Grammar Girl Presents
the Ultimate Writing Guide for Students

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Think a grammar book has to be annoying, boring, and confusing? Think again.

I’m Grammar Girl. I correct errors for a living. I even have a podcast about grammar. (Check me out on iTunes.) Writing is hard enough without being overwhelmed by nonstop rules, so that’s why I’m here—to make those dos and don’ts understandable.

Let’s face it: everyone writes. Sometimes writing is the only way you communicate with someone. Between creative writing, papers, and reports in school, it never stops, right? Add status updates, text messages, and blogs, and your life is a writing fest!

Why care about writing? Good writing allows you to express what’s in your head so that others can understand. What’s the point of having a great idea or an amazing story if your writing messes it up?

I think of grammar as rules for the game of writing. Knowing these rules will give you the confidence to produce the best writing you can and make sure your ideas are taken seriously.
Sure, English is full of conflicting rules, similar-sounding words, and exceptions; but I’m all about making complex explanations fun and easy to understand.

What I’m not trying to do is make you sound like everyone else or like you’re from Shakespeare’s time. I’m here to give you Quick and Dirty Tips: tools, crazy memory tricks, funny phrases, and grammar cartoons of Aardvark (an aardvark) and Squiggly (a snail), all so that your writing will reflect you, your thoughts, your research, and your ideas.

You’ll even get tips to jump-start your writing, help you with revisions, and make sure your school papers don’t get those dreaded comments: “redundant,” “awkward,” and “confusing.” We’ll also talk about what’s appropriate for all your writing: e-mail, letters, text messages, and school papers. Finally, we’ve created a website with quizzes and exercises to reinforce what you’ve learned. Visit grammargirlstudent.com.

If by the end of this book you find yourself addicted to grammar, to the many wonders of the comma, or to spotting apostrophe misuse, don’t fight it. Embrace your inner grammar guru.
Chapter One

Parts of Speech

In these next few chapters, think of me as your grammar guide, intent on demystifying grammar. I’m a practical person—I’ve given people batteries and socks as birthday presents. That is what I want to give you, the things everyone will use—the batteries and socks of writing.

In order to do that, we need a common language between the professionals and us. If I quickly spewed out terms like antecedents, future progressive tense, and subjunctive verbs, you’d probably run away screaming, but you do need to know some of these terms and what they mean. I promise to explain these words (and their usefulness) and, if I can, give you other words to use in their place.

To begin, you need to know the parts of speech, the function of different groups of words. In Chapter Two, you’ll use this knowledge to put together sentences. After that, punctuation. Then the world is your oyster.

Or your pizza.
I prefer pizza.
NOUNS

A noun is a person, place, or thing. Things can be concrete, like rocks, or abstract ideas, like courage or purpose. Nouns are divided into two types: proper nouns and common nouns.

Proper nouns name specific people, places, or things, such as Grammar Girl, Mississippi River, and Golden Gate Bridge. They are names. On the other hand, common nouns name general people, places, or things. The words girl, river, and bridge aren’t capitalized because they are common nouns that don’t name any one individual person, place, or thing.

QUICK AND DIRTY TIP

If you don’t know whether to capitalize a noun, see if it names a specific person, place, or thing. Grammar Girl High School would be capitalized because it’s a specific high school. Notice in the previous sentence that the second high school isn’t capitalized because it isn’t the name of a specific high school—it’s a generic use of the word.

Common Nouns
a river
the doctor

Proper Nouns
the Passaic River
Doctor Horrible

To learn how these general capitalization rules apply to specific words, such as nicknames, planets, seasons, directions, and dog breeds, see Appendix section A-1.

PLURALS: NOUNS, NOUNS EVERYWHERE

You have one computer, but you’d love another one. Easy—at least on paper. Add an s. Ta-da! You have two computers (or more). Magic!
It’s fairly easy to make nouns plural. The last letter or letters of the word determine what you need to do. Usually, you just add *s*.

- action → actions
- hole → holes
- pencil → pencils

When the word ends in *ch*, *s*, *sh*, *x*, or *z*, add *es*.

- birch → birches
- fox → foxes
- klutz → klutzes
- platypus → platypuses
- thrush → thrushes

When the word ends in *y*, look at the letter before *y*. If it’s a vowel, add *s*.

- holiday → holidays
- key → keys

If the letter before *y* is a consonant, change the *y* to *i* and then add *es*.

- rally → rallies

Words that end in *o* don’t follow specific rules; some words take an *s* to become plural and other words take an *es* to become plural. You have to memorize the spellings.

- cello → cellos
- echo → echoes
- kangaroo → kangaroos
- tomato → tomatoes

**Except That . . .**

If you’re dealing with a family name or product name, it doesn’t matter what comes before the *y*. Just add an *s*. *Clery* becomes the *Clerys* and *BlackBerry* (the phone) becomes *BlackBerrys*. 
Making Abbreviations Plural

Add s to make abbreviations plural, but make sure it’s a small s, not a capitalized one (and don’t use an apostrophe). The rule is the same regardless of whether the abbreviation has periods.

- CD  CDs
- DVD  DVDs
- M.D.  M.D.s

See section 3-34 for how to make single letters plural.

What’s UP with That?

Some nouns are called compound nouns. Don’t panic! All that means is that the noun is made up of more than one word—for example, brother-in-law. It’s a small collection of words that make up a noun just as a family compound is a collection of buildings that make up a residence.

What’s the main noun in brother-in-law? Brother, not law. The law part simply tells you what kind of brother he is. So, you put the s on brother when you’re talking about two brothers-in-law.

If you came in second place in a track meet, you’re the runner-up. If you tied for second, you’re one of the runners-up.

Tricky Nouns: Mouse? Mice? Meese?

With some nouns, you just have to know what the plural is, such as mice (for mouse), teeth (for tooth), deer (for deer), knives (for knife), children (for child), and oxen (for ox). Some of our words retain qualities of Latin or other languages they came from, so their plurals aren’t formed in a standard way. Examples include appendices.
(plural of *appendix*), *phenomena* (plural of *phenomenon*), and *bases* (plural of *basis*).

If you’re not sure what the plural form of a word is, go to the dictionary. The dictionary is your friend—honest. It will give you the plural of the word if the plural isn’t standard.

✓✓✓ **Check It Out** ✓✓✓

Rarely, language experts will say you can choose between two acceptable plural forms of a noun. For example, when you’re talking about a computer mouse, the plural can be either *mice* or *mouses*, and although most people who work with plants prefer the plural *cacti*, most dictionaries say either *cacti* or *cactuses* is fine. *Index* becomes *indices* when you’re writing about math or science, but in other cases it is usually made plural as *indexes*; and although *buses* is the preferred plural of *bus*, you can also go with *busses*. When in doubt, check a dictionary. The first plural form listed is the one that is most common.✓

**POP QUIZ**

Choose the correct sentence from each pair.

1. A. Squiggly knew one of the justices of the peace.
   B. Squiggly knew one of the justice of the peaces.

2. A. Our family holidays are filled with tradition.
   B. Our family holiday’s are filled with tradition.

3. A. The crowd threw rotten tomatoes.
   B. The crowd threw rotten tomatos.
VERBS: READY, CAMERA, ACTION

We have our people, places, and things—nouns—established, but they’re not doing anything. We have to get those things, people, and ideas moving. Enter the verb! Verbs add movement to your writing. Like nouns, verbs come in different categories.

TRANSITIVE AND INTRANSITIVE VERBS

The first way you can put verbs in groups is to separate them into transitive and intransitive piles. There’s an easy way to remember those names, which I’ll get to in a minute.

Transitive verbs take their action on something—the object. If you remove the object from these sentences, they don’t make sense:

**He will lay the book on the table.**
*(Lay is the verb; the book is the necessary object.)*

**She gave the pearl to the wizard.**
*(Gave is the verb; the pearl is the necessary object.)*

Intransitive verbs don’t need an object; they can take action all by themselves. No object is necessary in these sentences:

**He ran.**
**She sits.**