

Exploring Grammar (for PhD Writers)

Dr Paul Frazer
(p.frazer@qub.ac.uk)

International and Postgraduate Student Centre
(<http://qub.ac.uk/postgraduate>)
(pg.office@qub.ac.uk)

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1. Exploring Grammar (for PhD Writers)

Quite simply, UK educational institutions do not promote the fundamentals of grammar (in the English language) to the same extent that they used to. And because UK curricula no longer prescribe 'grammar-lessons', in the traditional sense, students enrolled in higher education often lack confidence in thinking, talking, and writing about grammatical conventions. So if you are coming to this workbook with anxieties about 'grammar' and writing generally, don't worry – you are not alone. To begin to develop an understanding of grammar, we must first face up to the feelings that this word generates – both positive and negative. When many people think of 'grammar', it conjures excruciating memories of critical feedback, embarrassing mistakes, and downright confusion.

1. (a) Understanding Grammar

Begin by asking yourself what this word, 'grammar', means to you? What memories (if any) does it stir up?

Now try to write a definition of 'grammar'?

Thirdly, why is 'grammar' important? Why is it important to you?

Identifying the reasons why 'grammar' matters is important. If the above questions seem a little vague (or needless), try to think about the reasons why you are reading this workbook. What do you want to achieve?

1. (b) Defining Grammar

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'grammar' can be defined as

That department of the study of a language which deals with its inflexional forms or other means of indicating the relations of words in the sentence, and with the rules for employing these **in accordance with established usage**; usually including also the department which deals with the phonetic system of the language and the principles of **its representation in writing**.

As we can see, the meaning of 'grammar' is fluid; it varies "in accordance with established usage". So building an awareness of grammar expectations needs to be an ongoing commitment. Learning the principles of "representation" (in writing) is a time-consuming but worthwhile undertaking. If we look to the history of the term, we can begin to see why. The word 'grammar' is derived from Greek and Latin terms for "the methodical study of literature"; in other words, it defines acts of scholarly attention to writing. Indeed in the Middle Ages, *grammatica* chiefly meant the knowledge or study of Latin, and was associated with *learning in general*. So for hundreds of years, knowledge of 'grammar' has been associated with the acquisition of knowledge generally. This is significant because, whether they like to admit it or not, many readers judge a writer's credibility through their knowledge and application of 'grammar' rules.

This workbook is designed to provide you with the beginnings of a grammatically-centred vocabulary, a crash course if you will. As such, the workbook outlines a series of practical exercises designed to heighten your sensitivities to grammar problems (and solutions); it should therefore help you to start overcoming the anxieties that many, if not all, PhD writers associate with writing, writing style, and punctuation. The first half of the workbook centres upon grammatical word classes and a range of exercises designed to get you thinking about grammar problems and opportunities in *your* writing style. The second section takes punctuation as its primary focus, demonstrating ways in which punctuation can be applied to achieve a range of stylistic effects. By revising the lessons in this workbook, you should be able to improve your writing along with your ability to think, talk, and write about 'grammar' as well.

1. (c) Bad Grammar?

I read many students' essays and find that the same problems keep coming up. Often the things that go wrong relate to sentence structure. Sentences may be incomplete, or alternatively too long and complicated. There may be confusion about who or what the sentence is about – its *subject*. Perhaps it is hard to see what this subject is doing, has done, or will be doing. There can be errors in the words themselves – the wrong spelling, ending or usage. There can also be errors in the way the words relate to each other. Punctuation is supposed to guide us to avoid confusion; often it is used in ways that contribute to the confusion. (Sinclair 2009, p. 7)

For those reading this workbook that have experience of teaching (at school or university level) and/or reading student writing, much of the above quotation will be all too familiar. Appreciating what we often term 'bad writing' when we read it is, for most doctoral researchers, straight-forward; however, explaining *why* the writing is 'bad' or 'unclear' (like Sinclair does in the example above) is a much more difficult task. By learning to describe writing technically, we can not only sharpen our abilities to identify grammatical problems, but also apply such lessons to our own writing.

Learning how to break language down into linguistic components – such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives – will help you to start think, talk, and write about the technical aspects of 'good' and 'bad' grammar. Applying word classifications to sentences will help you to receive feedback constructively from supervisors, editors, and peers. Work through the following pages and learn the major and minor word classifications.

1. (d) Identifying Word Classes

Here is a list of the major and minor word classes of the English language. Use them as a reference for your writing and revision:

Major:

Nouns: 'things' (*car, aunt*), animals (*mouse*), objects (*inkwell*), abstract ideas (*socialism*), emotions (*compassion*), etc.

Verbs: actions (*kick*), events (*fall, lose*), states (*contain, comprise*), etc.

Adjectives: size (*huge*), colour (*yellow*), shape (*oblong*), appearance (*pretty*), evaluation (*commendable*), etc.

Adverbs: manner (*happily*), time (*soon*), direction (*along*), etc.

Minor:

Pronouns: personal (*I, me, mine*), reflexive (*myself*), indefinite (*nothing, everyone*), relative (*who, which*), etc.

Determiners: articles (*a, the*), demonstrative (*this, that*), possessive (*my, our*), numerals (*five, fifth*), indefinite quantifiers (*some, few, a lot of*), etc.

Prepositions: space (*in, under*), time (*after, during*), explanatory (*because of*), etc.

Conjunctions: *and, or, but, while, whereas, although, if, that, when, so that, because*, etc.

(Minor word classes are not covered in detail in this guidebook. See the Further Reading section at the end of this document for some useful resources)

1. (e) Sentences and Clauses

The next step in dealing with grammar-related writing issues is to fully comprehend the sentence.

A sentence is a sequence of words that make complete sense on their own. Every sentence must have 3 things:

1. **Subject:** who/what the sentence is about;
2. **Predicate:** what is said about the subject (including verbs);
3. **Verb:** word(s) that convey action.

e.g. **Paul** made many grammatical errors.

Clauses

A clause is a group of words that can stand alone as a grammatically complete sentence. Multiple clauses can be combined to form long sentences. In the following examples, clauses are demarcated in brackets:

- (The leaves are falling from the trees), and (the days are getting shorter).
 - (The train arrived on time), although (it was held up near Banbury).
 - When (the telephone rings) (you must answer it).
-

Clauses in Simple Sentences

Clauses (and 'simple' sentences) must consist of a **subject** (do-er) and a verb:

- **Emma** smiled.
- **The leaves** fall.

An **object** (do-ee) may also form part of the clause:

- Emma *smiled* at her sister.
- The leaves *fall* on the path.

THE OBJECT IS THE PART OF A SENTENCE THAT IS AFFECTED BY THE ACTION; SUBJECTS ACT, OBJECTS ARE ACTED UPON.

Clauses in Compound Sentences

When two or more simple sentences are joined together with a co-ordinating conjunction (*and, but, or*) they form a 'compound' sentence, and the components are called 'clauses'. So

1. The **number of homeless people** *has* risen. There *is* less accommodation available.

becomes:

2. (The **number of homeless people** *has* risen), and (there *is* less accommodation available).

Clauses in Complex Sentences

A complex sentence results from the inclusion of one sentence as an element in another.

- **The security forces** *ordered* that **the area** should *be cleared*.

The clauses are divided into main and subordinate:

- MAIN: **The security forces** *ordered* (something)
- SUBORDINATE: that **the area** should *be cleared*.

A SUBORDINATE CLAUSE CANNOT STAND ALONE; IT MUST ACCOMPANY A MAIN CLAUSE

1. (f) Subjects and Objects

A **subject** is the 'agent', 'actor' or 'doing force' of a sentence:

- **John** kicked the leaves.
- **The experiment** produced multiple results.
- Inflation is caused by **careless money-lending**.
- Read incorrectly, **the text** can seem overly critical of Churchill's stance.

An **object** is a 'passive' or 'acted upon' element of a sentence:

- John kicked **the leaves**.
 - The experiment produced **multiple results**.
 - **Inflation** is caused by careless money-lending.
 - Read incorrectly, the text can seem overly critical of **Churchill's stance**.
-

1. (h) Exercise 1: Subjects and Verbs

Circle **subjects** and underline verbs in these sentences:

- a. The soldiers evacuated the building.
- b. The building was evacuated by the soldiers.
- c. An evacuation of a building was in occurrence.
- d. A terrorist gunned down a man who then fell to his death.
- e. The car park was set on fire.
- f. McAuley (2006) states that there is reasonable statistical evidence to support Smith's claims.
- g. Smith's claims are supported by reasonable statistical evidence states McAuley (2006).
- h. A distribution of assets was met with hostility among the workforce.
- i. I couldn't care less about punctuation; it's just dots on a page.

Some questions to consider:

- **Where subjects are difficult to locate, what does this tell us about the writer's sentence construction?**
- **Think about the effects of using the passive rather than active voice.**
- **Can you rework passive sentences into active constructions?**
- **What happens when the (main) subject is obscured or placed at the end of a sentence?**
- **What effect does this have on readability?**

(See solutions on p.20)

1. (i) Exercise 2: Main Characters and Actions

Read the following example, then circle **subjects** and underline verbs:

Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright.

Who/what are the main characters of this story?

Are they the subjects of these sentences?

Are the crucial actions being expressed by verbs?

Reconstruct the sentence so that actions are expressed using verbs and main characters are subjects.

Once upon a time,

Reliance upon passive verbs, nominalisation (see p.13), and failure to 'front the subject' makes the original example turgid and needlessly complex. This has negative effects for the readability of your work, slowing your reader down and making them work harder! Work through the examples on the following page and look out for more of these problems.

1. (j) Nominalisation

Nominalisation occurs when we turn verbs into **abstract nouns** by displacing the crucial action of a sentence:

- Because of inflation, **an increase** occurred in housing prices across the country.
- Once upon a time, **a walk** through the woods was taking place.

In the above examples, the verbs 'increase' and 'walk' are turned into abstract nouns (in these cases, events). This displaces the CRUCIAL ACTION of the sentences, which should be expressed by a verb. As a result, nominalised verbs can impede a reader's progress and make sentences more difficult to read.

Exercise 3. Nominalisation and Abstraction

a. Begin by circling subjects and underlining verbs:

The committee proposal would provide for biogenetic industry certification of the safety to human health for new substances requested for exemption from Federal rules.

What is happening to the actions and characters of this sentence?

How can we remedy the problems?

Reconstruct the sentence so that actions are expressed using verbs and main characters are subjects.

The Committee

Exercise 3 (b)

Again, circle subjects and underline verbs:

The Federalists' argument in regard to the destabilization of government by popular democracy was based on their belief in the tendency of factions to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Rework the sentence, matching subjects with main characters and actions with verbs:

The Federalists

(Solution: pp.21-22)

2. A Personal Approach to Grammar: Punctuation and Style

Adapted from Weinstein and Finn, *Grammar Moves: Shaping Who You Are* (Longman 2011)

2. (a) Grammar for Being Assertive: The Colon

Use colons to

- indicate that you're about to spell something out, as in the second sentence here:

To put it mildly, the new female action stars are unfortunate role models for girls. They embody two things women have been working hard to overcome: objectification and violence.

- introduce a block quote:

No matter how many times one has read that long, rousing birth announcement that opens the Declaration of Independence, it still bears rereading:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them...

By creating a brief but dramatic, expectation-filled pause before they actually deliver what they promise, colons *command attention*. Think about the following:

I have good reasons for not finishing my thesis this year: my wife is pregnant, my supervisor won't respond to my emails, and Tottenham Hotspur qualified for the Champion's League.

The colon after "year" lays claim to all the air time needed to say the rest. In that sense, the colon serves a need we have throughout our lives: it helps us get noticed.

2. (b) Grammar for Being Pro-Active: The Active Voice

The 'active voice' is our most straightforward way of describing action. In active voice, we *name* the **subject** (or doer) before saying what they did:

Clare $\xrightarrow{\quad}$ finished her thesis and $\xrightarrow{\quad}$ poked Sonja in the eye.
subject + verb + object + verb + object

When we move away from the active voice construction we get 'passive' sentences like these:

A vicious, thesis-related, eye-poking incident occurred involving Clare and Sonja.

or

Sonja was the victim of a poking to the eye.

Note: subjects, objects, and verbs can be difficult to locate in sentences like these. Think about main characters and actions – remember the effect of not matching these to clear subjects and verbs.

2. (c) Grammar for Being Organised: The Comma

Effective usage of commas can shape the accessibility of your writing in important ways. Follow the guidelines below:

Use commas before a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, yet, so*) that joins two independent clauses:

- “Hamlet spends much of his time onstage berating himself for not doing anything, but this is an unfair charge.”
- “Commas help to break up sentences for your reader, so use them wisely.”

Use commas after an introductory word or group of words:

- “If one takes the trouble to list all Hamlet’s actions, it becomes clear that in reality Hamlet keeps very busy.”
- “Nevertheless, Hamlet often wanders off-topic in his digressions on life and consciousness.”

Use commas to separate items in a series of items:

- “In the space of just three acts, Hamlet encounters his dead father, breaks up with his girlfriend, puts on a play to get his father’s killer to reveal himself, and confronts his mother with her lustfulness and her complicity in his father’s death.”

Use commas to set off non-restrictive elements in a sentence (information not essential to the main clause, but of interest in its own right):

- “Hamlet loathes Claudius, who is both his stepfather and his uncle.”

Use a comma to set off a noun of address – the name of the person being spoken to:

- “Whitney, have you read *Hamlet*?”

Use commas to distinguish essential from non-essential information:

- “Kate, a first-year undergraduate, skipped her economics class.”
- “Fearing she was coming down with a fever, Kate skipped her economics class.”
- “Kate skipped her economics class, which had become repetitive.”

2. (d) Grammar for Achieving Subtlety: The Semi-Colon

Semicolons connect two independent clauses when the second independent clause elaborates on the first or relates closely to it in another way:

- “Sasha’s grandfather knew nothing about Twittering; after she told him that’s what she had started doing, he went out and bought her a bird whistle.”

Here, for example, is a pair of sentences that need to be joined:

- “In 1970, China and the U.S. were deadly foes. By 1990, they were major trading partners.”

Here they are again, made into one sentence by a semicolon:

- “In 1970, China and the U.S. were deadly foes; by 1990, they were major trading partners.”

DO NOT CONFUSE SEMICOLONS WITH COLONS OR COMMAS. SEMICOLONS FUNCTION AS FULL STOPS – IF A FULL STOP WOULDN’T MAKE SENSE, THEN YOU CANNOT USE A SEMICOLON (EXCEPT WHEN NAMING THINGS IN A LIST).

Good writers also use semicolons to divide items a list (that follow a **colon**). This helps your reader when the listed items are complex and require several words each. Consider the following example:

For most modernists, the nation is characterized by: a well-defined territory; a unified legal system; and common legal institutions participation in the social life; and politics of the nation; a mass public culture disseminated by means of a public, standardized, mass education system; collective autonomy institutionalized in a sovereign territorial state; membership of the nation in an “inter-national” system of the community of nations.

Imagine how difficult this sentence would be to read if the author only used commas!

2. (e) Exercise 4: Punctuating Sentences

Edit and rewrite the below passages by punctuating (and capitalising) to create grammatically complete sentences:

when writers use commas correctly they help readers make sense of a text however when commas are not used correctly readers may have to ponder over a sentence to understand its meaning this causes the reader to think about the writing instead of the message being delivered which is always a sign of poor writing

scientists and philosophers of science tend to speak as if “scientific language” were intrinsically precise as if those who use it must understand one another’s meaning even if they disagree but in fact scientific language is not as different from ordinary language as is commonly believed it too is subject to imprecision and ambiguity and hence to imperfect understanding moreover new theories or arguments are rarely if ever constructed by way of clear-cut steps of induction deduction and verification or falsification

(Solutions: pp.22-23)

3. Solutions to Exercises:

EXERCISE 1: Subjects and Verbs

a. The soldiers evacuated the building.

**The soldiers' are the agents of this sentence – they cause the action ('evacuated') to occur.*

a. The building was evacuated by the soldiers.

**Note what happens when we change the word order. By placing the subject after the verb the sentence becomes a passive construction.*

b. An evacuation of a building was in occurrence.

**Here the subject ('soldiers') is removed and the crucial action of the sentence ('evacuate') is displaced. Resultantly, the verb 'evacuate' becomes an abstract noun and the real subject (or actor) is obscured. This does not tell our reader the whole story because our main character (the soldiers) is removed. Furthermore, the effect of expressing the crucial action as a noun ('an evacuation') is that the sentence loses the forward momentum of example a.*

c. A terrorist gunned down a man who then fell to his death.

**In this example we have two subjects. Note that the second ('man') is also the object of the opening clause: 'a terrorist gunned down a man'; 'man' then becomes the subject of the action 'fell'.*

d. The car park was set on fire.

**Think about the effect of this sentence. 'The car park' must act as both subject and object, but who set the fire? Without a clear subject our reader will not grasp the whole story.*

e. McAuley (2006) states that there is reasonable statistical evidence to support Smith's claims.

f. Smith's claims are supported by reasonable statistical evidence states McAuley (2006).

**Here we have the same meaning expressed using one passive and one active example. Think about the difference between these sentences – which sounds more effective when read aloud?*

g. A distribution of assets was met with hostility among the workforce.

**In this passive sentence the verb 'distribute' is expressed as a noun ('a distribution'). How could we restructure this example?*

h. I couldn't care less about punctuation, it's just dots on a page.

**Here 'I' is the doing force in the first clause. In the second, the pronoun 'it's' refers to the object of the previous clause: 'punctuation'. This avoids repetition and maintains the active voice.*

EXERCISE 2: Main Characters and Actions

Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright.

The main characters of the story are the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood, but they are not the grammatical subjects of the sentence. Instead, the verbs 'walk', 'jump', and 'frighten' are turned into nouns ('a walk...'; 'the Wolf's jump...'; 'her fright'). This also means that the crucial actions of the story are not expressed as verbs. As such, the ideal construction of subject – verb – object (where main characters are subjects, and crucial actions are verbs) is upset. If we restructure the example to rectify these issues, we could write the following:

Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when the Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

EXERCISE 3: Nominalisation and Abstraction

3 (a)

The committee proposal would provide for biogenetic industry certification of the safety to human health for new substances requested for exemption from Federal rules.

This sentence is difficult to read because of how the author presents the actions 'propose', 'certify', and 'exempt' as abstract nouns ('proposal'; 'certification'; 'exemption'). Added to this, the main characters are very difficult to determine, and are often absent. If we make changes to these aspects we could write something as clear as this:

The Committee proposes that when the biogenetic industry requests the Agency to exempt new substances from Federal rules, the industry will certify that the substances are safe.

3(b)

The Federalists' argument in regard to the destabilization of government by popular democracy was based on their belief in the tendency of factions to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Again we can see how the actions 'argue', 'destabilise', 'believe', and 'tend' are nominalised ('argument'; 'destabilization'; 'belief'; 'tendency'). By keeping these actions as verbs and expressing main characters as subjects, we could write:

The Federalists argued that popular democracy destabilized government, because they believed that factions tended to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Exercise 4: Punctuating Sentences

When writers use commas correctly they help readers make sense of a text. However, when commas are not used correctly readers may have to ponder over a sentence to understand its meaning; this causes the reader to think about the writing instead of the message being delivered, which is always a sign of poor writing.

Scientists and philosophers of science tend to speak as if "scientific language" were intrinsically precise, as if those who use it must understand one another's meaning even if they disagree. But in fact scientific language is not as different from ordinary language as is commonly believed; it too is subject to imprecision and ambiguity – and hence to imperfect understanding. Moreover, new theories or arguments are rarely, if ever, constructed by way of clear-cut steps of induction, deduction and verification or falsification

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