The English Language — Grammar and Usage

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Prepared for Maggie Enow's school of English Modern Letters.

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Chapter 1: Words and Word Classes

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain what a word class is and why grammarians group words into classes;
- name and recognise the eight main word classes of English;
- use simple tests — meaning, form and position — to decide the class of a word in a sentence;
- explain why the same word form can belong to different classes in different sentences.

1.1 Why We Group Words

Grammar is the study of how a language organises words into meaningful sentences. Before we can describe sentences, we need a vocabulary for talking about words themselves. Linguists therefore sort words into **word classes**, sometimes called parts of speech. A word class is a family of words that behave in similar ways: they appear in similar positions, they take similar endings, and they do similar jobs.

Think of a market. A trader does not throw fish, cloth, yams and radios into one heap; she arranges her stall so that each kind of goods has its place, and a customer who knows the arrangement can find anything quickly. Word classes are the arrangement of the grammarian's stall. When you know that a word is a verb, you already know a great deal about what it can do: it can carry tense, it can follow a subject, and it can be negated with *not*. Classification is not a game of labels; it is a shortcut to prediction.

1.2 The Eight Main Classes

English is usually described with eight major word classes.

Nouns name people, places, things, qualities and ideas: *teacher, Yaoundé, river, courage, silence*. Most nouns can be made plural (*teachers, rivers*) and can follow words such as *the, a, my* and *this*.

Verbs express actions, events and states: *run, build, rain, know, seem*. Verbs are the engine of the clause. They change their form to show time (*walk, walks, walked*) and they can be expanded with auxiliaries such as *has, is* and *will*.

Adjectives describe or limit nouns: *tall, careful, African, three, first*. Many adjectives can be compared (*taller, tallest*) and can stand after verbs such as *be* and *seem*: *The road is narrow.*

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs and whole sentences: *slowly, very, often, yesterday, perhaps*. Many adverbs of manner end in *-ly*, but not all do — *fast, hard* and *well* are adverbs without that ending.

Pronouns stand in place of noun phrases: *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, mine, this, who*. A pronoun saves repetition: instead of *Amina gave Amina's book to Amina's brother*, we say *She gave her book to her brother* — or, more naturally, *She gave the book to her brother*.

Determiners introduce nouns and fix their reference: *the, a, an, this, that, my, some, every, no*. They answer questions such as *which one?* and *how many?* Modern grammars treat determiners as a class of their own, separate from adjectives, because they cannot be compared and they must come before any adjective: *the three tall men*, never *three the tall men*.

Prepositions link a noun phrase to the rest of the sentence and show relations of place, time, direction and many others: *in, on, under, before, with, despite, through*.

Conjunctions join words, phrases and clauses: *and, but, or, because, although, if, when*. Coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, or*) join equals; subordinating conjunctions (*because, although, if*) attach a dependent clause to a main clause.

1.3 Three Tests for Word Class

When you are unsure of a word's class, apply three tests.

The meaning test. Ask what the word contributes. Does it name something (noun)? Does it express an action or state (verb)? This test is a useful first guess, but it is not enough on its own: *destruction* names an action, yet it is a noun, and *a swim* names an activity, yet *swim* there is a noun too.

The form test. Ask what endings the word can take. Nouns take plural *-s* and possessive *'s*. Verbs take *-s, -ed* and *-ing*. Adjectives take *-er* and *-est* or combine with *more* and *most*. Form is strong evidence because it belongs to the word's grammar, not to our impressions.

The position test. Ask where the word stands and what can stand around it. A word that follows *the* and can be replaced by a pronoun is behaving as a noun. A word that follows *will* and can be negated by *not* is behaving as a verb. Position is often the deciding test, because class is really about behaviour in the sentence.

1.4 One Form, Several Classes

English is generous with conversion: the same form can serve in several classes without changing its shape. *Water* is a noun in *Drink some water* and a verb in *Water the garden*. *Round* is an adjective in *a round table*, a noun in *the final round*,

a verb in *Round the corner slowly*, and a preposition in *Come round the house*. The lesson is fundamental: **we classify words as they are used in a sentence, not as they sit in the dictionary.** A dictionary lists the classes a word *can* belong to; only the sentence tells you the class it *does* belong to on a given occasion.

Worked Examples

Example 1. *The young farmer sells fresh eggs at the market every morning.*

- *The* — determiner: it introduces the noun phrase and cannot be compared.
- *young* — adjective: it describes the farmer and could take *younger*, *youngest*.
- *farmer* — noun: plural *farmers*, follows the determiner.
- *sells* — verb: carries present-tense *-s*, can be negated (*does not sell*).
- *fresh* — adjective; *eggs* — noun (plural form).
- *at* — preposition; *the market* — noun phrase.
- *every* — determiner; *morning* — noun.

Example 2. *She reads quickly.*

- *She* — pronoun, subject of the clause.
- *reads* — verb, present tense, third person singular.
- *quickly* — adverb of manner, modifying *reads*; note the *-ly* ending and the position after the verb.

Example 3. *His silence surprised everyone.*

- *silence* names an abstract quality but behaves as a noun: it follows the determiner *his*, it is the subject, and it can be replaced by *it*. The form and position tests overrule the meaning test, which might tempt us to call it something else.

Exercises — Chapter 1

1. Give the word class of each underlined word: (a) The **old** bridge **shook** in the wind. (b) She spoke **softly but** clearly. (c) **This** book belongs to **me**.

2. Use each word in two sentences so that it belongs to a different class in each: *light, book, present*.

3. Apply the three tests to the word *growth* in *The growth of the town surprised us* and state its class with reasons.

4. Explain why *a fast train* and *the train moved fast* do not contradict each other about the class of *fast*.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 1

1. (a) *old* — adjective (describes *bridge*, comparable: *older*); *shook* — verb (past tense of *shake*, follows the subject, can be negated). (b) *softly* — adverb (modifies *spoke*); *but* — coordinating conjunction (joins *softly* and *clearly* as equals). (c) *This* — determiner (introduces *book*); *me* — pronoun (object form, stands for the speaker).

2. Sample answers: *light* — noun: *The light failed.* / verb: *Light the lamp.* / adjective: *a light bag*. *book* — noun: *a good book* / verb: *Book a seat. present* — noun: *a birthday present* / adjective: *the present king* / verb: *They present the prizes today*. Any clear pair earns the mark; the point is that the sentence, not the shape, decides.

3. Meaning: an abstract process — inconclusive alone. Form: no plural here, but it follows a determiner. Position: it follows *the* and heads the subject phrase, replaceable by *it*. Conclusion: noun.

4. In the first sentence *fast* stands before a noun and describes it — adjective behaviour. In the second it follows the verb and tells how the train moved — adverb behaviour. One form, two classes; the tests are applied sentence by sentence.

Chapter 2: The Noun Phrase: Nouns, Pronouns and Determiners

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- distinguish common, proper, concrete, abstract, countable and uncountable nouns;
- choose correctly between *a, an, the* and no article;
- use pronouns in the right case — subject, object and possessive;
- build noun phrases with determiners, adjectives and modifying phrases in the correct order.

2.1 Kinds of Nouns

A **proper noun** names a particular person, place or institution and begins with a capital letter: *Maggie, Bamenda, University of Yaoundé I*. A **common noun** names a class: *woman, town, university*. Common nouns divide further. **Concrete nouns** name things we can perceive with the senses: *stone, rain, song*. **Abstract nouns** name qualities, states and ideas: *honesty, fear, education*.

The most practical division for the learner is between **countable** and **uncountable** nouns. Countable nouns have singular and plural forms and accept numbers: *one chair, three chairs*. Uncountable nouns name substances, qualities and wholes that English treats as undivided: *water, information, advice, furniture, progress*. We cannot say *an information* or *two furnitures*. Instead we use partitive expressions: *a piece of information, an item of furniture, a loaf of bread, a grain of rice*. Many nouns live on both sides of the line with a change of meaning: *a coffee* (a cup of coffee) beside *coffee* (the substance); *a paper* (a newspaper or an examination script) beside *paper* (the material).

Collective nouns name groups: *family, team, government, committee*. In British usage they may take a singular verb when the group acts as one body (*The committee has decided*) or a plural verb when the members act separately (*The committee are arguing among themselves*). Choose one view and keep it through the sentence: do not write *The family is large but they quarrel* unless the shift of view is deliberate and clear.

2.2 The Article System

English articles are small words with large duties. **The** (the definite article) points to a referent the speaker believes the hearer can identify: *Pass me the salt* — the salt on this table. **A/an** (the indefinite article) introduces one member of a class not yet identified: *A stranger knocked*. Use *an* before a vowel sound, not merely a vowel letter: *an hour* (the *h* is silent), *a university* (the word begins with the consonant sound "yoo").

We use **no article** (the zero article) with plural and uncountable nouns speaking in general: *Books open doors. Water is life.* We also omit the article with most proper names, with languages and subjects (*She studies Mathematics*), with meals (*at lunch*), and in set phrases such as *at home, by bus, in prison, to school* when the place is used for its purpose.

Second mention is the classic pattern: introduce with *a*, continue with *the*. *A man came to the gate. The man carried a letter. The letter was for you.* Uniqueness also calls for *the*: *the sun, the president, the first day* — there is only one candidate in the shared world of speaker and hearer. A very common learner error is to put *the* before general statements: write *Honesty is rare*, not *The honesty is rare*, unless a particular honesty already identified is meant.

2.3 Pronouns and Case

Pronouns change form according to their job in the clause. The **subject** forms are *I, you, he, she, it, we, they*. The **object** forms are *me, you, him, her, it, us, them*. The **possessive** forms are of two kinds: determiners that stand before a noun (*my book, her idea*) and independent forms that stand alone (*The book is mine. The idea was hers.*). Note carefully: possessive forms never take an apostrophe. *Its* means "belonging to it"; *it's* is the shortened form of *it is*. Confusing them is the single most frequent punctuation error in student writing.

Case causes trouble in two places. First, after prepositions and as objects, use the object form: *between you and me*, never *between you and I*; *The teacher praised him and her*, not *he and she*. Second, in comparisons, let the verb decide: *She sings better than I (do)* — the subject form, because a verb is understood; *He loves her more than (he loves) me* — the object form. When in doubt, complete the clause silently and the right form will announce itself.

Reflexive pronouns (*myself, yourself, himself, themselves*) refer back to the subject: *She taught herself to read music.* They also serve for emphasis: *The headmaster himself signed the letter.* They are not polite substitutes for *I* or *me*: write *Send the form to me*, not *to myself*, unless the sender and receiver are the same person.

2.4 Building the Noun Phrase

A noun phrase has a noun as its head, and it may carry material before and after the head. Before the head we find, in fixed order: determiner, then quantifying words, then adjectives of opinion, size, age, shape, colour, origin and material. Hence *a beautiful old round brown Cameroonian wooden table* — stiff and crowded, but in the only order English allows. After the head we may add

prepositional phrases (*the road to the village*), relative clauses (*the book that you lent me*) and other modifiers. The whole phrase behaves as one unit: it can be subject, object or complement, and a pronoun can replace all of it at once: *The tall man in the grey coat who spoke first* → *He*.

Worked Examples

Example 1. Correct the article errors: *The patience is a virtue. She is best student in the class.*

- *Patience is a virtue.* General statement about an abstract quality: zero article before *patience*.
- *She is the best student in the class.* Superlatives require *the*, because the best is unique in its group.

Example 2. Choose the pronoun: *The prize was shared between Ada and (I / me).*

- *me*. A pronoun governed by a preposition (*between*) takes the object form, and coordination with *Ada* does not change the rule.

Example 3. Expand the head noun *letter* into a full noun phrase, then replace it with a pronoun: *the long official letter from the ministry that arrived yesterday* → *it*.

Exercises — Chapter 2

1. Mark each noun countable (C) or uncountable (U): *advice, chair, luggage, poem, rice, success, bottle, knowledge*.

2. Supply *a, an, the* or nothing (—): (a) — honesty is the best policy. (b) She is — honest woman. (c) He plays — guitar after — dinner. (d) — sun rises in — east.

3. Correct the pronouns: (a) Between you and I, the work is finished. (b) Its raining, and the dog wagged it's tail. (c) The manager asked John and myself to wait.

4. Put the modifiers in order: *a (wooden / old / small / beautiful) box*.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 2

1. U: *advice, luggage, rice, knowledge*; C: *chair, poem, bottle*; *success* is normally U in the general sense (*Success came slowly*) but C when it names one achievement (*a great success*).

2. (a) — (general abstract). (b) *an* (vowel sound; *honest* has a silent *h*). (c) *the guitar* (instruments take *the* in British usage); — dinner (meal, zero article). (d) *The sun*; *the east* (unique referent; points of the compass used as regions take *the*).

3. (a) *Between you and me*. (b) *It's raining* (it is); *its tail* (possessive, no apostrophe). (c) *John and me* — the receiver is not the subject, so the reflexive is wrong.

4. *a beautiful small old wooden box* — opinion, size, age, material.

Chapter 3: Verbs: Tense, Aspect, Voice and Modality

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- distinguish tense (time reference) from aspect (how an event is viewed);
- form and use the present, past and perfect forms of regular and common irregular verbs;
- choose between active and passive voice with a reason;
- use the main modal verbs to express ability, permission, obligation, possibility and advice.

3.1 The Verb at the Centre

Every clause is built around a verb phrase. The verb tells us what kind of event or state we are dealing with, when it is located in time, whether it is finished or still open, and how the speaker judges it — certain, possible, necessary, permitted. No other word class carries so much grammar. Master the verb, and the rest of English grammar falls into place around it.

English verbs have up to five forms. Take *take*: base form *take*, third-person singular present *takes*, past *took*, *-ed* participle *taken*, *-ing* participle *taking*. Regular verbs collapse the past and the participle into one *-ed* form (*walk, walks, walked, walked, walking*). The verb *be* is the great exception, with eight forms: *be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being*.

3.2 Tense and Aspect

Tense locates an event in time. English has two true tenses marked on the verb itself: present (*she writes*) and past (*she wrote*). Future time is expressed by other

means — *will write, is going to write, writes tomorrow* — so careful grammarians speak of tense and of future-time expressions rather than of a future tense.

Aspect shows how the speaker views the inner shape of the event. The **simple** aspect presents the event as a whole: *He built a house.* The **progressive** (or continuous) aspect presents it as in progress, unfinished: *He was building a house.* The **perfect** aspect presents it as complete before a reference point, with results that matter at that point: *He has built a house* (the house now stands); *He had built a house before the rains came.* Perfect and progressive combine: *He has been building a house since January* — begun before now, still continuing.

The commonest confusions are these. Use the **present perfect** for past events connected to the present moment — *I have lost my key* (and so I cannot enter now) — and the **past simple** for events pinned to a finished time: *I lost my key yesterday.* Never combine the present perfect with a finished-time adverbial: *I have seen him yesterday* is wrong; *I saw him yesterday* is right. Use the **past perfect** only when you need to mark one past event as earlier than another: *When we arrived, the train had left.* If the order is already clear from *before* or *after*, the past simple often suffices.

State verbs — *know, believe, own, like, contain* — resist the progressive because they name unchanging conditions: *I know the answer*, not *I am knowing the answer*. When such verbs appear in the progressive, their meaning shifts to an activity: *I am tasting the soup* (an action) beside *The soup tastes good* (a state).

3.3 Active and Passive Voice

In the **active** voice the subject performs the action: *The council repaired the road.* In the **passive** the subject receives it: *The road was repaired (by the council).* Form

the passive with *be* + past participle, keeping the tense on *be*: *is repaired, was repaired, has been repaired, will be repaired.*

Choose the passive when the doer is unknown (*My bicycle was stolen*), unimportant (*The bridge was built in a year*), obvious (*He was arrested* — by the police, who else?), or when the receiver deserves the focus, as in scientific and official writing (*The samples were heated to a high temperature*). Choose the active for directness and vigour in ordinary prose. A passage stuffed with passives feels evasive; a passage with none can feel breathless. Good writers mix the two deliberately, and they avoid the clumsy double passive: write *They expect the work to finish soon*, not *The work is expected to be finished soon* when the shorter form says the same.

3.4 Modal Verbs

The modal auxiliaries — *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would* — add the speaker's judgement to the plain event. They never take *-s* in the third person, they are followed by the base form of the verb, and they make questions and negatives without *do*: *Can she swim? She cannot swim.*

- **Ability:** *can* (present), *could* (past or general), *be able to* (for tenses the modals lack: *She will be able to come*).
- **Permission:** *may* (formal), *can* (neutral), *could* (polite request: *Could I open the window?*).
- **Obligation:** *must* (the speaker's own authority or strong necessity), *have to* (external necessity: *I have to wear a uniform*), *must not* (prohibition) — beware: *need not / do not have to* means the opposite, absence of necessity.

- **Possibility and deduction:** *may, might, could* for what is possible; *must* for a confident deduction (*The lights are on; he must be home*); *can't* for a confident negative deduction (*It can't be true*).
- **Advice and expectation:** *should, ought to — You should rest. The train ought to arrive soon.*

Worked Examples

Example 1. *I have read the report this morning* — is this correct? Only if it is still morning. The present perfect needs a time period that includes the present moment. Later in the day, say *I read the report this morning.*

Example 2. Turn into the passive, keeping the meaning: *Someone has stolen my notes.* → *My notes have been stolen.* The doer is unknown, so no *by*-phrase is needed, and the perfect aspect is preserved on *have been*.

Example 3. Choose the modal: (a) A sign in a hospital: *Visitors ___ not smoke.* (b) *The sky is black; it ___ rain.* Answers: (a) *must* — a prohibition from authority; (b) *may / might / could* — possibility, not certainty, so *will* would claim too much.

Exercises — Chapter 3

1. Name the tense and aspect: (a) She has been teaching for ten years. (b) They walked home. (c) He is writing a letter. (d) The work had finished before noon.

2. Correct the errors: (a) I have met him last week. (b) I am knowing the answer. (c) The house built in 1990. (Rewrite (c) as a passive sentence.)

3. Rewrite in the passive: (a) The students wrote the answers. (b) Nobody has repaired the gate.

4. Fill each gap with a suitable modal: (a) ___ I borrow your pen? (polite request) (b) He ___ be at home; all the lights are off and the car is gone. (confident negative deduction) (c) You ___ apologise; it was your fault. (advice)

Answer Guidance — Chapter 3

1. (a) Present perfect progressive. (b) Past simple. (c) Present progressive. (d) Past perfect (simple aspect).

2. (a) *I met him last week* — finished time excludes the present perfect. (b) *I know the answer* — *know* is a state verb. (c) *The house was built in 1990* — *be* + past participle.

3. (a) *The answers were written by the students.* (b) *The gate has not been repaired* — *nobody* disappears; the negation moves to the auxiliary.

4. (a) *May / Could*. (b) *can't*. (c) *should / ought to*.

Chapter 4: Sentences and Clauses

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- identify subject, verb, object, complement and adverbial in a clause;
- distinguish main clauses from subordinate clauses and name the main types of each subordinate clause;
- build simple, compound, complex and compound-complex sentences;
- avoid fragments, comma splices and run-on sentences.

4.1 The Parts of the Clause

A clause is a structure built around one verb phrase, and its elements fall into five functional slots.

The **subject** is what the clause is about, usually a noun phrase before the verb: *The rain* destroyed the crops. The **verb** is the obligatory centre. The **object** receives the action and follows a transitive verb: *The rain destroyed the crops* — *the crops* is the object. Some verbs take two objects: *She gave her brother a book* (indirect object *her brother*, direct object *a book*). The **complement** completes the sense after linking verbs such as *be, seem, become*: *She is a doctor. He became angry.* Complements describe the subject (or, after verbs like *elect* and *call*, the object: *They elected her president*). The **adverbial** adds circumstance — time, place, manner, reason: *She spoke quietly in the hall yesterday.*

A quick test separates objects from complements after *be*: a complement can be an adjective (*He is happy*), an object cannot; and a complement refers to the same person or thing as the subject, while an object is a different participant. *She is a teacher* — *a teacher* = *she*. *She met a teacher* — the teacher is someone else.

4.2 Main and Subordinate Clauses

A **main clause** can stand alone as a sentence. A **subordinate clause** cannot; it serves inside another clause as subject, object, modifier or adverbial. Subordinate clauses come in families.

Noun clauses do the work of noun phrases: *That he lied surprised no one* (subject); *I know what you did* (object); *The truth is that we were lost* (complement). They are introduced by *that, whether, if* or by question words (*what, why, how*).

Relative clauses modify a noun: *The woman who spoke first is our chair.* Restrictive relatives narrow down which one is meant and take no commas; non-restrictive relatives add information about an already identified noun and are set off by commas: *Our chair, who spoke first, is a lawyer.* The relative pronoun may be omitted when it is the object: *the book (that) I lent you.*

Adverbial clauses give time (*when, after, before, while*), reason (*because, since, as*), condition (*if, unless*), concession (*although, even though*), purpose (*so that, in order that*) and result (*so ... that, such ... that*). *Although it rained, the match continued* — the concession clause admits an obstacle and the main clause asserts that the event happened anyway.

4.3 Sentence Types

A **simple sentence** has one main clause: *The library opens at eight.* A **compound sentence** joins two or more main clauses with a coordinator (*and, but, or, so, yet*) or a semicolon: *The library opens at eight, but the reading room closes at six.* A **complex sentence** has one main clause and at least one subordinate clause: *When the library opens, the students rush in.* A **compound-complex sentence**

combines both patterns: *When the library opens, the students rush in, and the latecomers wait outside.*

Variety of sentence shape is a mark of mature writing. A page of simple sentences reads like a telegram; a page of long complex sentences exhausts the reader. Aim to mix: a long sentence to develop a thought, a short one to strike the point home.

4.4 Fragments and Run-Ons

A **fragment** is a piece of a sentence punctuated as a whole one: *Because he was late.* Subordinate clauses and phrases cannot stand alone; attach them: *He missed the bus because he was late.* A **run-on** fuses two main clauses with no junction at all: *The rain fell the river rose.* A **comma splice** joins them with a comma alone: *The rain fell, the river rose.* Repair both faults in one of four ways: separate sentences, a semicolon, a coordinator with a comma, or subordination — *When the rain fell, the river rose.*

Worked Examples

Example 1. Analyse: *The committee elected Amina chairperson yesterday.*

- Subject: *The committee*. Verb: *elected*. Object: *Amina*. Object complement: *chairperson* (it names what Amina became). Adverbial: *yesterday* (time).

Example 2. Combine into one complex sentence: *The students worked hard. The examination was near.* → *The students worked hard because the examination was near* (reason clause) or *Because the examination was near, the students worked hard.*

Example 3. Repair: *He saved for years, he bought the land at last.* Comma splice. Repairs: *He saved for years; at last he bought the land.* | *He saved for years and at last bought the land.* | *After saving for years, he bought the land at last.*

Exercises — Chapter 4

1. Label subject, verb, object, complement and adverbial in: *The farmers planted maize in the valley last season.*

2. Name the subordinate clause types: (a) What he said was true. (b) The house that Jack built still stands. (c) Unless you hurry, you will miss the bus.

3. Join into one compound-complex sentence: *The bell rang. The pupils stood up. The teacher had entered.*

4. Repair: (a) Running down the hill. The boy fell. (b) She loves music, she plays the piano well.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 4

1. Subject *The farmers*; verb *planted*; object *maize*; adverbials *in the valley* (place) and *last season* (time). No complement.

2. (a) Noun clause as subject. (b) Relative clause modifying *house*. (c) Adverbial clause of condition.

3. Sample: *When the teacher had entered, the bell rang, and the pupils stood up.* Any version with two main clauses and one subordinate clause is correct.

4. (a) *Running down the hill, the boy fell.* (b) *She loves music, and she plays the piano well* — or use a semicolon, or two sentences.

Chapter 5: Agreement and Word Order

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- make verbs agree with their subjects in number and person, including difficult cases;
- place adjectives, adverbs and adverbials in natural English order;
- form questions and negatives correctly;
- avoid the word-order habits that most often betray the learner.

5.1 Subject–Verb Agreement

The rule is simple: a verb agrees with its subject in number and person. *The dog barks; the dogs bark.* The traps lie between the subject and the verb.

Intervening phrases do not count. The verb agrees with the head of the subject phrase, not with the nearest noun: *The quality of the essays is high* — head *quality*, singular. *The essays' quality* — but in *The quality of the essays*, *of the essays* is only a modifier.

Coordinated subjects. Two subjects joined by *and* normally take a plural verb: *Rice and beans are served.* But a pair naming one dish or one idea takes a singular: *Rice and beans is my favourite meal* (one dish); *The singer and songwriter is here* (one person — note the single article). With *or* and *nor*, the verb agrees with the nearer subject: *Neither the teacher nor the students were present; neither the students nor the teacher was present.*

Indefinite pronouns. *Everyone, everybody, someone, each, either, neither, nobody* are singular: *Everyone has a copy. Both, few, many, several* are plural. *None* and

all vary with their referent: *None of the money was found; none of the coins were found.*

Quantity expressions. *A number of students were absent* (several students), but *The number of students is rising* (the figure itself). Sums and measures take singular verbs when treated as one amount: *Ten thousand francs is a fair price. Five kilometres is not far.*

There-sentences. In *there is / there are*, the verb agrees with the noun that follows: *There is a letter for you; there are two letters.*

5.2 The Order of Words

English depends on word order more than most languages, because its nouns carry few endings. The basic pattern is Subject–Verb–Object: *The cat chased the mouse* means the opposite of *The mouse chased the cat*, and only the order tells us so.

Adjectives precede the noun they modify, in the order given in Chapter 2. **Adverbs** follow three broad homes. Adverbs of manner usually follow the verb or the object: *She sang the song beautifully* — never between verb and object: not *She sang beautifully the song*. Adverbs of frequency (*always, often, usually, never*) stand before a main verb but after *be* and after the first auxiliary: *He often visits. He is always late. He has never complained.* Sentence adverbials of time and place prefer the end of the clause, place before time: *We met in Douala last year.* Long adverbials may move to the front for emphasis or connection: *Last year, everything changed.*

Questions invert subject and auxiliary: *You are ready → Are you ready?* Where there is no auxiliary, *do* is supplied: *She left → Did she leave?* (note the base form

leave after *did*). In indirect questions the statement order returns and no question mark is used: *He asked where she had gone*, not *where had she gone*.

Negatives are formed with *not* after the first auxiliary, or with *do* + *not* when there is none: *She does not agree.* Standard English allows one negative marker per clause: *I did not see anyone*, not *I did not see nobody* — the double negative belongs to some dialects and to older English, but in examinations and formal writing it is marked wrong.

5.3 Errors That Betray the Learner

Three habits deserve special watchfulness. First, the missing subject: English requires one even when nothing real is meant — *It is raining*, never *Is raining*. Second, adjective used as adverb: *She drives careful* must be *carefully*. Third, direct transfer of question order into reported speech, and of statement order into questions: drill the pairs *Where is he? / I asked where he was* until the contrast is automatic.

Worked Examples

Example 1. *The list of names (is / are) on the desk.* → *is*: the head is *list*, singular; *of names* is a modifier.

Example 2. *Neither the players nor the coach (was / were) satisfied.* → *was*: agreement with the nearer subject, *coach*.

Example 3. Correct the order: *She speaks very well English.* → *She speaks English very well*: the object stands next to its verb, and the adverb phrase follows.

Exercises — Chapter 5

1. Choose the correct verb: (a) The basket of oranges (was / were) heavy. (b) Each of the boys (has / have) a locker. (c) There (is / are) two messages for you. (d) A number of errors (was / were) found.

2. Correct the word order: (a) He reads every day the newspaper. (b) She is late always. (c) I asked him where does he live.

3. Make questions: (a) They have finished. (b) She wrote the letter.

4. Correct the negatives: (a) I did not see nobody. (b) He never says nothing.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 5

1. (a) *was* (head *basket*). (b) *has* (*each* is singular). (c) *are* (two messages follow). (d) *were* (*a number of* = several).

2. (a) *He reads the newspaper every day.* (b) *She is always late* (frequency adverb after *be*). (c) *I asked him where he lives / lived* (statement order in indirect questions).

3. (a) *Have they finished?* (b) *Did she write the letter?* (base form after *did*).

4. (a) *I did not see anybody / anyone.* (b) *He never says anything* — or *He says nothing* (one negative only).

Chapter 6: Usage in Practice: Common Errors, Register and Style

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- recognise and correct a dozen of the commonest errors in student English;
- distinguish formal, neutral and informal register and choose suitably;
- write clearer sentences by preferring strong verbs, cutting dead weight and keeping related words together;
- proofread your own work with a short, reliable checklist.

6.1 A Dozen Common Errors

1. **Confused pairs:** *their / there / they're; your / you're; its / it's; to / too / two; advice* (noun) / *advise* (verb); *loose* (not tight) / *lose* (mislay); *quiet / quite*. Learn each pair with a sentence of your own.

2. **Wrong preposition:** *depend on, interested in, good at, afraid of, listen to, arrive at* (a place) / *arrive in* (a town or country), *discuss* (no *about* after it: *We discussed the plan*, not *discussed about*).

3. **Uncountable nouns made countable:** *informations, advices, furnitures, homeworks* — all wrong. Say *information, advice, furniture, homework*, or use partitives: *pieces of advice*.

4. **Missing article or false article:** *He is teacher* → *He is a teacher*; *The life is hard* (in general) → *Life is hard*.

5. **Tense drift:** keep one time frame unless the meaning changes it: *He came in and sits down* → *sat*.

6. **Agreement slips after long subjects:** return to Chapter 5 and find the head noun.

7. **Dangling modifiers:** *Walking to school, the rain soaked me* — the rain was not walking. Repair: *Walking to school, I was soaked by the rain.*

8. **Misplaced* only*: Only *belongs next to the word it limits:* I only lent him the book *(I did nothing else) differs from* I lent him only the book *(nothing else was lent) and* I lent only him the book* (nobody else received it).

9. **Comparative errors:** *more better, most easiest* — one marker is enough: *better, easiest*. And compare like with like: *His results are better than mine* (not *than me* — the comparison is between results and results).

10. **Redundancy:** *return back, repeat again, join together, free gift, past history*. The second word adds nothing; cut it.

11. **Wrong word family member:** *He gave a strong argue → a strong argument*; *She is very success → successful.*

12. **Capitalisation:** capitalise proper nouns, the pronoun *I*, days, months, languages and nationalities — but not seasons or school subjects in general: *She studies history and French on Monday in spring.*

6.2 Register

Register is the level of formality a text adopts, and the right register is the one that fits the audience and the purpose. A letter of application, an examination essay and a university report use formal or neutral English: full forms (*do not*, not *don't*), no slang, careful punctuation. A message to a friend may relax all of these. The fault is not informality itself but mismatch: *Dear Sir, I am writing to*

apply for the job, and by the way the salary is kinda small collapses two registers into one embarrassing sentence.

Watch also for words whose tone differs between varieties. In examination English in Cameroon, British usage is the expected standard: *organise* or *organize* both pass in most marking schemes, but consistency is required — choose one spelling system per text and keep it.

6.3 Writing Clearly

Three habits produce most of the clarity in good prose. **Prefer strong verbs** to verb-plus-noun padding: *decide* for *make a decision*, *help* for *give assistance to*, *use* for *make use of*. **Cut dead weight:** *due to the fact that* = *because*; *in spite of the fact that* = *although*; *at this point in time* = *now*. **Keep related words together:** subjects near their verbs, modifiers near what they modify, pronouns near their antecedents. When a sentence must be long, let its main clause arrive early, so the reader always knows whose story it is.

Finally, read your work aloud — or move your lips. The ear catches what the eye forgives: the missing word, the doubled *the*, the sentence that runs out of breath. Then run the checklist below.

Proofreading checklist. (1) Every sentence begins with a capital and ends with a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark. (2) Every sentence has a subject and a complete verb. (3) Verbs agree with their head subjects. (4) Articles checked, especially before job nouns and in general statements. (5) No apostrophe in possessive *its, yours, theirs*. (6) One spelling system throughout. (7) Names and titles capitalised. (8) Paragraphs break where the topic changes.

Worked Examples

Example 1. Improve: *Due to the fact that the rain fell heavily, the match was postponed.* → *Because the rain fell heavily, the match was postponed.* One word does the work of five.

Example 2. Repair the dangling modifier: *Having finished the harvest, the barn was full.* → *Having finished the harvest, the farmers filled the barn* — or *When the harvest was finished, the barn was full.*

Example 3. Register repair: *Dear Sir, I humbly beg to state that I wanna leave next week.* → *Dear Sir, I am writing to request a week's leave next week.* Formal purpose, formal forms.

Exercises — Chapter 6

1. Correct five errors: *The informations you gave was very useful for my homeworks, and I am very grateful of it.*

2. Rewrite without redundancy: (a) He returned back the book and repeated the story again. (b) It is a free gift for past history students.

3. Place *only* to match each meaning: (a) No one else passed — ___ she passed the test. (b) She did nothing but pass — She ___ passed the test. (c) She passed nothing else — She passed ___ the test.

4. Rewrite in formal register: *Hi Sir, just dropping you a line to say I can't make it to the meeting 'cause my car broke down.*

Answer Guidance — Chapter 6

1. *The information you gave was very useful for my homework, and I am very grateful for it.* (*Information* and *homework* are uncountable; *information* is singular, so *was* is right; *grateful for*, not *of*.)

2. (a) *He returned the book and repeated the story.* (b) *It is a gift for history students.*

3. (a) *Only she passed the test.* (b) *She only passed the test.* (c) *She passed only the test.*

4. Sample: *Dear Sir, I am writing to inform you that I shall be unable to attend the meeting because my car has broken down.* Any version with full forms, no contractions or slang, and a clear statement earns full credit.

A Final Word to the Reader

You now hold the working tools of English grammar: word classes, the noun phrase, the verb system, the clause, agreement and word order, and the habits of clear usage. Grammar is not a set of traps set by examiners; it is the shared machinery by which speakers make themselves understood. Keep this book beside your other studies, do the exercises with a pen in your hand, and return to the chapters as your writing grows. A language is mastered the way a path is made — by walking it often.

— Maggie Enow, Graduate of the University of Yaoundé I, English Modern Letters