

Where to Go from Here

Before you get started, one last word. Actually, two last words. *Trust yourself.* You already know a lot. You'd be amazed how much grammar can be absorbed by osmosis from day-to-day language, even if you don't know the technical terms. So be brave. Dip a toe into the sea of grammar. The water's fine.

- » Defining *good grammar*
- » Identifying features of accepted Australian English
- » Understanding the main word classes: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, verbals, determiners, prepositions and conjunctions

Chapter 1

Grappling with Grammar

Good communication and good grammar go hand in hand. The very point of using language is to express and exchange ideas in a way that conveys them clearly, with as few misunderstandings as possible. Sure, an occasional ‘Oh, you know what I mean’ is not going to stop the world from turning or upset your friends and family, but if you need to impress somebody, you need your communication to be accurate. If you want your job application to shine, your presentation to captivate or your documents to be precise, using good grammar will help you to achieve these things.

Of course, you probably already have pretty good grammar. Most people learn the basics of language use as if by osmosis, picking it up without necessarily understanding the rules. After all, you’re likely to have been talking almost all of your life and have probably forgotten when and how you first learned to read and write. But the fact that you have this book in your hands means that you have decided that learning *better* grammar is a valuable strategy. Yay you! This book will help you become a better communicator.

In this chapter, we look closely at what constitutes proper grammar and consider what makes Australian English unique. We also take a trip back in time to revisit probably the first thing you were taught about grammar as we consider the very basic unit of communication: the word.

Grasping Grammar: Good and Proper

Rightly or wrongly, your audience or readers judge you by the words you use and the way you string them together. Listen to the speech of the people in movies. An uneducated character sounds different from someone with five diplomas on the wall. The dialogue reflects reality: educated people follow certain rules when they speak and write. In fact, people who use language according to formal grammar rules are said to be speaking *properly*. If you want to present yourself as an educated person, you have to follow those rules too.

Actually, several different types of grammar exist, including *historical* (how language has changed through the centuries) and *comparative* (comparing languages). Vintage grammar-geeks and gurus loved to complicate things. But don't worry; we love to keep things simple. In this book, we use the best bits of the two easiest, most familiar ways of presenting the rules of grammar to come up with what's proper.

Descriptive grammar gives names to things — the parts of speech, or word groups, and parts of a sentence. When you learn descriptive grammar, you understand what every word *is* (its part of speech) and what every word *does* (its function in the sentence). Learning some grammar terms has a couple of important advantages — to be clear about *why* a particular word or phrase is correct or incorrect, and to be able to understand the explanations and advice given by your computer's grammar checker or in a dictionary or style guide.

Functional grammar tells you how words behave when they're doing their jobs properly. It guides you to the right expression — the one that fits what you're trying to say — by ensuring that the sentence is put together correctly. When you're agonising over whether to say *I* or *me*, you're solving a problem of functional grammar. Most of the grammar we use in this book is functional grammar.

So here's the formula for better grammar: a little descriptive grammar plus a lot of functional grammar. Better grammar equals better self-expression. And better self-expression equals improved self-confidence. And with improved self-confidence, anything is possible. The news is all good!

Using Aussie English

In the Middle Ages, *grammar* meant the study of Latin, because Latin was the language of choice for educated people. In fact, knowing Latin grammar was so closely associated with being an educated person that the word *grammar* was also used to refer to any kind of learning. That's why *grammar schools* were called grammar schools; they were places of learning — and not just learning about how Latin and English work.

These days, grammar is the study of language — specifically, how words are put together to create meaning. Through time, grammar has also come to mean a set of standards that you have to follow in order to speak and write correctly. No doubt in your career as a student, you discovered that different teachers have different pet hates — English teachers included. The emphasis placed on the importance of certain points of grammar differs from classroom to classroom. Don't worry; we're consistent.

The accepted way that English is spoken is called *usage*, and this includes both *standard* and *non-standard usage*. Standard usage is the one that is regarded as proper. It consists of the commonly accepted correct patterns of speech and writing that mark an educated person in our society. You can find standard usage in government documents, in formal newspapers and magazines, and in textbooks. Non-standard usage includes slang and just plain bad grammar. It's common in everyday conversations, but should be avoided in formal situations.

Furthermore, the way the rules and patterns of grammar are applied varies in different English-speaking countries. Standard Australian English isn't the same as either standard American English or standard British English. Certainly, we choose different standard spellings for the same word (such as *-ise* endings in Australia versus *-ize* endings in America) or different words for the same thing (for example, a sidewalk in America is a pavement