

clean,

well-lighted

sentences

**A Guide to Avoiding the Most Common
Errors in Grammar and Punctuation**

Janis Bell

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To all the modifiers in my life who
positioned themselves right next to me
and never budged. I'm grateful for the
loyalty and definition.

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Preface

Another grammar book? Why?

You've seen grammar books before—you may even own one that you pull out now and again, when you're uncertain about a sentence you wrote. Chances are, however, that you close that book pretty soon after you open it because you don't find the answer to your question. In fact, you can't figure out even how to look for the answer to your question because the text is comprehensive and filled with terms you've long forgotten.

English is your native tongue. Or it's not, but you know it well enough to be dreaming in it. You don't need a book that teaches grammar from the ground up. All you need is a guide that answers the questions you have from time to time, an explanation of the problems that typically crop up when you're writing sentences. Some relate to grammar (*Is it **who** or **whom**, **will** or **would**, **it's** or **its**?*); some relate to usage (*Is it **lie** or **lay**, **affect** or **effect**, **everyday** or **every day**?*); some relate to punctuation (*What belongs here—a comma or semicolon? Dash or hyphen? Single quotes or double?*). Whatever the question, this book answers it in a way that will make sense to you.

How can I make that claim when I don't know you and I've never seen your sentences? Unless you're very different from the thousands of people I've taught over the last three decades in both academic and business classrooms, I do know you and I have seen your sentences. I know where your grammar and usage errors hang out. I know where your punctuation gaffes live. I can tell you exactly what these characters look like and the fragrances they wear. After reading this text, you'll be able to spot a mistake from around the corner. You may even be able to smell it.

Of necessity, this book contains grammar terminology, but it defines all terms in an introductory section and defines them again when they appear in a chapter. It discusses each issue, rather than just listing rules. It presents many sample sentences, incorrect and correct, so that you can see the concept in action. It asks—and answers—the questions you're likely to have. It gives you a quiz to take at the end of each chapter, as well as answers to the quizzes, so that you can see what you've learned and what you still need to work on. It turns on the floodlights and even makes you laugh.

Finally, this book increases your confidence, which is key to writing well. I wish I could just sprinkle some self-assurance on your cereal in the morning and watch your sentences transform by the afternoon. But, alas, there's no such product on the market. We all have to make it from scratch by strengthening our skills. That's what you'll be doing as you work your way through this text.

Once you can produce clean, well-lighted sentences, you'll approach every writing project with a can-do attitude. I'm not promising that you'll ever like to write (few people do); I'm saying that you'll be able to write in a way that commands respect—from you and from your readers.

C'mon now, turn the page, scan the terminology, and jump into a chapter, any chapter. When you encounter one of your own sentences there, you'll wonder how many others slipped into this book when you weren't looking. It's time to keep an eye on them, don't you think?

Grammar Terminology

Parts of Speech

noun	a word that names a person, place, or thing. Nouns can be concrete (<i>Josephine, Alabama, spinach</i>) or abstract (<i>fear, integrity, attitude</i>).
pronoun	a word (<i>she, he, it, they, who, that, which, myself</i>) that stands in for/refers to a noun
verb or verb package	a word (<i>eat, ate</i>) or group of words (<i>has eaten, had eaten</i>) that depicts the action associated with a subject
modifier	a general term for any descriptive word or group of words (adjectives and adverbs)
adjective	a word (<i>delicious</i>) or group of words (<i>which is delicious</i>) that describes a noun or pronoun
adverb	a word (<i>quickly</i>) or group of words (<i>in two minutes</i>) that describes a verb (<i>eat</i>) in terms of how, when, where, or why
preposition	a word that often conveys direction or position (<i>in, on, to, from, under, over, between, among</i>), but not always (<i>by, for, of</i>). Prepositions combine with a noun, pronoun, or noun equivalent to form a phrase (<i>by the way, to him, in writing</i>).
gerund	an action word ending in ing that functions as a noun (<i>eating is my favorite pastime; I enjoy eating</i>). Gerunds are noun equivalents.
infinitive	the source from which all verbs come, beginning with to and ending with an action word (<i>to eat, to relax, to converse</i>). Even though infinitives look like verbs, they don't function as verbs. They do other jobs: they can serve as nouns (<i>to nibble is enjoyable; to scarf up is divine</i>), in which case they are noun equivalents; or they can serve as adjectives (<i>to finish this meal, one must have a large appetite</i>), in which case they are part of a phrase that describes a noun or pronoun.
participle	an action word ending in ing (<i>debating</i>) or ed (<i>digested</i>) or an irregular form (<i>forgotten</i>). On their own, participles do not function as verbs. They can be part of a verb package, when preceded by an actual verb (<i>am eating, was digested, had been forgotten</i>). Or they can be adjectives, when placed next to a noun (<i>debating team, digested food, forgotten plan</i>).

Sentence Roles

subject	a noun, pronoun, or noun equivalent representing a person, place, or thing connected to a verb (an action). Usually, a subject is located to the left of a verb: <i>Josephine receives a lot of mail.</i> <i>She is admired by her friends.</i> <i>Talking on the phone is her favorite pastime.</i> Occasionally, a subject follows a verb (in sentences that begin with prepositional phrases).
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occasionally, a subject comes in a verb (in sentences that begin with prepositional phrases, for example):

On the line is Josephine.

At the center of the debate is Josephine.

Always, however, the subject is the answer to the question “who or what?” before the verb. For instance, when you ask “Who or what receives a lot of mail?” (in the first sample sentence), the answer is **Josephine**; when you ask “Who or what is her favorite pastime?” (in the third sample sentence), the answer is **talking**; when you ask “Who or what is at the center of the debate?” (in the final sample sentence), the answer is **Josephine**.

a noun, pronoun, or noun equivalent that is not serving as a subject. Although there are several kinds of objects, it’s not necessary to distinguish among them; all you need to know is that they are not subjects. (Being able to identify a subject is key to achieving subject-verb agreement.)

object

verb or

verb a word or group of words depicting the action associated with the subject

package

clause

a group of words containing a subject and verb. A clause can be independent (meaning it is capable of standing alone as a sentence) or dependent (meaning it isn’t capable of standing alone as a sentence, even though it contains a subject and verb).

Independent clause:

Josephine receives a lot of mail

Dependent clause:

Because Josephine receives a lot of mail

Dependent clause:

Josephine, who loves talking on the phone

phrase a group of words that does not contain a subject and verb

Prepositional phrase:

On the phone

Infinitive phrase:

To finish the conversation

Participial phrase:

Often dialing incorrectly

Clean, Well-Lighted Sentences

Chapter 1: Case

Case refers to the form of a noun or pronoun. Remember, a noun is a word that names a person, place, or thing—either concrete (*Josephine, Alabama, spinach*) or abstract (*fear, integrity, attitude*). A pronoun is a word that stands in for/refers to a noun (*she, he, it, they*).

Nouns

Nouns don't change form when they serve as subjects and objects. **Josephine**, for example, remains **Josephine**, no matter where she shows up:

Josephine eats anything that isn't nailed down.

Food is irresistible to Josephine.

In the first sentence **Josephine** is a subject; in the second sentence **Josephine** is an object. In both roles she remains **Josephine**, because she's a noun.

The only time that nouns change form is when they become possessive, to show ownership. The possessive form of a noun always involves an apostrophe, and it often (not always) involves an **s**. To determine where to place the apostrophe and whether to add an **s**, first type the noun. It may be singular or plural—that doesn't matter. Just type it:

child

children

class

classes

You'll notice that **child** and **class** are singular, while **children** and **classes** are plural. Again, that doesn't matter. What does matter is the last letter of the word. Ask yourself, "Does this word end in the letter **s**?" If it does not, you make the word possessive by adding an apostrophe and an s:

child's

children's

If the word does end in an **s**, then you add only an apostrophe (no **s**) at the end:

class'

classes'

If you follow this guideline all the time, you'll never be wrong.

- [**The Kitchen as Laboratory: Reflections on the Science of Food and Cooking \(Arts and Traditions of the Table: Perspectives on Culinary History\) here**](#)
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