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The Tiny, Tiny Grammar Book

A or an

That, which or who

Apostrophes

I or me

Less or fewer

Plurals

Who or whom

Welcome to the Tiny, Tiny Grammar Book.
Look inside for some helpful advice on choosing the right words.
Look like an expert. Sound like an expert. Be an expert!

Forward

Hi there.

My name is Jeff Mason. I've written this tiny book to help anyone who appreciates the importance of using correct language structures. Why look like a dummy when it's so easy to use better language? My impetus has been the serious degradation in language skills, as written in newspapers, shown or spoken on television, or spoken on radio.

So, whether you present the weather on television, host a radio show on a major Sydney station, or just want to present a better school assignment, this little book should help.

There is a Table of Contents below to help but the truth is that this book is deliberately very small. I don't expect anyone to wade through hundreds of pages of grammar and for that reason, you'll find no mention of past participles, future perfect tense, transitive verbs and all that other stuff that fills bigger books. This book contains only the words that are most often abused.

You might ask why grammar is so important. After all, so long as someone understands what I'm trying to say, what does it matter? Oh, and it's an evolving language, isn't it?

My answer to those who don't care, and who are not reading this book anyway, is that while our language may be evolving, we don't have a licence to murder it. For those who are speaking, one assumes you want your listener to take in what you are saying. Why therefore distract them with horrible grammar?

Table of Contents

I or me.....	3
You (uggh) or is it Youse (uggghhh)?.....	3
That, which or who.....	3
A or an.....	4
Less or fewer.....	4
Between goes with AND.....	4
When is my subject plural?.....	5
Who or whom.....	5
Apostrophes.....	6
Its or it's.....	6
Your vs you're.....	6
There vs they're vs their.....	7
Other confused homophones.....	7
Could of, should of, would of.....	8
Different from, to, than.....	8
One word or two?.....	8
The lamented adverb.....	9
Words that don't exist.....	9
Commas.....	9

I or me

What's wrong?

Many people use "I" when they should use "me". For example: "Dad gave Andrew and I bottles of wine".

The rule

Use "I" for a subject and "me" for an object. If that confuses you, just delete one person. The sentence above would become "Dad gave me bottles of wine".

So why use "I" just because there's another person involved?

You (ugggh) or is it Youse (uggghhh)?

What's wrong?

This is Bogan language at its worst. THERE IS NO SUCH WORD! Got it?

The rule

"You" serves perfectly well for multiple people. Example: "I'll see you later". This could apply to a single person, a couple, or many more. There is simply no need to attempt to turn the word "you" into a "more plural" form.

What to do on hearing it

Reply "Ewes are a mob of sheep". I guarantee the person who said "yous" will not comprehend the sarcasm!

That, which or who

What's wrong?

Quite simply, many people have no idea which of these words to use in any given context.

The rule

"That" is definitive. Example: "it was the red car that hit the boy".

"Which" is supplemental (and usually preceded by a comma). Example: "the boy was hit by the neighbour's car, which was red".

"Who" refers to a person. There are mobile mechanic's vans running all over Sydney with the words "the mechanic that comes to you" written across them. Who! The mechanic WHO comes to you.

A or an

What's wrong?

Some people just don't get this at all and will happily say "a egg" while the rest of us cringe. Most errors though are because people believe the longer word, an, should be used prior to a vowel. That's not true.

The rule

"An" is used before a vowel sound. For consonant sounds, use "a".

Examples:

She was dressed as a unicorn. [U is a vowel but the sound is "y"]

He was an unhappy child. [The U here is a vowel sound]

I had to get an x-ray. ["x" here has an "e" sound]

What about before the letter "h"?

Easy, the same rule as above is applied, so it depends entirely on whether the "h" is pronounced.

Examples:

It was an honorary degree. [the sound is "o"]

Wow, what a history lesson! [the "h" is pronounced]

Less or fewer

What's wrong?

Many people use "less" all the time, to the total exclusion of "fewer". Get with it folks. Supermarkets, are you listening? "12 items or less" is shocking!

The rule

If the subject can be counted, use "fewer". If not, use "less".

Examples:

Less money / fewer dollars

Less fuel / fewer litres

Fewer sharks, fewer people, fewer menu choices, fewer grammatical errors!

Between goes with AND

What's wrong?

It is incorrect and extremely annoying to use the combination of "between" and "to". Please don't ever say "there will be between 15 to 20 millimetres of rain" or "the gates will be closed between 5pm to 7am".

The rule

Use AND. Always. No exceptions. Ever!

There will be between 15 and 20 millimetres of rain.

The gates will be closed between 5pm and 7pm.

When is my subject plural?

What's wrong?

Whenever a collective noun is used, such as "couple" or "team", there is often an incorrect usage of "was" or "were", or similar words that differentiate between a singular subject and multiple entities.

We are therefore subjected to sentences such as "the couple was married on a yacht".

The rule

Look at the meaning of the sentence. In the case above, is the subject the couple or the members of that couple? If you want to argue that "couple" is singular, then please tell me what a couple would marry – another couple perhaps? The sentence "the couple were married on a yacht" is correct.

What to do?

First consider restructuring the sentence. Instead of "the team drove its cars home", change it to "the players drove their cars home". Second best is to accept that the implied subject is actually the members of the group, so "the team drove their cars home" is still better than the original horrible sentence.

Who or whom

What's wrong?

Not much actually, unless you are a language purist. If someone asked you "who do you believe, Malcolm or Bill?" you'd probably reply "neither" without even questioning whether "who" should have been "whom".

"Who" seems to be commonly used where "whom" should have been the choice. The reverse never seems to be the case, or is rare in any case.

The rule

"Who" is used for a subject where "whom" is used for an object.

Hint: try substituting "he" or "she" (you might have to re-jig your sentence a little). If that works, then use "who". If "him" or "her" fits, then use "whom".

Examples:

Who broke the chair? [he broke the chair, she broke the chair]

To whom are you speaking? [Are you speaking to him or her?]

Apostrophes

What's wrong?

Ask your greengrocer! He won't know though because he's famous for misusing them. Carrot's, pumpkin's and apple's are enough to cause many people to start rubbing out the offending little mark.

The opposite can be true too, where an apostrophe is required but missing.

And then there's the special case of words ending with "s". We'll get to that.

The rule

An apostrophe is used to designate possession, or to replace one or more missing letters.

Examples:

It was Carol's day off.	[possessive]
We've got little left.	[missing letters – "we have"]
The first mate is on the fo'c's'le.	[missing letters – fore-castle]

Words that end with 's'

Such words may or may not be plural, so let's deal with that first.

If the subject is plural, such as "dogs", then the apostrophe comes after the "s". The sentence "it was the dogs' dinner" implies multiple dogs, where "it was the dog's dinner" implies that there's only one dog.

Words or names that end in "s" often require an additional "s" – "Lewis's car" for instance. In this case the guiding rule is that if the extra "s" is pronounced, it should also be written. I have no idea why but Jesus seems to be an exception to this rule. "Jesus' disciples" is used where "Jesus's disciples" is not. I have no idea why.

Its or it's

What's wrong?

To start with, this word is an exception to the apostrophe rules above. Hence the confusion and frequent misuse.

The rule

"It's" is an abbreviation of "it is". Example: "it's an ill wind...".

"Its" is possessive. Example: I stepped onto the yacht and noticed its sail was torn".

Your vs you're

What's wrong?

Many people simply don't understand the difference and use only "your". It gets worse when texting and "ur" is substituted.

The rule

"You're" is a contraction of "you are" so say your sentence in its longer form.

Examples:

I was cold in your home. [you are can't be substituted]

If you're going I won't. [you are now fits].

There vs they're vs their

What's wrong?

Too many people use one when they should use another.

The rule

"They're" is a contraction of "they are". Can you substitute these two words? Example: They're going on holidays next week.

"Their" is possessive. Example: It was their cat, their rug and their problem.

"There" is used in all other meanings.

Examples: The new kitten is over there on the wall.

There will be rain tomorrow.

Other confused homophones

Homo what? Homophones are words that sound like each other, yet may have different spellings and different meanings.

What's wrong?

Just because it sounds like the right word doesn't mean it is. Three topics above ("Its or it's", "Your vs you're" and "There vs they're vs their") are examples of homophones. Their misuse is so prevalent that they were awarded their own sections in this book.

The rule

Are you sure the word you want is correct? Consider this horrible example from Joe the sheep farmer: "I don't know wether the whether has affected the little weather".

Now that might actually mean something if Joe had used the three variants in their correct places.

Very few people use "two" incorrectly but "to" and "too" are often confused. The latter, "too", is used to add meaning, often implying "also" or an excess.. If it is a connection between words you're after then "to" is the correct choice. Examples: "Dad gave the old bike to James". "He will give me something too". "Oh my goodness, that's just too funny".

Could of, should of, would of

What's wrong?

We hear the contracted forms so much (could've, should've etc) that we forget each is an abbreviation of the word HAVE.

The rule

Stop using the "of" forms. Use either the contracted form ("would've") or the long form with "have" ("would have").

Different from, to, than

What's wrong?

That depends on where you live. Americans use the form "different than". What would you expect from people who can't even get a date format right?

The rule

Many will disagree with me on this, but "different from" and "different to" are both acceptable. I know what you'll say – "I was taught "different from" and "similar to". Well, you might have been taught that, but both "to" and "from" are acceptable.

One word or two?

What's wrong?

Some single words get confused with two words that use the exact same letters. An example is the word "maybe", which should not be confused with "may be".

Incorrect usage often sees nouns or adverbs being used as verbs,

The rule

Truly? Just think about it. In the vast majority of cases a tiny bit of thought will lead you to the correct usage.

Examples:

I may be a little late

Maybe you could pick me up too?

He had a lot of money.

I will allot you one spare uniform each.

[Note that there is no such word as alot].

It was a terrible setback.

That delay will cause us to set back the last phase.

The lamented adverb

What's wrong?

Adverbs are dying. They are those helpful little words, usually ending in "ly" that tell us more about a verb. Examples: "she kissed him tenderly"; "the car approached rapidly".

People now use the adjectival form of the word as an adverb, very wrongly. Examples: "please walk quiet"; "but you have to send it quick".

The rule

If the word is adding meaning to a verb then use the adverb form. If it's adding meaning to a noun, use the adjective.

Examples:

It was a very rapid flow.

The river was flowing quite rapidly.

Please write carefully.

Words that don't exist

What's wrong?

Someone, somewhere invents a word, not intentionally, but out of ignorance. Then others start using it and before we know it, it's gone viral.

Some examples:

Dove He dove into the pool. [No he didn't, he dived in]

Alot The earthquake did alot of damage [should be "a lot"]

Irregardless I'll paint it blue irregardless of your advice [just "regardless" is fine].

The rule

If unsure, look it up. We don't lack for research resources these days do we?

When you've decided that it's not a word, don't use it, ever.

Commas

What's wrong?

Commas give meaning to a sentence. They indicate those subtle little pauses that separate words and thus imply connections that matter.

The rule

It's not really a rule, just a guideline. Whatever you've written, read it back, out loud.

A wonderful book by Lynne Truss sums up the comma issue in its title. Consider the difference between these two variants...

Eats shoots and leaves or

Eats, shoots, and leaves.

