

Grammar

Don't be frightened! Grammar is just the name given to a set of conventions underlying our use of language. Most people who wish to improve their writing skills do not want to be burdened with having to memorise grammatical rules, and we're *not* going to do that here. The formal study of grammar may be an interesting part of linguistics, but it is not the best way to improve the fluency and precision of your writing. This might seem a somewhat heretical view, but it is based on the observation that most people are not seeking the technical names and the causes of these grammatical problems. What they are looking for is help in avoiding them and examples of good usage.

It is also unlikely that anyone could develop a good sense of language-use by trying to *learn* the rules of grammar. This would be rather like learning to drive a car by studying a repair manual. A far more fruitful approach [in addition to practising your own writing] would be to *read* as much as possible. You can develop a sense of the rhythms and the nuances of a fluent prose style by reading the work of successful writers.

However, if there are some points of grammar with which you regularly have difficulties, you should be prepared to clarify the issues for yourself. Get hold of a book which explains grammar *at the level you require*. I am not going to deal with all the niceties of parts of speech and the relationship of clauses here, otherwise this book would be twice as long as it is. Some of the basic issues are dealt with as part of nearby sections, such as **Punctuation** — Chapter 4 and **Sentences** — Chapter 7.

But there are some very common problems which we can briefly examine here, partly because they are fairly straightforward, and partly because they are caused by grammatical weaknesses. Seeing these issues explained may help you to avoid mistakes. I have tried to explain the details involved with the absolute minimum of technical jargon.