fortunate* becomes *unfortunate*
- `Im': *prudent* becomes *imprudent*
- `In': *conceivable* becomes *inconceivable*
- `Dis': *honourable* becomes *dishonourable*
- `Non': *alcoholic* becomes *nonalcoholic*
- `Mis': *understood* becomes *misunderstood*

Choosing the correct prefix can be confusing. If you are in doubt, consult a dictionary.

Something to be wary of: flammable and inflammable mean the same thing. Their opposite is nonflammable.

A third way to express the opposite of a particular adjective is to use either 'less' or 'least' alongside it. (Use 'less' when the comparison is between two things or people and 'least' when the comparison is among three or more things or people).

This is a good way to be kind, gentle or diplomatic – or all three – with your words. For example, describing someone as 'slightly less attractive' is kinder than saying 'uglier'.

Compound modifiers

To put two or more words together to create a modification is creating compound modifiers. For example, 'four-year-old girls love pink,' and 'late-nineteenth-century workers in Britain had it tough.'

There are three forms of compound words. Those examples above are the **hyphenated** form. The others are the **closed** form (such as 'keyboard' and 'secondhand') and the **open** form, such as 'post office' and 'music hall'.

A- adjectives

Examples of a- adjectives are:

- ashamed
- aghast
- asleep
- alone
- alive

These adjectives are usually used as **predicate** adjectives – they come after a linking verb: 'I felt ashamed', 'I'm alive' and 'I want to be alone'.

Articles

'The' is known as 'the definite article'; 'a' and 'an' are the 'indefinite articles'.

Prepositions: words that link nouns, pronouns and phrases to other words in a sentence

The word or phrase that the preposition introduces is called the **object** of the preposition.

Prepositions fall into four categories:

- **Time** prepositions (eg. at, on, in, since, for, during, before)
- **Location** prepositions (at, on, in)
- **Direction** prepositions (at, on, in, towards, around, through, across)
- **Position** prepositions (beneath, under, over, on)

Here are some examples:

- **Time prepositions**
- 'Peter ate his sandwich **during** the morning's train journey.'
- 'Peter has lived in London **since** the mid-80s.'
- 'Peter has lived in London **for** 20 years.'
- 'Peter had his lunch **at** three o'clock.'
- 'Peter's birthday is **on** March 20th.'
- 'Peter is going on holiday **in** three months...**in** the summer.'
- 'Peter is quitting work **before** he travels.'

Location prepositions

- 'Peter ate his sandwich **on** the train.'
- 'Peter has lived **in** London since the mid-80s.'
- 'Peter works **at** London Bridge.'

Direction prepositions

- 'Peter's bus travelled **through** the red traffic light **towards** its destination.'
- 'That bus really did go **around** the houses.'
- 'Peter's bus travelled **across** the bridge.'

Position prepositions

- 'Peter sat **on** the bus and read his newspaper.'
- 'Peter's bus waited **at** the red light.'
- 'Peter sat **beneath** a crumbling bridge, **over** which rumbled a heavy lorry.'

Prepositions, like **over** in the final example above (there's another one!), will always sit comfortably before the pronoun 'which' (as in, '...**over** which rumbled a heavy lorry.').

And there has always been some debate about whether or not prepositions should be 'allowed' to sit at the end of a sentence. My advice on this one is this: ask yourself – which version sounds better, clearer? Is it, for example, 'The world we live **in**,' or, 'The world **in which** we live.' That's up to you.

What I would say is that wherever you place your preposition and however you structure your sentence around it, ensure that you don't write the preposition twice, such as: 'The world **in** which we live **in**,' which is actually a Paul McCartney lyric, from the theme from 'Live and Let Die'. He's allowed – it's poetic licence!

Prepositions with nouns, adjectives and verbs

Prepositions are sometimes so closely linked to other words that they almost act as one single word. This is the case when prepositions are used alongside certain nouns, adjectives and verbs.

Here are some examples:

Nouns and prepositions

- approval of
- belief in
- concern for
- love of
- reason for

Adjectives and prepositions

- afraid of
- married to
- happy about
- made of
- familiar with

Adjectives and prepositions

- give up
- grow up
- look up
- pay for
- find out

Improve Your English

Be careful not to fall into bad habits with prepositions: it can be quite easy to use one where it is simply not necessary or required. For example:

- **Incorrect:** 'She met *with* her boss.'
- **Correct:** 'She met her boss.'

- **Incorrect:** 'I got it off *of* my brother.'
- **Correct:** 'I got it from my brother.'

- **Incorrect:** 'Where are you *at*?'
- **Correct:** 'Where are you?'

- **Incorrect:** 'He threw her stuff out *of* the window.'
- **Correct:** 'He threw her stuff out the window.'

Prepositions cause lots of problems for lots of people, so do not worry if that includes you. It is hardly surprising these often-little words create such havoc – for example, we might say that we are *at* the hospital, but we sometimes visit a friend who is *in* hospital.

Similarly, we lie *in* bed, but *on* a sofa. We might watch a play *at* a theatre or a film *on* television.

So, like I said, do not worry. Just pay attention to these little words and practise using them.

Conjunctions: words that join two parts of a sentence

Words such as *and* and *but* are very useful in the English language. They are called **conjunctions** and, just as the title above says, they are able to join two parts of a sentence together.

And and *but* – known as coordinating conjunctions – are set apart from most other conjunctions because the two parts of a sentence that they connect (two **clauses**) are of equal importance. For example:

'The boys played and went home happy.'

In this example, the first clause, 'The boys played' is just as important as the second clause – the bit that tells us that they 'went home happy'.

Other coordinating conjunctions are:

- *Or*
- *Nor*
- *For*
- *Yet*
- *So*

Personally, I do not like to use a comma just before writing *and* or *but* (although I will on rare occasions). Usually, I just do not think its place is warranted, especially if you are writing a three-part list, such as:

'The doctor helped a young boy, his mother and his father.'

Some people prefer not to start a sentence in English with *and* or *but*. I am quite happy to start a sentence with either of these, but only if it is warranted.

Now consider this:

'The boys played *having* enjoyed a good, hearty breakfast.'

In this sentence, 'having' is a **subordinating conjunction**. That is, it indicates the beginning of a clause which is of lesser importance compared to the main clause.

Main clause (more important): 'The boys played'

Subordinate clause: 'having enjoyed a good, hearty breakfast.'

Other subordinating conjunctions are given below, with an example of a *subordinate clause written in italics* and the **main clause in bold**.

- *When*

'*When we were young*, **we were so carefree**.'

- *After*

'*After the war*, **they were able to return home**.'

- *Once*

'*Once he'd eaten*, **he soon fell asleep**.'

- *Because*

'*Because of the heavy rain*, **the game was postponed**.'

- *Since*

I've hardly slept *since it happened*.'

More subordinating conjunctions:

- *Until*
- *While*
- *Although*
- *If*
- *Once*
- *In order to*
- *Unless*
- *That*
- *Who* and *which* (denoting the start of a relative clause)
- Verbs participles (eg, '*having*')

Correlative conjunctions

Some conjunctions combine with other words to form **correlative conjunctions**. They always work in pairs and join various sentence elements which are grammatically equal. Common examples are:

- Neither/nor
- Either/or
- Not only/but also
- Both/and
- Whether/or

Certain styles of written English positively thrive on numerous clauses and relatively little punctuation. One such example I can think of is legal language.

Many contracts and other legally-binding documents need to be written in such water-tight, crisp language that they virtually do away with punctuation altogether.

The longer the sentence, it seems, the tighter the document. This also explains why you might hear about *clauses* so often in news stories concerning changes to the law of the land.

I'll finish this section with a lengthy example. As you read it, try to pick out the main clause, the one thing above all else that the sentence wants to say. (Hint: look again at the lists above of coordinating and common subordinating conjunctions).

'When Jack was six, before he changed schools and during that long hot summer – when temperatures rarely dipped below 90 degrees, it seemed – he had the time of his life.'

The clauses are as follows:

Subordinate clauses:

- 'When Jack was six'
- 'before he changed schools' and
- 'during that long hot summer'
- 'when temperatures rarely dipped below 90 degrees, it seemed'

Main clause:

- 'He had the time of his life'

Practise, practise, practise...and you will soon grasp the idea of clauses which vary in importance.

And then, breaking down even the longest and most complex sentences in English will become ever simpler for you.

Phrases in apposition

When two words, clauses or phrases stand close together and share the same part of the sentence, they are in **apposition** (and are called **appositives**).

This type of sentence construction is often used in tabloid newspaper writing. Here's an example:

'Sir Alex Ferguson, Manchester United's manager, has won numerous trophies.'

The point here is that the two phrases at the beginning of the sentence – 'Sir Alex Ferguson' and 'Manchester United's manager' – together form the same part of the sentence.

Punctuation

This can be a particularly confusing area of the English language. But it is an area that you need to understand as best you can in order to make your writing – however formal or informal – as clear as possible.

Without the correct punctuation, English is messy and extremely difficult to understand, even for a good reader. So do your best with this one. You might find that you know more than you realise.

Full stop . (also known as 'period' or 'full point')

Primarily used to end a sentence. Also used in abbreviations – for example, the M.E.N. Arena, in England, is the abbreviated name for the Manchester Evening News Arena. ('M.E.N' is wrong).

However, it is quite common for acronyms (such as M.E.N.) to be written without the full stops. A very good example of this would be the BBC – known throughout the world, but very rarely written as 'B.B.C.'.

Question mark ?

Generally used in conjunction with an interrogative pronoun (for example, *what, which, who, whom, where, how*) in order to ask about something, such as, 'What is the capital of France?'

Exclamation mark !

Used to emphasise the tone of a sentence – literally, to exclaim!

Brackets (aka parenthesis)

Used to include additional information in a sentence (which might be of slightly less importance, but important nevertheless).

When you have a set of brackets in the middle of a sentence (like this), the sentence should read just as well even if you ignore the words which are within the brackets: in this case,

'When you have a set of brackets in the middle of a sentence, the sentence should read just as well even if you ignore the words which are within the brackets.'

Note that the comma (',') is present in both examples, and where there are brackets, the comma should come after the closing bracket.

There is a different set of brackets which is also worth mentioning. If you read something in a newspaper, for example, and there is a direct quote – ie something someone said – what you might come across is something like this:

"They [English football fans] are among the most passionate in the world," said Mr So-and-so.

So, what happened there is this:

Mr So-and-so actually said: "They are among the most passionate in the world," possibly answering a journalist's question.

But we, the reader, might not know who Mr So-and-so was talking about, so the newspaper editor (or sub-editor) put in some extra information (in this example, 'English football fans') in order to make the quote clearer and more coherent.

So the bit between the square brackets was not actually uttered by the person being quoted.

Something else to consider where brackets are concerned is their use alongside a full stop.

A full stop closes a sentence; brackets do not.

Brackets aid the understanding of a sentence. (They can even surround a whole one- or two-clause sentence, such as this one). That is why I **always** place the full stop **after** the closing bracket.

Dash –

I often use a dash to aid the reader's understanding of a sentence. A dash can be used to place a greater emphasis on the word or phrase that immediately follows it. And that particular word or phrase can come either in the middle of a sentence – like this – or at the end of a sentence – like this.

If dashes are used in a pair, rather than one dash on its own towards the end of a sentence, that pair must behave like brackets: the sentence should read just as well even if you ignore the words between the dashes. For example:

'That particular word or phrase can come either in the middle of a sentence – like this – or at the end of sentence.'

'That particular word or phrase can come either in the middle of a sentence or at the end of a sentence.'

I believe there are two kinds of dash – the 'em' (or 'M') dash and the 'en' ('N') dash. They are of differing lengths, the 'M' dash being longer (because the letter 'M' is longer/wider than 'N'). I disregard all this – and just use the one kind. It is far simpler.

Hyphen -

A hyphen is used in the following situations:

- When we want to join two or more words to make what is known as a **compound**, particularly modifiers before nouns, such as 'two-year-old', 'part-time' and 'wholly-owned'
- Writing numbers twenty-one to ninety-nine and fractions (eg. 'three-quarters')
- To create other compounds, such as 'well-being' and 'fly-on-the-wall'
- When adding certain prefixes to words, for example, 'ex-husband', 'self-righteous', 'all-encompassing', 'non-English'

A major difference between dashes and hyphens is that there should be no space either before or after a hyphen.

Suspended (or 'hanging') Compounds

I used a suspended compound earlier (when I was talking about brackets): 'They can even surround a whole one- or two-clause sentence, such as this one.' The bit 'one- or two-clause sentence' features a hanging compound.

Be careful not to use this feature too often in your writing – it can be quite annoying for your readers as you are making them do more work in order to understand what you are saying.

Comma ,

Here are some uses of commas:

- To separate elements in a series, for example, a three-part list (as in 'The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe'). I never (or at least very rarely) use a comma just before a coordinating conjunction (*and, but*, etc – see page 44)
- After an introductory clause. For example: 'Having eaten his slice of cake, he drank his tea.'
- To set off a relative clause, such as: 'Richard always helped his colleagues, who held him in high esteem,' and phrases in apposition (see page 48)
- To separate adjectives in a series: 'The big, red, noisy bus.' Notice how I do not place a comma between the final adjective and the noun being modified (in this case, 'noisy' and 'bus')
- To set off quoted elements: "They are among the most passionate in the world," said Mr So-and-so. Or, "English fans," said Mr So-and-so, "are among the most passionate in the world."
- To avoid confusion. Quite simply, commas are very useful when you want to break up a sentence to make it clearer. For example, 'For Peter, this journey was hard work.'
- Between two related place names (*London, England*) or the date and the year (*May 12th, 2002*)

I strongly advise that whatever you do, use commas with caution. Always question whether a comma is necessary. Often they are not.

Colon :

This little-understood item of punctuation is used to set off an explanatory or introductory element. It may be useful to think of a colon as a gateway, an invitation to read on and see what the piece you are reading has to say. I have used the colon many times already in this book: they do a great job.

Semi colon ;

This, again, is not very well understood. Put simply, it has two great uses:

- It can be used to join two potential sentences. For example, 'Harry loved his rabbit; it was so fluffy.'
- It can help break up a long list, particularly if there are elements within it which are of varying degrees of importance, such as this:

'Fifty buttons, including ten red ones; twenty shirts, all white; two rolls of cotton, also white.'

Apostrophe '

Used for...

- Some **abbreviations (contractions)** – where letters have been omitted, as in *Nott'm* for *Nottingham*, or *B'ham* for *Birmingham*. Also, in the case of joining two words and omitting a letter – such as *you're* for *you are*. Put simply, an apostrophe is used in place of the missing letter(s).

- For **possessives** – *Peter's* book, *Harry's* rabbit, *men's* department, *Ladies' Day*. Generally, if the noun is singular (*Peter, Harry*), the apostrophe should be placed before the 's'; if the noun is plural, the apostrophe goes after the 's' (*Ladies'*). But if the noun is a plural without an 's', the apostrophe goes before the 's' (*men's*).

One thing I must say here is that **I never use an apostrophe to form a plural**. I hate it when I see that. It is just my opinion, but we would never write *book's* when we mean *books*, so why write *1980's* when we can quite easily write *1980s* ?

Writing *it's* instead of *its* (or vice versa) is arguably the most common mistake in written English. However, these words follow a basic rule, which I have already touched on.

It's – an abbreviation

- Formed from joining *it* and *is* or *it* and *has*, with the apostrophe replacing the *i* (in *is*) or the *ha* (in *has*)

Its – the possessive of *it*

- As in: 'The cat drank its milk.'

We do not want to say this:

'The cat drank it is milk,' or 'The cat drank it has milk.'

This is what you are saying if you write, 'The cat drank it's milk.'

Speech marks or quote marks “ ”

These look like ‘66’ and ‘99’ with the holes filled in when written by hand. The ‘66’ goes at the start of the quote, and the ‘99’ goes at the end of the quote, as in: “Gary Lineker scored a cracking goal,” enthused Bobby Robson.

Inverted commas ` ’

These can also be used as quote marks, as well as to highlight – *jargon*, perhaps, or an *example*, *unusual words* or a *new word* or *phrase*. Here’s an example:

‘Rock ‘n’ roll’ is a term which was coined by the DJ Alan Freed.

Please note: in the above example, the ‘n’ in ‘**rock ‘n’ roll**’ is marked either side with an **apostrophe** to indicate that letters have been dropped, ie, the ‘a’ and ‘d’ from the word ‘and’. The apostrophe should not be confused with inverted commas. This is one of the most common mistakes in English.

Ellipsis ...

The ellipsis consists of three evenly-spaced dots and is used for the following:

- When you are quoting someone but you want to omit one or more words. For example: “I grew up in the same place...as Elton John.” That quote (one of my very own 😊) uses the ellipsis in this case in place of: ‘Pinner, on the outskirts of London’.
- To indicate a pause in a sentence, particularly when quoting someone or writing dialogue, for example, as part of a script: “His speech slowed...tremendously.”

A few spelling tips

- Has a word got an *a* in it or an *i*? An *i* is possible, but an *a* is probable
- *Stationery* or *stationary*? An **e**nvelope could be classed as station**e**ry; when you are **p**arked, you are station**a**ry
- *Principal* or *principle*? **P**rincip**a**l is concerned with a **l**eader or something that **l**eads in its field; a **p**rincip**l**e could be a **r**ule
- *Practise* or *practice*? You **c**an't beat **p**ractic**e** (noun); to **p**ractic**e** could be to **s**tudy (verb)
- *License* or *licence*? As above – the 's' is part of the verb, to **l**icense
- *Presence* or *presents*? **P**res**e**nce often goes with **c**harisma; "Say **t**hank you for your **p**res**e**nts!"
- *Affect* or *effect*? Do you **h**ave an **e**ffect (noun) on people or **a**re you **a**ffected (verb) by them?
- *Inquiry* or *enquiry*? **P**ublic **i**nquiry; got a **q**uest**i**on? You've got an **e**n**q**uir**y**.

Tips for better writing

Be consistent

There are a few simple things you can do which will help your written English instantly. One of these is to look for areas within your writing which allow for consistency.

Active or passive?

For example, if you start writing a piece with the verbs in the active voice, do not start writing in the passive voice halfway through: 'John picked up a stone; it was thrown.' While this sentence (or two potential sentences joined by a semi colon) does make sense, it is not very easy to read. Your aim must always be to convey your message with **clarity**, **brevity** and **impact** – and that means not making your reader stop to think about the words he is reading.

Verb forms

Here is a line I heard on a British television channel which is aimed at teachers. Again, this sentence's message is understood, but its verbs lack consistency: '[A particular teacher] monitors and evaluates rather than imposing learning.' This sentence contains the verb participles *monitors*, *evaluates* and *imposing*. Had it been written like this – '[A particular teacher] monitors and evaluates rather than imposes learning' – I think it would sound much better. Just my opinion.

Use of s or z in certain words (US or UK English?)

When you write, do you use (for example) *summarised* or *summarized*? Analysed or analyzed? It doesn't really matter...as long as you write it (and/or other similar words) the same way every time throughout your work.

Repetition

Sometimes, writing contains unnecessary repetition. Here are some examples:

1. 'When coffee and hot chocolate are combined together, they make the perfect drink.'

It would be much better (and use fewer words) to say: 'When coffee and hot chocolate are combined, they make the perfect drink.'

2. 'An experienced camper's kit might comprise of a tent, a gazebo and a good sleeping bag.'

This is a common mistake. Use either *comprise* or *consist of*. Do not use the combination *comprise of*.

Bad English is littered with such errors. Another example is the use of 'meet with' instead of 'meet' (they say the same thing).

Also, while on the subject of repetition, try not to say the same word more than once in any sentence unless you really cannot avoid it or the sentence actually demands it (maybe in the case of a joke, for example). Aim to use a pronoun or simply try to rearrange what you are saying to increase the efficiency of your words.

Length of sentences and paragraphs

Golden rule: you should always aim to *invite* readers (or potential readers) to your words.

If you write a blog, people can click the back button and be gone, forever, in five seconds. So you want to employ every tactic in order to win and then retain the attention of as many potential readers as possible.

Think about it: you are presented with two sheets of paper with writing on and your instinct tells you to scan each sheet in turn (spending less than one second on each). One sheet is virtually full with writing, big paragraphs and a cluttered feel; the other has a good proportion of its area left as empty white space, with shorter paragraphs and writing presented in smaller chunks. Which sheet do you go for?

Put the most relevant/important information first

Grab your reader's attention immediately! Decide whether you are writing a **declarative**, **imperative** or **interrogative** sentence. Here are the differences:

- Declarative – this type of sentence *declares* something (hence the name). For example: 'The cat sat on the mat.'
- Imperative – this type of writing is often used in marketing and advertising because it asks for action (or *demands* action). 'Buy it now!', 'Stop!' and 'Grab your reader's attention immediately!' are all examples of sentences written in the imperative.
- Interrogative – quite simply: questions.

More writing tips

- Avoid using '&', 'etc', 'eg' and other abbreviations, especially in formal writing. They make your writing appear lazy and/or too familiar. This even includes abbreviations such as *you're*, *don't* and *won't*.
- Splitting the to-infinitive of a verb: my advice is if it sounds ok do it; if it doesn't, don't.
- Don't rely on clichés – again, over-use can make your writing (and you) look lazy because it might mean you could not be bothered to think of an original way of expressing yourself.
- Drop 'the' wherever possible, for example, before 'police' and 'best'. If you don't need it there, don't put it there. Remember: every word should work hard for its right to be on your page.
- When writing numbers, here is the rule of thumb I follow: I write numbers **one** to **twelve** in words, then numbers **13** and over in figures.
- A good adage to bear in mind when writing – especially fiction writing – is this: show don't tell. That means don't just go for exposition but use action and dialogue to engage your readers.
- Use of capitals – only proper nouns (ie names of people and places) or words which begin sentences or quotes should start with a capital letter.

Common mistakes & areas of confusion

'Me' or 'I'?

Should it be 'Jason and me' or 'Jason and I'? Always work it out – it may be different every time.

Let's extend our example: 'Jason and I always go there.' Now drop 'Jason' from the sentence: 'I always go there.' You wouldn't say, 'Me always go there.' So go for 'Jason and I' in this case.

If, however, you wanted to say, 'They gave the ball to Jason and I,' it would be wrong. Again, drop Jason from the sentence to test it: 'They gave the ball to I.' No, of course it should be: 'They gave the ball to me.'

Elder/eldest v older/oldest

To talk about people, use *elder* or *eldest*. For example, 'She is her elder sister.'

Older and *oldest* are the comparative and superlative forms, respectively, of the adjective *old*, and should be used accordingly.

Relations v relationships

Even Presidents get this wrong. *Relations* refers to members of a family; *relationships* are about people relating to one another.

You're or Your?

- *You're*: you are, as in: "Where do you think you're going?" or "Where do you think you are going?"
- *Your*: a possessive pronoun, as in: "Is that your coat?" and "Improve Your English"

They're, Their or There?

- They're = They are
- Their = possessive pronoun: 'Is that their house?'
- There = demonstrative pronoun: 'There she is!'

Less or fewer?

For countable nouns, use the word *fewer*; when we're talking about measurable quantities that we cannot count, use the word *less*: *fewer apples* and *less music*.

Advice or advise?

- 'Advice': a noun. For example, you might give someone advice.
- 'Advise': a verb – 'to advise': 'His agent advised him.'
- 'Adviser' or 'advisor'? Either – both are correct

Yours sincerely or faithfully?

Use 'Yours sincerely' when you know the name of the person you are writing to and 'Yours faithfully' when you do not.

'Them' or 'those'?

An example:

- 'I'll wear them shoes': incorrect use of an objective pronoun
- 'I'll wear those shoes': correct use of a demonstrative pronoun

'Too' or 'to' or 'two'?

- 'Too': an adverb, meaning 'in addition to...'
- 'To': a preposition
- 'Two': the number

'Good' or 'well'?

- 'Good': an adjective
- 'Well': an adverb

Therefore, 'The boy did good,' is grammatically incorrect, as it should be telling us *how* the boy did (ie, 'he did *well*').

'Equally as good' or 'equally good'?

- It should be 'equally good' – there is no need for 'as'.

Figures of speech

- **Simile:** the comparison of one thing with another ('She is like a rose.')
- **Synonym:** a word with the same meaning as another (*joyful, elated, glad*)
- **Metaphor:** when a term is transferred to something it does not literally apply to ('He is a rock.')
- **Onomatopoeia:** the formation of a word, such as *cuckoo* or *boom*, by the imitation of a sound made by or associated with the object in question
- **Alliteration:** two or more words selected for their common opening letter, for example, 'Peter Piper picked a pepper'.
- **Assonance:** two or more words selected for their common vowel sound. For example, 'Becks flexes his pecks'.
- **Acronym:** a word formed from the initial letters of other words, for example, ASH – Action on Smoking & Health
- **Oxymoron:** a contradiction. For example, 'cruel kindness'.
- **Palindrome:** a word, line, verse or sentence which reads the same backwards as it does forwards. For example, 'Hannah'.

Notes