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Chapter 2
GRAMMAR GIRL ON GRAMMAR

I LOVE WRITING ABOUT USAGE, but basic grammar is something you need to know too. Grammar is the set of rules for putting together a sentence. I think of grammar as the rules to the game of writing. Grammar dictates that an adjective modifies a noun and that singular nouns need singular verbs—stuff like that. (I do touch on some points of grammar in other chapters, but we're going to get into the nitty-gritty rules here.) So without further ado, let's start with some of the common grammar myths.

I'VE GOT A PREPOSITION FOR YOU

Just as Harry Potter was unfairly labeled "undesirable number one" in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,* ending a sentence with a prepo-

sition is often unfairly labeled "undesirable grammar construction num-
ber one" by people who were taught that prepositions have a proper
place in the world, and it's not at the end of a sentence.

I'm going to start calling this "grammar myth number one" because
nearly all grammarians agree that it's fine to end sentences with preposi-
tions, at least in some cases.

So before I lose you, let's back up. What is a preposition?

A preposition is a word that creates a relationship between other
words. It's been said that prepositions often deal with space and time,*
which always makes me think of *Star Trek.* For example, the preposi-
tions *above, by,* and *over* all say something about a position in space; the
prepositions *before, after,* and *since* all say something about time.

Here's an example of a sentence that can end with a preposition:

I hope he cheers up.

A key point, you might say the quick and dirty tip, is that the sentence
doesn't work if you leave off the preposition. If you write, "I hope he
cheers," it has a completely different meaning from *I hope he cheers up.* Be-
cause it has a specific meaning, *cheer up* is actually what's called a "phrasal
verb"—a set of words that act as a single verb unit. Phrasal verbs can have a
different meaning from the way the words are used individually. For exam-
ple, the verb *cheer up* specifically means to become happier, not to shout joy-
fully. So given that *cheer up* is a unit—a phrasal verb—some people don't
believe you've ended a sentence with a preposition when you say, "I hope he
cheers up." They say you've ended the sentence with a phrasal verb.

Here's a slightly different example of a sentence that can end with a
preposition:

What did you step on?

---

* R. Huddleston and G. K. Pullman, *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar* (Cam-
bridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 20, 137–38.

You can't say, "What did you step?" You need to say, "What did you step *on*?" to make a proper sentence. Again, if you leave off the *on,* the sentence doesn't make sense, but this time I can hear some of you gnashing your teeth, while thinking, "What about saying, 'On what did you step?' "

But really, have you ever heard anyone talk that way? I've read long, contorted arguments from noted grammarians about why it's OK to end sentences with prepositions when the prepositions aren't extraneous, but the driving point still seems to be that nobody in their right mind talks this way. Yes, you could say, "On what did you step?" but not even grammarians think you should.

But don't get carried away. You can't *always* end sentences with prepositions. When you could leave off the preposition and it wouldn't change the meaning, you should leave it off. Here's an example of a sentence you will hear often if you're listening for it:

Where is she at? (wrong)

Oh, the horror! That is one of the instances where it's not OK to end a sentence with a preposition! The problem is that the sentence *Where is she at?* doesn't need the preposition. *Where is she?* means the same thing, so the *at* is unnecessary.

The problem with unnecessary prepositions doesn't just happen at the ends of sentences. People often throw extraneous prepositions into the middle of sentences, and they shouldn't. Instead of saying, "Squiggly jumped *off of the dock,*" it's better to say, "Squiggly jumped *off the dock*." You see? You don't need to say *off of the dock; off the dock* says the same thing without the preposition.

To get back to the main point—ending sentences with prepositions— the bottom line is that many people think it's wrong, so I wouldn't advise ending sentences with prepositions in critical situations; for example, you shouldn't do it in a cover letter. I always say, "It's better to be employed than right," at least when it comes to silly grammar myths. But once you're hired, end away, and do your part to dispel grammar myth number one.

Idioms

Idioms are phrases that don't mean what they literally say, but have meaning to native speakers. For example, the phrase *under the weather* is known by most native English speakers to mean that someone isn't feeling well, but if you weren't a native English speaker, you would probably have no idea what *under the weather* means by just looking at the words. I can imagine foreigners trying to figure out what it means to be literally under the weather. They could guess that someone is getting rained on, and who could blame them?

Sometimes idioms break grammar rules too. For example, if you're feeling groovy you could recommend a restaurant or club by saying, "It's where it's at, man." Although *where it's at* violates the true rule about not ending a sentence with a preposition—leave it off if it doesn't change the meaning—it's considered an idiomatic phrase, a saying from the '60s that means something is hip, cool, and trendy, and has nothing to do with its location.

People wonder where idioms come from, and to me a lot of idioms seem to be holdovers of phrases that had a more literal meaning in the past. For example, *Mind your p's and q's* might originate from the way pubs did their bookkeeping many years ago. In another example, some sources say *under the weather* originates from a time when it was more common to travel by boat; during storms seasick passengers would go belowdecks, where the rocking was less intense, and they were literally under the weather that was occurring above deck. However, idioms don't always have such clear historical sources, and even in this case there is disagreement: some sources say *under the weather* simply refers to the belief that bad weather can make you sick.

I Want to Split Infinitives

I consider it my calling to dispel the myth that it's against the rules to split infinitives. It's fine to split infinitives, and sometimes, I split them when I don't have to just to maliciously make a point. Yeah, that's my

idea of fun! I know it may come as a surprise, but Grammar Girl isn't that adventurous.

To understand this "rule," we first have to clearly define the word *infinitive.* An infinitive is just a fancy name for a specific form of a verb. In English, there are two kinds of infinitives: full infinitives and bare infinitives. Bare infinitives are the kinds of verbs you usually see in a dictionary, such as

- Go
- Make
- Run
- Define
- Split
- Break up (phrasal verb)

On the other hand, full infinitives are made up of two or more words, often by putting the word *to* in front of the bare verb. For example

- To go
- To make
- To run
- To define
- To split
- To break up

The logic behind the nineteenth-century rule about not splitting infinitives rests on comparing English to Latin because in Latin there are no two-word infinitives. They don't have to deal with full verbs versus bare verbs. Therefore, it's impossible to split infinitives in Latin. For some reason, many grammarians in the nineteenth century got the notion that because it is impossible to split infinitives in Latin, it shouldn't be done in English either.

But notions change over time, and today almost everyone agrees that it is OK to split infinitives, especially when you would have to change the meaning of the sentence or go through writing gymnastics to avoid the split. English isn't Latin, after all.

Here's an example of a sentence with a split infinitive:

Squiggly decided <u>to</u> quickly <u>remove</u> Aardvark's cats.

In this case, the word *quickly* splits the infinitive *to remove: to <u>quickly</u> remove.*

If you try to unsplit the verb, you actually change the meaning. For example, you might try to say

Squiggly decided quickly <u>to remove</u> Aardvark's cats.

Now, instead of saying Squiggly quickly removed Aardvark's cats (zip zip) while Aardvark stepped out for a minute, you're saying he quickly made the decision to remove the cats.

You could rewrite the sentence without the split infinitive to make the same point. For example

Squiggly decided to grab Aardvark's cats and set them free before Aardvark got back from the corner market.

And that could even be a better sentence (I like the imagery), but from a grammatical standpoint, rewriting isn't necessary. The bottom line is that you can usually avoid splitting infinitives if you want to, but there's no reason to go out of your way to avoid it, and certainly don't let anyone tell you that it's forbidden.

And here's a bonus: If you want to remember what a split infinitive is, just remember what may be the most famous example: *Star Trek*'s "to boldly go where no man has gone before." *To <u>boldly</u> go* is a split infinitive. (As you've probably gathered by now, I'm a *Star Trek* fan—*Star Trek: The Next Generation* was my favorite series, followed by *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine.*)

Irregular Verbs

Since we're talking about verbs, what's up with irregular verbs like *dreamt, went,* and *flung*? Why aren't they *dreamed, goed,* and *flinged*?
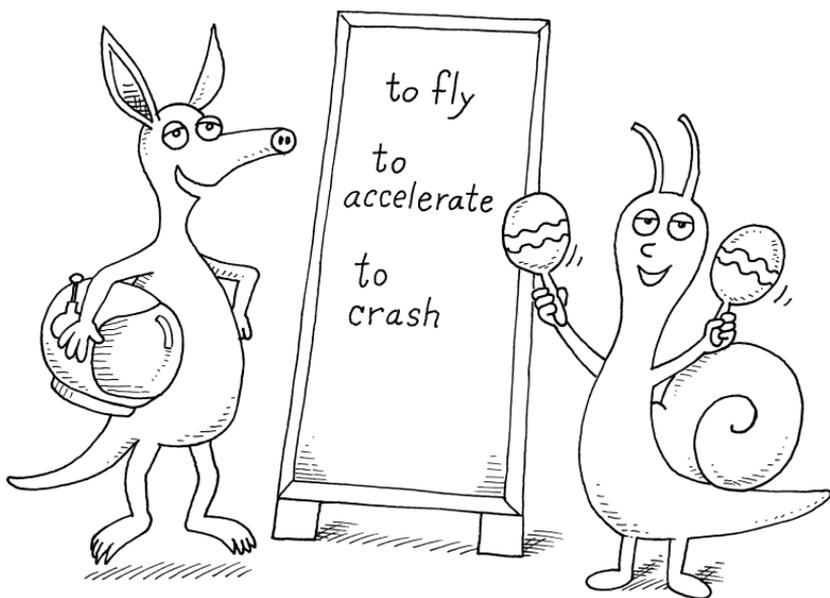
To infinitives and beyond!

Regular verbs follow a pattern: you make them past tense by adding
-d or *-ed*.

present tense	past tense
verb	verbd or verbed

Irregular verbs don't follow this pattern; they are holdovers from
language past. Believe it or not, conjugation rules were even more com-
plicated in days gone by. Over time, conjugation rules got simpler and
most verbs were regularized. Today, English has fewer than two hun-
dred irregular verbs, but some of the most common English verbs are
irregular:

present tense	past tense
am	was
go	went
do	did
sit	sat
run	ran
say	said
see	saw

Researchers recently found that the more frequently a verb is used, the less likely it is to be regular. The theory is that it is harder to change a word that people use every day than one that isn't so integral to everyday life. Be sure to look at the appendix on page 199 for other common irregular verbs.

People who grew up speaking English just know the irregular verbs (although children often get them wrong—How many times have you heard a toddler say, "We goed to the store"?), but for the most part, people who are learning English have to memorize them.

Some additional verb confusion is caused by the differences that exist between British and American English—people speaking British English tend to use more irregular verbs than people speaking American English. For example, *dreamt, learnt,* and *spilt* are the common past tense verbs in Britain, whereas *dreamed, learned,* and *spilled* are the common forms in the United States.

THE SINGLE LIFE: *THEY* AS A SINGULAR PRONOUN

Let's say you're writing a sentence that starts *When a student succeeds. . . .* At that point there's enormous confusion about how you should finish the sentence when you're talking about one unknown person:

> *he* **should thank** *his* **teacher**
>
> *she* **should thank** *her* **teacher**

he or she should thank *his or her* teacher

they should thank *their* teacher

Betty, one of my listeners, summed it up best by saying, "*He or she* seems too awkward, *he* seems sexist, and *one* seems archaic." I would add that exclusively using *she* also seems sexist, the hybrid *s/he* seems silly and awkward, the various alternative pronouns people have suggested (*e, sie, ze,* etc.) will never catch on, and switching between *he* and *she* is downright confusing to readers. A listener named Bryan called switching between *he* and *she* "whiplash grammar," which I love.

Then there's the solution that everyone loves to hate: using the personal pronoun *they,* which breaks the rule that you don't use a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent.

Honestly, I don't think there is a perfect solution, and I've been avoiding the question because I know that no matter what I say I'm going to make someone angry. But then Ken from Denver wrote in pleading for help. He had obviously spent a lot of time looking through *The Chicago Manual of Style* and had concluded that their answer is "My, that's a toughie. Try to avoid it." I agree that an answer like that is unhelpful, so I decided to muster up some courage and try to do better.

First, some of you might disagree that using *he* is sexist; but even if you disagree, you should still at least consider the alternatives because the major style guides recommend against using *he* in a generic way.

When I am confronted with this problem, I first take the *Chicago* route and ask if there is any way to avoid the problem. Usually this involves simply making the original noun plural. You could say, "When students [plural] succeed, they should thank their teacher." Sometimes more extensive rewriting is required, and if necessary, I'll do it. I would rewrite a whole paragraph if it meant I could avoid the problem.

Rewriting is almost always possible, but if it isn't, then you have to make a choice. If I'm writing a formal document, I'll use *he or she.* For example, *He or she accidentally knocked over a water bottle.* Admittedly, it's a little awkward, but if you're already using formal language, I don't think it's too distracting.

I will state for the record that I am a firm believer that someday *they* will be the acceptable choice for this situation. English currently lacks a word that fits the bill, and many people are already either mistakenly or purposefully using *they* as a singular gender-neutral pronoun, so it seems logical that rules will eventually move in that direction.

Nevertheless, it takes a bold, confident, and possibly reckless person to use *they* with a singular antecedent today. I could almost feel people's blood pressure rising as I started to imply that it is OK to use *they*.

The thing is, if you are a respected editor in charge of writing a style guide for your entire organization, you can get away with making it acceptable to use *they* with a singular antecedent. I would even encourage you to do so, and there are a variety of credible references that will back you up including the *Random House Dictionary* and *Fowler's Modern English Usage*. You would be in the company of revered authors such as Jane Austen, Lewis Carroll, and Shakespeare. But, if you are responsible to superiors, there's a good chance that at least one of them will think you are careless or ignorant if you use *they* with a singular antecedent.

So here's the quick and dirty tip: rewrite your sentences to avoid the problem. If that's not possible, check if the people you are writing for have a style guide. If not, use *he or she* if you want to play it safe, or use *they* if you feel bold and prepared to defend yourself.

Grammar by Committee

Generic pronouns are a very contentious area of language, and Grammar Girl listeners are split in their opinions. In a completely unscientific website poll with about twelve hundred respondents, 40 percent of respondents preferred *his or her,* 32 percent preferred *their,* and 25 percent preferred *his* in the sentence *A student should thank___teacher.*

If I Only Had a Brain: Misplaced Modifiers

Simple Misplaced Modifiers

Of all the writing errors you can make, misplaced modifiers are among the most likely to confuse your readers, but they're also kind of fun because misplaced modifiers can give your sentences silly meanings that you never intended. If you're not careful, you can end up writing that your boss *is* a corn muffin instead of that your boss *invested in* corn muffins.

I once worked with an editor who liked to send everyone in the office especially hilarious sentences that contained misplaced modifiers. We produced enough reports to keep two copy editors busy, and many of the writers were scientists, so there were always lots of opportunities to find misplaced modifiers. The e-mailed examples were entertaining, unless you were the one who had written the offending sentence.

Modifiers are just what they sound like—words or phrases that modify something else. Misplaced modifiers are modifiers that modify something you didn't intend them to modify. For example, the word *only* is a modifier that's easy to misplace.

These two sentences mean different things:

> **Squiggly ate *only chocolate*.**
>
> **Squiggly *only ate* chocolate.**

The first sentence (*Squiggly ate only chocolate*) means that Squiggly ate nothing but chocolate—no fruit, no meat, just chocolate.

The second sentence (*Squiggly only ate chocolate*) means that all Squiggly did with chocolate was eat it. He didn't buy, melt, or sell it. He only ate it.

It's easiest to get modifiers right when you keep them as close as possible to the thing they are modifying. When you're working with one-word modifiers, for example, they usually go right before the word they modify.

Here's another example of two sentences with very different meanings:

Aardvark *almost failed* every art class he took.

Aardvark failed *almost every art class* he took.

The first sentence (*Aardvark almost failed every art class he took*) means that although it was close, he passed all those classes.

The second sentence (*Aardvark failed almost every art class he took*) means that he passed only a few art classes.

Note again that the modifier, *almost,* acts on what directly follows it: *almost failed* versus *almost every class.* In either case, Aardvark is probably not going to make a living as a painter, but these two sentences mean different things.

A similar rule applies when you have a short phrase at the beginning of a sentence: whatever the phrase refers to should immediately follow the comma. Here's an example:

ic*Rolling down the hill,* Squiggly was frightened that the rocks would land on the campsite.

In that sentence, it's Squiggly, not the rocks, rolling down the hill because the word *Squiggly* is what comes immediately after the modifying phrase, *rolling down the hill.*

To fix that sentence, I could write, "Rolling down the hill, the rocks threatened the campsite and frightened Squiggly." Or I could write, "Squiggly was frightened that the rocks, which were rolling down the hill, would land on the campsite."

Here's another funny sentence:

c*Covered in wildflowers,* Aardvark pondered the hillside's beauty.

In that sentence, Aardvark, not the hillside, is covered with wildflowers because the word *Aardvark* is what comes directly after the modifying phrase, *covered in wildflowers.*

If I want Aardvark to ponder a wildflower-covered hillside, I need to
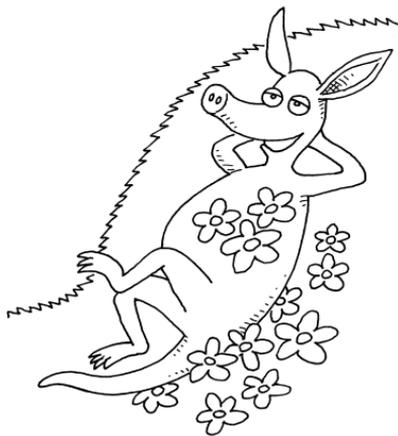
Covered in wildflowers, Aardvark
   pondered the hillside's beauty.
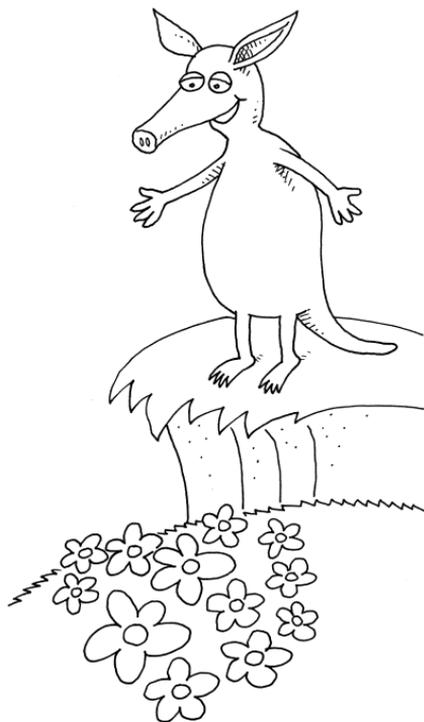
Covered in wildflowers, the hillside
   inspired Aardvark with its beauty.

write something like, "Covered in wildflowers, the hillside struck Aard-
vark with its beauty."

Here, the words *the hillside* immediately follow the modifying phrase,
covered in wildflowers.

Or better yet, I could write, "Aardvark pondered the beauty of the
wildflowers that covered the hillside."

I can think of even more ways to write the sentence, but the point is to
be careful with introductory statements: they're often a breeding ground
for misplaced modifiers, so make sure they are modifying what you intend.

Modifiers are hilarious! (Grammar Girl is easily amused.) In addition
to misplacing modifiers, you can dangle them and make them squint!

It's a Dangler: Dangling Modifiers

A "dangling modifier" describes something that isn't even in your sentence. Usually you are implying the subject and taking for granted that your reader will know what you mean—not a good strategy. Here's an example:

Hiking the trail, the birds chirped loudly.

The way the sentence is written, the birds are hiking the trail because they are the only subject present in the sentence. If that's not what you mean, you need to rewrite the sentence to something like, "Hiking the trail, Squiggly and Aardvark heard birds chirping loudly."

Hey, Squinty: Squinty Modifiers

And how do you make a modifier squint? By placing it between two things that it could reasonably modify, meaning the reader has no idea which one to choose.

Children who <u>laugh</u>, rarely <u>are shy.</u>

As written, that sentence could mean two different things: children who rarely laugh are shy, or children who laugh are rarely shy.

In the original sentence (*Children who laugh rarely are shy*) the word *rarely* is squinting between the words *laugh* and *are shy*. I think "shifty modifier" would be a better name, but I don't get to name these things, so they are called squinting modifiers (or sometimes they are also called two-way modifiers).

So remember to be careful when using modifiers; they are easily misplaced, dangled, and made to squint. My theory is that these problems arise because you know what you mean to say, so the humor of the errors doesn't jump out at you. Misplaced modifiers often crop up in first drafts and are easily noticed and remedied when you reread your work the next day.

He Was Completely Dead: Modifying Absolutes

While we're on the topic of modifiers, there's another thing people often do with them that isn't kosher: modify words with absolute meanings such as *dead* and *unique*. (In formal language terms, such words are considered "nongradable.")

That is the most unique painting I've ever seen. (wrong)

The issue is that the primary meaning of *unique* is "one of a kind"; it's an absolute, so something can't be more unique than something else. Here's the deal: most authoritative sources say it's bad to qualify or compare the word *unique,* and then in the next breath they all acknowledge that it's commonly done, and that it's been done for a long time.

For example, *Fowler* would consider *unique* to be weakened in the sentence *Those are very unique maracas.* His book states, "It must be conceded that *unique* is losing its quality of being not gradable (or absolute)," but he also notes that it continues to be controversial.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* since the middle of the nineteenth century *unique* has "had a tendency to take the wider meaning of *uncommon, unusual, remarkable.*"

A lot of usage notes talk about the role advertising plays in diluting the meaning of *unique.* The notes made me laugh because I have a friend who sells new homes, and I recently gave her a hard time after she made a sign advertising her "unique" new subdivision. I used to live in one of those subdivisons, so I'm not knocking them, but you can get lost because all the houses look alike. They are anything but unique, and her sign cracked me up.

It seems to me that the trend toward talking about degrees of uniqueness is an example of how language changes. I had to ask myself if I am on the side of sticking with the older rule or going with common

usage, and in this case I believe *unique* should continue to mean one of a kind. There are plenty of other words people can use to talk about degrees. A piece of art can be the most stunning painting you've ever seen, or the marimbas can be very unusual. There's just no reason to assign a new meaning to *unique.* So it's good to know that this is a controversial area of language, but I can't recommend modifying absolute words with qualifiers in phrases such as *very unique* and *completely dead.*

IF I WERE A RICH GIRL: SUBJUNCTIVE VERBS

Whether you prefer Tevye's version from *Fiddler on the Roof* or Gwen Stefani's more recent interpretation, *If I were a rich man/girl* is a classic example of a sentence in the subjunctive mood.

You see, verbs can be as moody as teenage girls. Yes, before the Internet and before emoticons, somebody already thought that it was important to communicate moods. So, like many other languages, English verbs can have moods ranging from commanding (imperative mood) to matter-of-fact (indicative mood) to doubtful or wishful (subjunctive mood). The mood of the verb *to be,* when you use the phrase *I were,* is called the subjunctive mood.

Hundreds of years ago subjunctive verbs were quite common, but in modern English their use is rare, with *I were* being one of the few examples left that doesn't sound archaic to our modern ears.

A subjunctive verb is used to communicate feelings such as wishfulness, hopefulness, or imagination—things that aren't real or true. For example, in the song "If I Were a Rich Man" Tevye is fantasizing about all the things he would do if he were rich. He's not rich, he's just imagining, so *if I were* is the correct statement. *I were* often follows the word *if,* because *if* usually means you are wishing or imagining.

In a subjunctive sentence the verb is often also followed by a statement using wishful words like *would* or *could*. For example, again from *Fiddler on the Roof*, "*If I were* a wealthy man . . . I *wouldn't* have to work hard."

A MILLION LITTLE FRAGMENTS: SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

I often imagine that my listeners and readers are writing articles and essays and books, but I was recently reminded that some people make their living writing shorter things like headlines and ad copy, and that it's really hard work.

When writers focus too much on brevity, sometimes they leave out important words and produce fragments instead of sentences. Unfortunately, you can't magically make any set of words a sentence by starting with a capital letter and ending with a period (or an exclamation point). Most sentences have at least one subject and one verb.

A verb is an action word that tells the reader what's happening, and a subject does the action of the verb. You can make a complete sentence with just two words: *Squiggly hurried. Squiggly,* our beloved snail, is the subject, and *hurried* is the verb.

There's even a sentence form called the imperative that lets you make one-word sentences such as *Run!* Imperative sentences are commands, and the subject is always assumed to be the person you are talking to. If Squiggly looks at Aardvark and says, "Run!," Aardvark knows that he's the one who should be running. It's such a strong command that he knows it is imperative for him to run.

You can also make a one-word sentence using an exclamation. For example, *Ouch! Wow! Eureka!*

So you can make imperative sentences such as *Run!* with one verb, and exclamatory sentences with one exclamation or interjection such as *Ouch!* or *Hello!,* and you can make simple complete sentences such as *Squiggly hurried* with a subject and a verb. But there is also a case where you have a subject and a verb, but you still don't have a complete sentence. Ack! This happens when your fragment is a dependent clause, meaning that it depends on the other part of the sentence: the main clause. If you're dependent on your parents, then you need them. It's the same with dependent clauses; they need their main clauses.

Dependent clause fragments usually start with a subordinating conjunction such as *because, although,* or *if*. I'm going to need more examples to explain this one. It makes a lot more sense when you see examples.

Let's go back to our simple sentence: *Squiggly hurried.* I'm sure you all get that *Squiggly hurried* is a complete sentence because it has a subject and a verb, but look what happens if you put a subordinating conjunction in front of it: *Because Squiggly hurried.* By adding *because,* I've messed up the sentence; now I need something to explain the *because.* The *because* makes the whole thing a dependent clause that can't exist on its own. (Well, it can exist, but it's a fragment and that's bad.) The dependent clause now makes sense only if it has a main clause; for example, *Aardvark was relieved because Squiggly hurried.*

To sum up, there are some easy tests to see if you have a fragment. The easiest test is to ask yourself if there is a verb. If there's no verb, then it's probably a fragment. Then, if there is just one word, ask yourself if the sentence is an exclamation, an interjection, or a command. If it's not, then it's a fragment. Finally, ask yourself if it is a subordinate clause to the previous sentence. If it is, then it is a fragment. That last one is a little trickier, but I'm sure you can do it!

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG: SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Singular nouns take singular verbs and plural nouns take plural verbs. It's really quite simple.

I am happy.

We are happy.

But wait! A few tricky words might cause you to doubt yourself.

Everyone Hates Subject-Verb Agreement

Everyone sounds like a lot of people, but in grammar land, *everyone* is a singular noun and takes a singular verb:

> **Everyone is happy. (right)**
>
> **Everyone are happy. (wrong)**

Everyone and *everybody* mean the same thing and are interchangeable, so *everybody* takes a singular verb too. The same rules hold true for *anyone* and *anybody,* and *no one* and *nobody*—they're singular and interchangeable. (In Britain, these words are sometimes considered plural.)

Playing with the Band

Band names (and team names) are generally plural in the United States, but they are generally singular in Britain. Some people go by the rule that if the name sounds plural (like *The Beatles* and *Black Eyed Peas*), they treat it as plural, and if it sounds singular (like *Lifehouse* or *Coldplay*), they treat it as singular.

Let's Take Up a Collection

Collective nouns are words such as *team, family, orchestra,* and *board;* they are nouns that describe a group. Again, they sound like a lot of people, but they are usually singular nouns (in the United States).

> **The family is going on vacation next week.**
>
> **The orchestra plays on Thursdays.**

Some collective nouns, such as *couple,* are considered plural if each person has a sense of individuality. (I know that is terribly vague, but it's the rule.) For example, you would say, "The couple are vacationing separately this year," because there is a sense that it is two individual

people; but you would say, "Each couple is going to Bermuda on a different week," because each couple is being spoken of as a unit. You just have to use your best judgment, and even though this seems tricky, the good news is that you can never really get it wrong because (1) there is no real rule, and (2) you can always just assert that you were thinking of the couple as individuals (or a unit) if someone questions your verb choice.

Since we started with an example from *Star Trek,* I'll end with an example from *Star Trek* too! To remember that collective nouns are usually singular, think of the Borg. (For the uninitiated, the Borg is a group of cyborgs who don't have a sense of individuality and instead act as a "collective.") With the Borg, the group is one, a singular collective—just as collective nouns are usually singular.