

Essential Grammar Knowledge

'Grammar is the business of taking language to pieces. Everyone who speaks English knows grammar intuitively and unconsciously. But not everyone who speaks English knows about grammar. Knowing about means being able to talk about what we know. It is a conscious process and it does not come naturally.'

Professor David Crystal

Joan Stark
English consultant

Part 1: Word classes

In English there are eight word classes (or 'parts of speech'):

- nouns
- pronouns
- verbs
- adjectives
- adverbs
- prepositions
- conjunctions/connectives
- interjections

Each word class has its own job to do in a sentence. In English, the order and position of words in sentences directly affect meaning. The position of a word in a sentence usually decides what job it does.

Teaching point: many words belong to several different word classes depending on word order and position. So **never** teach a rule such as: *All adverbs end in -ly.*

Nouns

The traditional definition of a noun is that it is the **name** of something: a person, a place or a thing. However, this is too vague and can lead to some children thinking that only a person's name is a noun. Also, nouns are not always concrete objects that we can see or touch, like *chair* or *cat*, but can be abstract, such as *beauty* and *happiness*.

There are four types of noun:

- proper
- common
- abstract
- collective

Proper nouns

A proper noun specifically names a person, group of people, place or thing: *Joan; Queen Elizabeth; America; London; Christmas; Friday; December; Tesco; Audi*

Teaching point: proper names begin with capital letters wherever they are in a sentence. However, conventions are changing: look out for interesting exceptions such as *iPhone; easyJet*;

Common nouns

A common noun tells you about one thing with its own name: *cat; flower; table*. But a common noun such as *flower* can be a generic overarching noun for others, such as: *rose; daisy; orchid; geranium*.

Abstract nouns

An abstract noun is the name we give to something we can understand with our minds but can't perceive with our senses: *courage; fear; hope*

Collective nouns

A collective noun is the name for a group of people or things: *a herd of cows; a battalion of soldiers; a pride of lions; an audience*. And my particular favourite: *a loveliness of ladybirds*

Other features of nouns

Nouns can be **singular** or **plural**. The most common way in English of showing a plural noun is to add *-s*. But there are many situations where this doesn't work, which can be used for vocabulary and spelling investigations. A noun can be singular or plural: *house, houses*; or singular only with no plural: *sheep; chess; anger; measles; news*.

Nouns can have **gender: masculine**, such as *prince; boy; bull*; or **feminine**, such as *princess; girl; lioness*. They can be **neuter** (neither masculine or feminine): *table; music; car* or **common** (either masculine or feminine): *child; athlete; soldier*.

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that is used **instead of a noun**. If we didn't use pronouns, we would write like this: *The boy kicked the ball around the field. The boy lost the ball. The ball was in the long grass where the boy couldn't see the ball. The boy searched everywhere for the lost ball.*

There are seven types of pronoun:

- **personal** pronouns are used for people and things: *I; me; you; he; she; it; we; us; they; them*. They can be singular or plural.
- **possessive** pronouns show who or what owns something: *my; mine; yours; his; hers; ours; theirs*. **Teaching point:** possessive pronouns never need apostrophes.
- **reflexive pronouns** link back to the subject: *myself; yourself; himself; herself; ourselves; yourselves; themselves*.
- **demonstrative pronouns** point out nouns or pronouns: *this; that; these; those; them; one; none*
- **interrogative pronouns** ask questions: *who? which? what? whose?*
- **relative pronouns** link things already mentioned: *who; which; whose*; as in *The girl, who was wearing a white dress, spilt orange juice. The orange juice, which is sticky, ruined it.*
- **indefinite pronouns** link people or things which are not exactly defined: *anyone; someone; several; some; none; sometimes; they; one*

Teaching point: children don't need to name the seven different types of pronouns. They need to be able to identify pronouns in sentences and to use them correctly. However, it is useful for teachers to know the different pronoun categories.

Verbs

Verbs are important words. Together, nouns and verbs are the powerhouse of language. Verbs tell us about **actions** or **states of being**. An *action* can be performed by a noun: *The cup **broke***. Or they tell us the state of *being* of a noun: *The girl **is** ill*.

Teaching point: If we over-emphasise that a verb is a 'doing' word, we miss out the important 'state of being' aspect.

There are three types of verbs: transitive; intransitive; auxiliary

A **transitive verb** has a subject and an object. This subject-verb-object (SVO) structure is the most common sentence pattern in English:

Subject	Verb	Object
<i>Tom</i>	<i>kicked</i>	<i>the ball.</i>
<i>The baby</i>	<i>dropped</i>	<i>his mug.</i>

An **intransitive verb** has no object:

Subject	Verb	No object
<i>The rain</i>	<i>fell.</i>	
<i>I</i>	<i>shivered.</i>	

Auxiliary verbs help to make a complete verb. 'Auxiliary' means helping. The most common auxiliary verbs are: *have; be; must; may; can; do* as in:

- *It **is** snowing.*
- *I **have** lost my pen.*
- *I **may** go shopping on Saturday.*
- *You **should** go to the doctor.*
- *Sam **has been** playing football all morning.*

Teaching point: children don't need to know the terminology of 'transitive' and 'intransitive', although it is useful to know that a verb can stand alone without an object. However, the terminology of 'auxiliary' or 'helping' verb is important as it shows that a verb is not just a single word.

Verbs have two **participles** which follow auxiliary verbs: the **present** participle usually ends in *-ing*, as in *dancing; walking; swimming* and the **past** participle which usually ends in *-ed*, as in *danced; walked; stumbled*.

Verbs have three main tenses:

- the **present** tense is used when the action is happening now
- the **past** tense is used when the action has already happened
- the **future** tense is used when the action is going to happen

Regular verbs behave like this:

Present tense	Past tense	Past participle	Future tense
<i>I dance</i>	<i>I danced</i>	<i>I have danced</i>	<i>I will dance</i>
<i>He plays</i>	<i>He played</i>	<i>He has played</i>	<i>He will play</i>
<i>They help</i>	<i>They helped</i>	<i>They have helped</i>	<i>They will help</i>

Irregular verbs do not simply add *-ed*:

Present tense	Past tense	Past participle	Future tense
<i>He sings</i>	<i>He sang</i>	<i>He has sung</i>	<i>He will sing</i>
<i>We think</i>	<i>We thought</i>	<i>We have thought</i>	<i>We shall think</i>
<i>Sarah goes</i>	<i>Sarah went</i>	<i>Sarah has gone</i>	<i>Sarah will go</i>

Verbs have two voices: the **active** and the **passive**. In the active voice, the subject performs the action: *Tom threw the ball over the wall*. In the passive voice, the subject has the action done to it by someone or something else: *The ball was thrown over the wall by Tom*. Sometimes we don't know who has performed the action: *The thief was murdered*.

A **phrasal verb** a verb + adverb to give a different meaning, such as *shut up*; *pop in*; *write off*; *run down*. There are a lot of phrasal verbs in English, so it is useful for children to recognise them. Find Michael Rosen's poem *Busy day* for the varieties of the phrasal verb 'pop'.

Adjectives

Adjectives **tell us more, or give more information**, about nouns or pronouns. Teaching that they are 'describing' words is too vague, as nouns and adverbs are also 'describing' words. An adjective is *usually* placed immediately in front of the noun it describes.

There are six types of adjective:

- **descriptive** adjectives are the most common. They tell us more about things, people and places: *a sparkling raindrop*; *powdery snow*; *an angry crowd*; *busy streets*. They can be linked to the noun by a verb for the same meaning: *The raindrop was sparkling*.
- **demonstrative** adjectives point out specific things: *this coat*; *those boys*; *such lovely singing*. Demonstrative adjectives include the **articles**: *the*; *a*; *an*. *The* is the **definite article**; *a* and *an* are the **indefinite articles**.
- **possessive** adjectives show who or what owns something: *my gloves*; *your pencil*; *their football*; *its teeth*. Possessive *its* **never** has an apostrophe.
- **interrogative adjectives** ask questions: *Which house?* *Whose car?*
- **numerical** adjectives show **number**: *six birds*; *each team*; *one hundred pounds* or **the order** of things: *first team*; *last chance*; *final whistle* or an **indefinite number**: *some ideas*; *few people*; *several times*;
- **quantitative adjectives** show how much of something: *a little bit of salt*; *a whole lemon*; *more chocolate*; *much suffering*

Teaching point: to improve writing, encourage children to choose powerful nouns, rather than add one or two adjectives to a weak noun. And discourage the cliché adjective, as in *the blue sky*; *the hot sun*. As with pronouns, children don't need to name the different categories of adjectives.

Adverbs

Adverbs **tell us more, or give more information**, about verbs, and sometimes adjectives. *Usually* an adverb in a sentence is as close to the verb as possible.

There are seven types of adverbs:

- **manner:** answer the question 'How?' (*Dan spoke **slowly**.*)
- **place:** answer the question 'Where?' (*Please go **outside**.*)
- **time:** answer the question 'When?' (*The train will arrive **soon**.*)
- **reason:** answer the question 'Why?' (*I cancelled the meeting **because** of the snow.*)
- **number:** answer the question 'How many?' (*He kicked the ball **once**.*)
- **degree:** answer the question 'How much?' or 'To what extent?' (*My dad was **extremely** annoyed.*)
- **negation** 'not' (*She would **not** laugh.*)

Adverbs can also be added to adjectives, other adverbs, phrases and whole sentences: *He spoke **painfully slowly**. The driver was **entirely** in the wrong.*

Spotting an adverb

- Many, but not all, adverbs end in *-ly* and tell us more about the verb. But because a word ends in *-ly*, it doesn't mean it's an adverb: *lovely; holly;*
- Some adverbs are the same as an adjective: *She drove **fast** (adverb) in the **fast** (adjective) car.* It all depends whether they are giving information about the noun or the verb.
- The word *not* is always an adverb.

Teaching point: unlike some other parts of speech, adverbs can be moved around in a sentence. Experiment with moving an adverb around to see how it subtly affects the meaning.

- *He opened the drawer **quietly**.*
- ***Quietly**, he opened the drawer.*
- *He **quietly** opened the drawer.*

But this doesn't sound right: *He opened **quietly** the drawer.* And this does not make grammatical sense: *He opened the **quietly** drawer.*

Teaching point: to improve writing, encourage children to choose powerful verbs, rather than adding an adverb to a weak verb. So: *He **slammed** the door* rather than *He **shut** the door **firmly**.* Encourage children to find a verb for speaking, rather than adding an adjective to *said*.

Prepositions

A preposition is a word **that links two nouns:** *The car went **over** the bridge.* The preposition links *car* and *bridge*. Prepositions must link two nouns (or pronouns) and go immediately before the second one.

Many words can be both prepositions and adverbs:

- He put a belt **round** his trousers. (preposition)
- The car turned **round**. (adverb)

The best way to tell the difference is that a preposition must be followed by a noun, a pronoun or similar phrase.

Common prepositions include: *above; after; against; along; around; at; before; behind; beneath; below; between; down; except; from; in; inside; near; off; over; since; through; to; towards; under; until; up; with*

Compound prepositions consist of more than one word: *in front of; due to; apart from; because of*

Prepositions often show **time**: *We came in **at** midnight. We ate popcorn **during** the film.* They also show **direction**: *The man showed us the way **to** the station. We went **over** the bridge.*

Conjunctions/connectives

Conjunctions are words that join clauses within a sentence. The main conjunctions are: *and; but; or; so.*

Connectives are words and phrases that link clauses or sentences. Connectives can be **conjunctions** (*but; when; because*) or **connecting adverbs** (*however, then, therefore.*) or **adverbial phrases** (*first of all; last week; of course*). Used between sentences, they give a paragraph a united style. Used between paragraphs, they help make the whole piece of writing flow. They maintain the **cohesion** of a text.

There are four types of **conjunction**: co-ordinating; contrasting; subordinating; co-relative.

Co-ordinating conjunctions, such as *and; as; or; so* join things that are basically similar: *Emma plays netball, **and** so does Jane.*

Contrasting conjunctions, such as *but; yet; however* are used when things are different: *Emma plays netball, **but** Jane likes gymnastics.*

Subordinating conjunctions, such as *after; because; for; since; when; although* are used when one thing depends on another: ***Although** it was raining, the match went ahead.*

Co-relative conjunctions, such as *both...and; either...or; not only...but also* emphasise that the two things joined are similar: *The skater **not only** wore a helmet, **but also** knee and elbow pads.*

Although conjunctions join things, they often start a sentence: ***When** I went to London, I went on the London eye.*

Teaching point: We can begin sentences with *and* or *but* when we want to emphasise a point. There are several examples of sentences like this in this booklet.

Interjections

Interjections are usually single words to express strong feelings: *Help! Stop! Hello: Really?* They are often followed by an exclamation mark. Interjections are common in everyday conversation. In writing, they are usually in dialogue.

Part 2: Sentence grammar

Everyone uses the concept of 'sentence', but in fact it is difficult to define. We imagine we talk in sentences, and we try to teach children to write them correctly, using capital letters and full stops. However, many children are confused about what a sentence is. A recent research study in a Dorset secondary school showed that half of the pupils in Y8 confused sentence construction for meaning with issues around punctuation and general presentation of writing. One pupil stated: *Sentences help you to breathe!*

Two general rules apply to any English sentence:

- It is constructed according to a system of rules, used intuitively by all adult mother-tongue speakers of the language. We would never say: *Car the red is.*
- It is a language construction which makes sense on its own, without sounding incomplete. Some sentences don't include a verb, although they *usually* do. *Beautiful day! Help! Goodbye* make complete sense. Dickens began *Bleak House* with two non-verb sentences: *London. Im placable November weather.*

Teaching point: decide on a school definition of a sentence that all staff understand and use consistently when teaching writing, especially in modelled writing, and in marking. The marking comment '*Write in sentences*' does not provide useful guidance to children who aren't sure what a sentence is.

The difference between phrases, clauses and sentences

A **phrase** is a group of words that acts as one unit, but it does not make Complete sense on its own. So *dog* is a word but *the dog, the big dog, or that huge black dog over there by the fence* are all noun phrases.

A phrase can function as a **noun**: ***My last winter holiday in Tenerife** was fantastic.* Or an **adjective**: *I am **really extremely hungry**.* Or an **adverb**: *They left school **five minutes ago**.*

A **clause** is a group of words that expresses an event: *She drank some water* or a situation: *She was thirsty.* It usually contains a verb, but does not always make complete sense on its own. So the phrase: *a big dog* is different from the clause: *a big dog chased me*

A **sentence** is made up of one or more clauses:

- One main clause: *It was raining.*
- Two main clauses: *It was raining but we went out.*

- One main clause, one subordinate clause: *When we went out, it was raining.*
- One main clause, two (or more) subordinate clauses: *When we went out, it was raining, although the forecast predicted sun.*

A **main clause** is complete on its own and can form a complete sentence. A **subordinate clause** belongs to the main clause, and does not make sense on its own.

There are **three main types of sentence**:

- **statements** such as: *Dogs like bones. My dress is blue. We went to town.*
- **questions** where the word order changes: *Do dogs like bones? Is your dress blue? Are you going to town?*
- **commands** or 'imperatives' such as: *Stop! Please sit down.*

And there are two minor sentence types: **exclamations** such as *What a fool I've been!* and **wishes**: *May the New Year bring you health and happiness.*

Sentence construction

There are three types of sentence construction:

- simple sentences
- compound sentences
- complex sentences

Simple sentences make sense by themselves and contain one main verb. They have one clause. Although they are called 'simple', they are not necessarily short.

- *It snowed.*
- *I like chocolate.*
- *My sister doesn't like cabbage, peas, sweetcorn or mushrooms.*
- *Have you heard about the bad accident on Abbey Road last night?*
- *The orange-haired clown with the bright red nose, chequered trousers and patent leather shoes sprayed water all over the excited, laughing audience.*

Compound sentences are formed when two or more simple sentences are joined by a conjunction such as *and* or *but*, or by suitable punctuation. They have two or more clauses which make complete sense on their own.

- *Mary had a little lamb and Jack had a black sheep.*
- *Jack fell down, broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after.* (We don't have to repeat *Jack* because the first and second clauses have the same subject).

Teaching point: watch out for the common error of the **comma splice**. This happens when people use a comma instead of a conjunction to join two simple sentences instead of constructing a compound or a complex sentence: *Mary had a little lamb, Jack had a black sheep.* Both clauses make sense on their own, so need a conjunction, never a comma.

Complex sentences are made up of a single main clause, plus one or more **subordinate** clauses. The subordinate clauses do not make complete sense

standing alone., whereas the main clause does. Most subordinate clauses are signalled by a **subordinating conjunction** such as *although; if; while*. Complex sentences are not necessarily long.

- *When I fell, I cried.*
- *Although it was raining, we climbed the mountain.*
- *We climbed the mountain, although it was raining.*
- *I like the beach, whereas you like the hills, where you can practise rock-climbing.*
- *Whenever I travel, I go by train as I hate flying.*

Part 3: Teaching grammar

Research has shown conclusively that teaching grammar and punctuation in isolated, decontextualised exercises does not transfer into children's independent writing skills. We have all had the disheartening experience of seeing full marks on worksheets on capital letters and full stops, followed by a piece of writing where the capital letters and full stops are missing. However, grammar exercises may help children to gain marks on the DfE grammar and punctuation test.

The best teaching of grammar **which impacts directly on children's writing** is when teachers:

- are secure in their own knowledge, using essential terminology naturally and as part of everyday practice
- use **modelled** writing regularly and frequently in context, explaining their grammar and punctuation choices and how they impact on meaning
- link grammar teaching securely to whole-text types and their language features
- find good examples from high quality literature and the world around us to make the link between reading and writing
- encourage curiosity about language, often in a playful way, for example, through jokes

There is a lot of confusion among teachers about the difference between **shared** and **modelled writing**.

In **modelled writing** the teacher is in charge of the process and demonstrates how to write a text, without taking contributions from the children at this point. The teacher acts as the adult expert, making her thinking about any aspect of the writing process explicit. She physically demonstrates how to orchestrate a range of skills on paper or screen.

In modelled writing it is important to:

- agree the **audience and purpose** for writing as this determines the structure, grammatical features and level of formality
- have one (at most two) **specific grammar and punctuation objectives**
- **orally rehearse sentences** before writing them down so that children see how adults compose and revise sentences before committing to paper or screen
- encourage and demonstrate the **automatic** use of punctuation

- **consistently and cumulative re-read** to gain a flow from one sentence and paragraph to the next, as well as checking for improvements and mistakes
- **discuss and explain** choices and decisions
- make the occasional **deliberate mistake** to focus on common errors

In **shared writing** the teacher will take contributions from the children after the initial modelling. The teacher focuses, limits and challenges the children's contributions to refine their understanding and compositional skills. She may take a number of contributions before explaining her particular choice.

In both modelled and shared writing it is important not to cram too many objectives into one session. Sessions need to be regular, frequent and not too long. Sometimes modelling one or two sentences is enough. Teachers must plan their modelled writing before the lesson so that they keep the focus firmly on the teaching objective.

Helpful resources to support grammar teaching:

- **Grammar rules (Collins)** ISBN 0-00-720537-6. This basic book gives clear, understandable definitions and examples of key grammatical concepts. It is designed for upper KS2 but many teachers have found it useful.
- **Re-discover grammar with David Crystal (Longman)** ISBN 0-582-00258-3. David Crystal is the current leading authority on English grammar, and anything he writes on language is worth reading. This book is used by A Level English language students and undergraduates. Although technical in parts, it is the best book on grammar concepts I have come across, and very useful when you want to check up on tricky points.
- **Grammar for writing (National Literacy Strategy)**. This handbook is no longer in print, although you may have copies in your store cupboards. It is still available online in the Primary National Strategy archive. The summary of organisation of text types and their language features, and the grammatical glossary, are still really useful.
- **BBC Skillswise English for adults**. Short videos and quizzes on key grammatical concepts which are a good check on your knowledge. Level 1 is the standard needed for access to most jobs.
- **BBC Bitesize revision for KS2**. A good site for homework or revision clubs as children can go at their own pace, and work on gaps in knowledge