

NES Brief Guide to Grammar

Adapted from Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995).

Review of Basic Parts of Speech

Nouns: A noun is the name of a person, place, thing, or idea. Nouns are often preceded by an article (*a, an, the*).

- Due to its constant repetition, *propaganda* often is accepted as *truth*.

Nouns may function as adjectives that modify other nouns.

- *Metal* cans should be recycled.

Pronouns: A pronoun is a word used in place of a noun. The pronoun usually replaces a certain noun known as its antecedent.

- If the clothes are dirty, *they* should be washed. [*clothes* is the antecedent of *they*]

Pronouns can function as adjectives modifying nouns.

- *That* speeding ticket certainly caused me to watch *my* speedometer more closely.

Relative pronouns introduce subordinate clauses and function as adjectives: *who, whom, whose, which, that*.

- Sally, *whose red hair is stunning*, has decided to bleach her hair blonde.

Demonstrative pronouns identify or point to nouns. They function as adjectives or may substitute for nouns: *this, that, these, those*.

- *This* puppy is the one I want.
- *That* is my favorite meal!

Verbs: The verb of a sentence expresses either action (*walk, love*) or being (*is, become*). It is composed of a main verb and may be preceded by a helping verb. Linking verbs are forms of the verb *be*.

- The stars *shined* brightly in the sky.
- The stars *were shining* brightly in the sky.

Adjectives and articles: An adjective is a word that modifies (describes) a noun or pronoun. Adjectives typically answer these questions: Which one? What kind of? How many?

- The *brown* dog
- *crusty old* bread
- *thirty-two* people

Adverbs: An adverb modifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb. Adverbs answer these questions: When? Where? How? Why? Under what conditions? To what degree? Many adverbs end in *-ly*.

- I would like to eat my dessert *first*.
- Sit *extremely* still, and you will be happy when the bird lands on your hand.

Prepositions: A preposition precedes a noun or pronoun to form a phrase that modifies another word in the sentence. The prepositional phrase functions as an adjective or adverb answering the same questions these parts of speech answer.

- The shop *around the corner* could not compete with the larger chain store.
- *Inside the house*, it seemed much cooler.

Conjunctions: Conjunctions join words, phrases, and clauses. They reveal the relationship between the parts of the sentence they join.

Coordinating conjunctions: and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet

Correlative conjunctions: either...or, neither...nor, not only...but also, whether...or, both...and

Capitalization

Of Titles and Subtitles of Works: Capitalize the first and last words of a title. All major words—nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs are capitalized. Minor words—articles, prepositions, and coordinating conjunctions are not capitalized unless they are the first or last words. Always capitalize the first word after a colon.

- *The Complete Works of John Wesley*
- *The Shame and the Sacrifice: The Life and Martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

In Quotations: Capitalize the first word of a quoted sentence unless it is blended in with your sentence that introduces it.

- A strong advocate of community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, “Freedom is not something persons have for themselves but something they have for others.”
- Eberhard Bethge spoke of Bonhoeffer as “the German Lutheran theologian, and ecumenist; that fighter on behalf of the First Commandment against the idolatrous syncretisms of his time.”

Subject-Verb Agreement

Make the verb agree in number with its subject, *not with a word that comes between*. Take care to note what the subject is and do not confuse it with modifying phrases such as prepositional phrases.

- The *chickens* in the coop in the yard *are* noisy. [*in the coop* is a prepositional phrase]
- A *set* of sheets *costs* more than you would expect. [*of sheets* is a prepositional phrase]
- The *head* of the firm, along with the partners, *was* impressed by the young lawyer. [*of the firm, along with the partners* are phrases that modify *head*, and do not come into play when considering the form of verb]

Compound subjects connected by *and* are usually treated as plural.

- Todd and Mike often *drive* together.
- Pete's biblical understanding and articulate speech *contribute* to his adeptness as a Bible teacher.

Exceptions: When the parts of the subject form a single unit, treat the subject as singular.

- Brownies and ice cream *is* my first choice.
 - My friend and mentor *has* advised me to see a counselor.
- This last example is a case in which the choice of verb number is crucial to the understanding of whether the friend and the mentor are the same person or two different individuals.*

Verbs used with compound subjects connected by *or* or *nor* agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb.

- A driver's *license* or a school *ID* *is* required
- A driver's *license* or two photo *IDs* *are* required.
- Neither the father *nor* his children *were* able to figure out where the source of the smoke was.
- If a relative *or* friend *is* coming, let me know.

Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular (see section **Problems with Pronouns**).

- *Each* of the plants has been fertilized.

Shift of Verb Tense

Verb tenses establish the time of the actions being described. When a passage begins in one tense and shifts to another for no reason, it makes for confusing reading.

Use the past tense for things that happened in the past. It is tempting to shift from past tense when referring to actions, to present tense when referring to something said or believed. A person spoke in the past; keep language in past tense.

- Verb shift (Incorrect): Clare **established** a simple rule of life due to the influence of Frances of Assisi. In her *Rule*, she **makes** clear that a woman of her order “should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor.”
- Correct: In her *Rule*, she **made** clear that a woman of her order “should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor.”

Split Infinitives

An infinitive is the word *to* plus a verb: *to eat*, *to live*, *to dance*, *to do*. An infinitive is “split” when a modifier comes between the two parts.

- Incorrect: *to repeatedly do this*
- Correct: *to do this repeatedly*

Problems with Pronouns

Use of Personal Pronouns in the Proper Case

Subjective case: When a pronoun functions as a subject or a subject complement (a word following a linking verb that completes the meaning of the subject), it must be in the subjective case (*I, we, you, he/she/it, they*).

Subject: James and *he* shared the computer.

Subject complement: Thomas decided that the ones to use the computer were James and *he*.

In casual speech, typically the improper case is used when a pronoun is the subject complement. The linking verb in the example above is *were*. *James and he* complements the subject.

Subject complement: Bethany admitted that the artist was *she*.

Linking verb is *was*. The pronoun must be in subjective case; it complements the subject, *Bethany*.

Objective case: When a pronoun functions as a direct object, an indirect object, or the object of a preposition, it must be in the objective case (*me, us, you, him/her/it, them*).

Direct object: Simon looked in the closet and found *her* there.

Indirect object: Eva made *us* a cake.

Object of a preposition: We went to the ocean and looked for *them*.

Compound word groups: When the subject or object is part of a compound structure, it is often difficult to determine in which case the pronoun should appear. To test for the right correct pronoun, take away the entire compound word group excepting the pronoun in question.

- No one believed Jack when he said [that his brother and] *he* had jumped onto a moving train.

Mentally remove the words in brackets to test which pronoun belongs in the second half of the sentence.

- The most enjoyable part of the rodeo for [my son and] *me* was the calf roping.
Again, mentally remove the part in brackets to make it easier to determine the correct pronoun.

Pronoun-antecedent agreement: The antecedent of a pronoun is the word to which the pronoun refers. If one is singular, both must be singular. If one is plural, both must be plural.

- The *dog* finished eating *its* lunch. (both singular)
- The *physicians* were waiting to see how *their* friend’s surgery turned out. (both plural)

Pronoun-antecedent agreement is especially tricky when using gender inclusive language.

- *Humankind* can only comprehend what God reveals to *it*. (both singular)
- As God loves each *person* the same, so *he or she* should respond by loving others without prejudice. NOT: As God loves each *person* the same, so *they* should respond by loving others without prejudice. (If antecedent is singular, pronoun must be singular—see handout from CMC500NE on gender inclusive language for ideas on how to not always write *he or she*.)
- We know that all *persons* are created equal and therefore, *they* all have the same human rights. (both plural)

Indefinite pronouns: All of the below are singular, although current thought is that we might consider “everyone” and “everybody” as plural to accommodate gender-inclusive language.

<i>anybody</i>	<i>someone</i>
<i>anyone</i>	<i>something</i>
<i>each</i>	<i>everyone</i>
<i>somebody</i>	<i>everybody</i>
<i>either</i>	

Misplaced Modifiers

Whether they are single words, phrases, or clauses, modifiers should point to the words they modify. Typically, the related words should be kept together. Modifiers should be placed in front of the word they modify if the meaning of the sentence could be misconstrued with an alternate placing.

Examples of modifiers: *only*, *even*, *almost*, *nearly*, *just*, *not*, and phrases that describe something or set it apart from other things.

- Scott sang on key *almost* in the solo. (Did Scott sing another song before the solo that was off key?)
- Correct: Scott sang *almost* on key in the solo.

- The professor was well loved by her students, and many reread the book she wrote *after her death*. (Did she write the book after her death?)
- Correct: The professor was well loved by her students, and *after her death*, many reread the book she wrote.

Parallelism

Items in a series should be expressed in parallel grammatical form. The length should be parallel: words with words, phrases with phrases, clauses with clauses.

The form of speech should be parallel: noun forms with noun forms, verbs with verbs, prepositional phrases with prepositional phrases.

- Incorrect: In the grocery line, people are looking at magazines and talk to one another.
- Correct: In the grocery line, people are looking at magazines and talking to one another.

Pair ideas with coordinating conjunctions properly (*and, but, or, either ... or, not only ... but also*).

- Incorrect: The soldiers were not only tired but also were hungry.
- Correct: The soldiers were not only tired but also hungry.
(Words following *not only* should balance those following *but also*.)

- Incorrect: It was suggested she either should have driven or taken the bus.
- Correct: It was suggested she either should have driven or should have taken the bus.
(Words following *either* and *or* should be balanced.)

In comparisons linked with *than* or *as*, the elements being compared should be in parallel grammatical structure.

- Incorrect: My youngest daughter cannot be convinced that looking is as good as to touch.
- Correct: My youngest daughter cannot be convinced that looking is as good as touching.

Needed Words

- Add the word *that* if there is a danger of misreading without it.
 - Incorrect: On the way down the drive, Robert could see the horses in the pasture, which he loved to ride, were gone.
 - Acceptable to leave out: He picked up the axe [that] he used to cut down the tree.
- Add words to make comparisons logical and complete.
 - Incorrect: Rhonda appreciated the mountains in Colorado more than New York.
 - Correct: Rhonda appreciated the mountains in Colorado more than those in New York.
 - Incorrect: Incandescent bulbs appear brighter.
 - Correct: Incandescent bulbs appear brighter than fluorescent bulbs.
- Include enough language to make the meaning of the sentence completely clear.
 - Ambiguous: Pastor Elaine worked with me more than Jen.
 - One understanding: Pastor Elaine worked with me more than Jen did.
 - Another understanding: Pastor Elaine worked with me more than she worked with Jen.

Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is a group of words that appears to be a sentence but is not. It may have a subject and verb, but begins with a subordinating word (a word that makes it dependent on other material not included in the sentence).

- In the house in which he was born. [*he* is a subject; *was born* is a verb phrase, but the fragment is dependent on information not given here.]
- Phil was especially comfortable there. In the house in which he was born. [The fragment must be combined with the previous sentence.] Phil was especially comfortable in the house in which he was born. OR Phil was especially comfortable there; it was the house in which he was born.

Common Usage Errors (Drawn from Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*, 3rd ed.)

When in doubt, look it up in a dictionary!

Contractions are not used in formal writing.

accept, except *Accept* is “to receive.” *Except* means “excluding, or to exclude.”

adverse, averse *Adverse* means “unfavorable.” *Averse* means “opposed” and is followed by *to*.

advice, advise *Advice* is a noun; *advise* is the verb.

affect, effect *Affect* is a verb meaning “to influence.” *Effect* is a noun meaning “result.”

agree to, agree with *Agree to* means “to give consent to.” *Agree with* means “to be in accord with.”

all ready, already *All ready* means “completely prepared.” *Already* means “previously.”

all right Two words, not one

allude, elude To *allude* to something is to make an indirect reference to it. Do not use *allude* to mean “to refer directly.” Instead use *referred to*. *Elude* means “to escape from or to avoid.”

allusion, illusion An *allusion* is an indirect reference. An *illusion* is a false impression.

a lot Two words, not one.

amoral, immoral *Amoral* means “neither moral nor immoral.” *Immoral* means “morally wrong.”

and etc. Adding *and* is redundant.

and/or Avoid the awkward use of *and/or* except in technical or legal documents.

anyways *Anyways* is nonstandard; use *anyway*.

as, like *Like* is a preposition. While in casual speech one might say, “She looks like she hasn’t slept,” or “You don’t know her like I do,” in formal writing the correct sentences are “She looks as if she has not slept” and “You do not know her as I do.”

awful, awfully In formal writing *awful* means “awe-inspiring.” *Awfully* is often used to mean “very.” Do not use *awfully* with this meaning in formal writing.

being as, being that Nonstandard expressions. Write *because* or *since* instead.

could care less Nonstandard expression. Write *could not care less* instead.

could of Nonstandard for *could have*.

council, counsel A *council* is a deliberative body, and a *councilor* is a member of that body.

Counsel means “to give advice,” and a *counselor* is one who gives advice or guidance.

criteria, criterion *Criteria* is the plural of *criterion*.

e.g. In formal writing, replace the Latin abbreviation with *for example* or *for instance*.

etc. Avoid ending a list with *etc.* in formal writing. The use of *and so on* is acceptable.

firstly Avoid this pretentious expression, which leads to the ungainly series *firstly, secondly, thirdly*, and so on. Use *first, second, third* instead.

in regards to *In regards to* confuses two different phrases *in regard to* and *as regards*. Use one or the other.

irregardless Nonstandard; use *regardless*.

its, it's *Its* is a possessive pronoun; *it's* is the contraction for *it is*.

lead, led *Lead* is a noun referring to a metal. *Led* is the past tense of the verb *lead*.

lie, lay *Lie* means “to recline or rest on a surface.” Its principle parts are *lie, lay, and lain*. *Lay* means “to put or place.” Its principle parts are *lay, laid, and laid*.

lots of Avoid using this phrase in formal writing.

might of, must of Nonstandard for *might have* and *must have*.

precede, proceed *Precede* means “to come before.” *Proceed* means “to go forward.”

should of Nonstandard for *should have*.

suppose to, use to Nonstandard for *supposed to* and *used to*.

than, then *Than* is a conjunction and is used in comparisons. *Then* is an adverb denoting time.

that, which Many writers reserve *that* for restrictive clauses, *which* for nonrestrictive clauses.

unique Do not add *more* or *most* to *unique*.

who, which, that Do not use *which* to refer to persons. Use *who* instead. *That*, though usually used to refer to things, may be used for a group or class of people.

who, whom *Who* is used for subjects (part of speech); *whom* is used for objects (as in object of a preposition).

would of Nonstandard for *would have*.

Use of Standard Idioms

We often use incorrect combinations of words. In formal writing, be certain to use the correct or standard idioms (right-hand column)

Unidiomatic (incorrect usage)

abide with (a decision)

according with

angry at (a person)

capable to

comply to

desirous to

different than

intend on doing

off of

plan on doing

preferable than

prior than

superior than

sure and

try and

type of a

Idiomatic (correct usage)

abide by

according to

angry with

capable of

comply with

desirous of

different from

intend to do

off

plan to do

preferable to

prior to

superior to

sure to

try to

type of